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Print from 1787 of a Right Boy raid on a farm, illustrating a contemporary account of Right Boys and other disturbances in the South of Ireland in 1785 and 1786; by John Carter Bennett, Cork.

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An Account of the Whiteboys from the 1790s

by Thomas Bartlett

Rural secret societies in Ireland have not wanted a historian. After a slow start when only the nineteenth-century social investigator, George Cornwall Lewis, thought them worthy of study, the pace of research has speeded up considerably in the last twenty years.¹

So far as the Whiteboys are concerned, there have been notable contributions from the late Maureen Wall, J.S. Donnelly Jr., and from Maurice Bric. In fact, however, most secret societies to the 1820s and beyond have been subjected to detailed examination.²

A previous generation was happy to use the generic term “whiteboyism” as a blanket appellation for all agrarian disturbances in Ireland from the 1760s on. As a result of these recent researches, historians have become much more discriminatory. They now carefully distinguish the Whiteboys from the Rightboys (would that contemporaries had been as precise!), the Hearts of Oak from the Hearts of Steel, the Defenders from the Peep of Day Boys, the Shanavests from the Caravats, and the Rockites from the Terry Alts.

Moreover, just as the separate origins of each agitation have been set apart from others, so too much effort has gone into isolating the motivation, territorial limits and social composition of these groups, and in assessing the response of the authorities to them. From these writings, a more sophisticated picture has emerged of the nature, extent and importance of Irish secret societies in the sixty years after 1760.

Finally, a noted feature of the resurgence of historical interest has been the concern of historians to publish whatever contemporary accounts of these agitations they uncover during their researches. An important contemporary account of the Whiteboy troubles has been edited by James Kelly; contemporary narratives of the Rightboys have also been published by J.S. Donnelly.

Recently contemporary materials relating to the Defenders and the Peep of Day boys have been compiled by David Miller.³ It is hoped that the document published here for the first time (with the permission of the Director of the National Army Museum, London) makes a contribution to this latter historiography.

The author of the following narrative, the Reverend John Hewetson, came from a well-known Kilkenny gentry family, one that numbered Christopher Hewetson the sculptor among its members.⁴ John, however, had no artistic leanings, but was among the most active magistrates in the Kilkenny and Tipperary areas in the pursuit of Whiteboys in the early 1760s.

He was particularly unrelenting in his pursuit of the unfortunate Fr. Nicholas Sheehy, and in his memoir he boasts of his role in bringing about his trial, conviction and execution. He continued to act as a magistrate until the late 1770s. He never received the ecclesiastical preferment that he felt entitled to, and in 1784 we find him advertising his services in the *Dublin Evening Post* as a schoolmaster at Suirville.⁵ It is not known how this venture worked out.

From internal evidence in his memoir, it appears that Hewetson compiled his narrative of agrarian disturbances some time after 1791. His purpose in doing so was almost certainly to curry favour with - on his own admission - his former benefactor Lord Townshend, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland 1767-72. It may be surmised that Hewetson sought to interest Townshend in a lengthier version of his narrative. Or perhaps he expected Townshend to intercede on his behalf in a matter of church preferment.



In either case he certainly miscalculated, for Townshend, ever since his return from Ireland in 1772, had been on the periphery of British politics and had no connection with Irish patronage. There is no record of any further correspondence among the Townshend Mss.

Hewetson's "narrative" is a curious piece. The lengthy, all-embracing title promised much more than the author delivers: and what we have here, in fact, is little more than a compilation of his memories of the Whiteboy agitation in Kilkenny and Tipperary in the early 1760s, with a few remarks on the Rightboys of the 1780s. Moreover, while falling far short of its declared aims, it should also be pointed out that what remains is shot through with errors, inconsistencies and flat contradictions.

He seeks to perpetuate the myth that the Whiteboys originated in 1759, that they were under the direction of the Stuarts, and that they formed an element in French invasion plans for Ireland. None of these points can be sustained. Subsequent research dates the Whiteboys to the closing months of 1761; and no evidence of French or Jacobite connection has been uncovered.⁶

The grievances - enclosure of commons, the harsh exactions of tithe-gatherers or proctors, and, curiously, exorbitant demands by Catholic priests - which Hewetson dismissed as mere pretexts concealing a much deeper plan, have turned out on examination to be well founded. Moreover, it should be pointed out that the murder of the magistrate Ambrose Power took place in 1775:⁷ a casual reading of Hewetson's narrative could give the impression that it was a feature of the first cycle of Whiteboy disturbances, 1761-5.

On the other hand, the incidents, particularly the "battle of Newmarket" (September 1764) which Hewetson described, did take place, though the loss of the French ammunition ship in Bantry Bay with the loss of on board may be doubted. The various individuals mentioned by Hewetson were real enough. Lord Drogheda and his Light Dragoons were active against the Whiteboys; so too was the Earl of Carrick ("as keen as a greyhound about the Whiteboys", commented Richard Boyle).⁸

The victims of the repression which ensued, notably Father Nicholas Sheehy, but also James Farrell⁹ were no figment of his imagination, and his description of the Whiteboy behaviour and dress has been corroborated from other sources. One tantalising reference is made to the presence of the Irish language in the area. Remarkably, Hewetson himself claimed sufficient fluency in the language so as to deceive some Whiteboys.

In the final analysis, however, the primary interest which attaches to this document does not, in fact, derive from the accuracy or otherwise of Hewetson's observations and facts. The significance of the narrative lies in the way in which it evokes the fevered sectarian atmosphere of north Munster in the early 1760s.

Hewetson's narrative well reveals the poisonous mixture of hatred and fear among the Protestant gentry of Tipperary for Catholics of all classes, and its determination to connect well-to-do Catholics - bishops, merchants, large farmers - with the allegedly treasonable disturbances of lower-class Catholics. It was this rancorous atmosphere which ultimately engulfed Sheehy and the others.

So far as certain elements of the Protestant gentry of Tipperary and Kilkenny were concerned, the Whiteboy agitation was fundamentally a *political* protest, a challenge to the political *status quo* that had to be confronted and overcome. Moreover, since it was axiomatic that the lower orders could not mobilise themselves in a protest, there had to be leadership from above or abroad, or both.

It was this conviction which fuelled the determination of the likes of Hewetson to find a "leader" whom he could destroy. The unfortunate Sheehy was cast in that role. It may be that the main interest of the document lies in its revelation of the mindset of those rabid Protestant gentry families, particularly in Tipperary, who brought about Sheehy's downfall.

FOOTNOTES

1. G.C. Lewis: *On Local Disturbances in Ireland* (London, 1816).
2. Maureen Wall: "The Whiteboys" in T. Desmond Williams (ed.), *Secret Societies in Ireland* (Dublin, 1973), pp. 13-25; J.S. Donnelly, jr: "The Whiteboy Movement. 1761-5", in *Irish Historical Studies*, xxi, no. 81 (March 1978), pp. 20-54; Maurice Bric: "The Whiteboy Movement, 1760-1780", in W. Nolan and T.G. McGrath (eds.): *Tipperary: History and Society* (Dublin, 1985), pp. 148-184. For a wide-ranging series of studies of peasant disturbances in Ireland, see J.S. Donnelly Jr. and Samuel Clark (eds.): *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914* (Manchester, 1983).
3. James Kelly (ed): "The Whiteboys in 1762: A Contemporary Account" in *Journal of Cork Archaeological and Historical Society*, xciv, no. 253 (1989), pp.19-26; J.S. Donnelly Jr. (ed), "A Contemporary Account of the Rightboy Movement: The John Barter Bennett Manuscript" in *ibid.*, lxxxviii, no. 247 (1983), pp. 1-50; David Miller (ed): *Peep of Day boys and Defenders in Armagh* (Belfast, 1990).
4. For a discussion of Christopher Hewetson's work, see Anne Crookshank: "The Visual Arts" in T.W. Moody and W.E. Vaughan (eds), *A New History of Ireland: vol. iv, Eighteenth-Century Ireland, 1691-1800* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 511, 522.
5. *Dublin Evening Post*, 22 January 1784: I owe this reference to the kindness of Dr. Kevin Whelan.
6. References as for note 2.
7. Bric, "Whiteboy Movement", pp.165-7.
8. Rich. Boyle to Henry Boyle, 22nd December. 1764 (Public Record Office, N. Ireland, Shannon Mss, D2707/A/1/11/93).
9. For Farrell, see Bric, "Whiteboy Movement", p.159, and note.

A succinct narrative of the past and present risings of the Whiteboys, Rightboys, Peep of Day Boys etc. in Ireland, their original source, views and connections laid open from authentic records in the possession of the Revd. John Hewetson of Suirville in the county of Kilkenny humbly submitted to the consideration of his most worthy friend and benefactor, the Rt. Honble the Marquis of Townshend.

A succinct narrative of the first commotions in the south of Ireland raised by the Whiteboys, their original source, views and connections laid open from authentic records in the possession of the Revd. John Hewetson of Suirville... [two lines, possibly those following on the title page, have been deleted here] ... who was employed by government in the year 1766 to quell those insurrections.

In the memorable year 1759, under the administration of the Duke of Bedford, a violent spirit of insurgency broke out in the southern parts of Ireland and manifested itself by frequent and numerous risings of people externally dressed in white and thence denominated Whiteboys. These being for the most part mounted on horses press'd or stolen from their neighbours, headed by Officers deck'd with white sashes and hats fringed with white muslin, armed with guns, swords and pistolls marched in a military form thro' the country villages always preceded by the musick of bagpipes or the sounding of horns.

In these villages they enlisted or pressed into their service all the able bodied men they cou'd find fit for their purposes under an oath of fidelity and obedience to their officers. These officers were bound by an oath of allegiance to the French King and Prince Charles, otherwise the



Pretender to these realms as it appeared from the confession of several of those insurgents whom I afterwards apprehended and convicted of high treason.

The pretext they formed for thus rising was to redress imaginary grievances which proceeded as they alledged from the Protestant clergy's proctors, the exorbitant charges of their own priests and the enclosure of commons.

The barbarities they committed on such as opposed their mandates or refused to joyn in their Confederacy are horrible to be related. Some they tied naked on horseback and thus led them several miles thro' the country shivering with the cold. Others they buried in graves made for that purpose and lined with briars and nettles up to their chins. Some they laid flat on their backs covered with some apparatus and thus left them [shrieking?] in their blood till the morning light appeared. On many they inflicted the loss of tongues, ears and noses, on others severe stripes which were most moderate punishments. Even the brute creation escaped not their vengeance for they frequently cropp'd, maimed or hough'd the cattle of such as incurr'd their displeasure.

The confusion and terror which these savage barbarities raised throughout the whole country is not to be described and yet such the secrecy observed by this Confederacy that for a considerable time they proceeded in committing these enormities without detection. In vain were associations formed and considerable rewards offer'd by government to find out the offenders. They eluded all pursuits and enquiries till I luckily devised and put in practice the following stratagem which was attended with all the success I could wish for.

Being well versant in the Irish language and having found out their mode of dress and some of their marching phrases [*sic*], I took with me one night a small party of Ld. Drogheda's Light Dragoons then station'd in Carrick and with these I proceeded to the Welch [*sic*] mountains from whence these insurgents usually descended and near a village in these mountains which I suspected to be infected with this phrenzy I placed the Light Dragoons with orders not to quit their station till they should hear me whistle. I then deck'd my body in white and thus personating one of their captains I went alone to one of their houses and knocking with impetuosity at the door roused up two sturdy fellows from their beds, address'd them just awaken'd from their sleep in the Irish tongue as their commander, chided them for their delay and called them out instantly upon duty. My appearance and dress and language effectually deceived them. They believed my words, apologized for their tardiness and begg'd I would wait a few minutes till they dressed themselves and saddled their horses. I shortly after led them out clad in their white shirts over their coats, mounted and armed and thus brought them before they suspected the least fraud into the midst of the Army. Their astonishment and terror on finding their mistake is not to be described. They instantly fell on their knees to beg their lives, acknowledged their guilt and discovered several of their confederates, nine of whom I apprehended that very night in their beds by their guidance. These nine men were committed to the county jail under an escort of a serjeant's guard of Ld. Drogheda's Light Dragoons, a regiment distinguished for its zeal and activity in the service of the public in quelling those risings. On their way thither the escort was attack'd by a numerous body of these insurgents at a village called Newmarket, who kill'd the serjeant and one of his men and rescued all the prisoners. The whole escort would have shared the same fate but for the intrepid courage and prudent conduct of the corporal who ascending an eminence near the scene of action, with two of the dragoons kept up a regular fire on the rioters, kill'd several of them on the spot, wounded numbers and thus discharged and saved his batter'd companions. The day following I pursued the rioters, took several of them who were convicted at the ensuing Assizes at Kilkenny and publickly executed.



I now learned from certain informations that this spirit of insurgency had very different views from those the public imagined and that the true cause of those tumultuous risings was to support an invasion actually plann'd and intended by the court of France agst. this Kingdom in order to counter-balance the various losses and disgraces which they suffered in every quarter of the world where they encountered the British arms. This invasion was attempted by an armament under M. Conflans which was designed to land in Cork harbour whilst another under Thurot (a famous partizan in those days)] should force a landing in the north in order to divert the attention of government from the former on the success whereof their chief hopes were founded.

The better to support this intended invasion several officers from the Irish brigades in the French service were sent home to Ireland to raise and discipline their friends and relations and to collect as numerous a body of armed men as they could for this purpose. A ship laden [*sic*] with several thousand arms and ammunition was dispatched with them at the same time which was lost in Bantry Bay and every soul on board this ship perished. A second vessel was more successful, having safely landed four French officers on the coast of Wexford. Of their arrival I had previous notice from a leading man among the Whiteboys whom I entertained [*sic*] as a spy to watch and apprise me of all their schemes and motions. These officers very narrowly escaped my pursuit and fled to the county of Cork where the chief scene of their activity was intended and here they were near being taken by the earl of Shannon. This spirit of insurrection did not cease after Conflan's defeat, on the contrary it daily gained ground being kept alive with a view to support another attempt on some future occasion and it was well supplied with money from the court of France for this purpose, under the duke de Choiseul's auspices. Even after peace was establish'd betwixt the courts of England and France in the year 1762 these insurrections still increased and became daily more outrageous for the insurgents now traversed the country in more numerous bodies than before and in more exact order, levied contributions on the rich farmers, inflicted their punishments, if possible, with greater severity and these were sometimes attended with death to which they devoted [*sic*] some who had incur'd their resentment.

Among the many victims of their vengence the fate of the late Ambrose Power esq., elder brother to the chief baron of our Exchequer, a very worthy, active magistrate and a gentleman of a very considerably prosperity in the county of Tipperary, is peculiarly melancholy. His house was surrounded and attack'd by night by a numerous body of these insurgents and tho' bravely defended at last forced open and he himself was most barbarously murdered, the contents of a blunderbuss being lodged in his body. About this time my house was also attack'd but I was more fortunate having repulsed the assailants and some time after my person was brought into the utmost, imminent danger by an ambush laid agst. me by 12 sworn assassins who were bound by an oath to put me to death and who actually fired at me but providentially missed their aim having only wounded my horse. These incidents tho' not coinciding with the time I am now describing I beg leave to introduce here as strong instances of that unbounded licentiousness which possessed those infatuated people.

These shocking violations of the public tranquillity now truly alarmed government and roused their attention and in consequence hereof by the particular advice and recommendations of the late earl of Carrick to the earl of Hertford, then Ld. Lieut. of Ireland, I was honoured with full powers to quell those insurrections and to bring the delinquents to public justice and to enable me to do so with greater effort a serjeant's guard of light infantry from his majesty's 10th Regt. of Foot was ordered to be station'd at my house and a particular command was also given to me over Ld. Drogheda's Light Dragoons by whose assistance during the space of a two



years' warfare wherein I was absolutely engaged with those infatuated people, I cleared my own and the neighbouring counties of all commotions, apprehended several of the principal conspirators and brought them to publick justice. Among these was the late Nic[hola]s Sheehy, a popish priest of famous memory; a very capital ringleader of those insurgents and the very life and soul of these deluded people.

In the course of these my labours in the service of my country I obtained many valuable and important discoveries and I explored fully the prime source of this dangerous conspiracy in which I found the heads of the popish clergy and gentry were engaged; and I also brought to clear lights their views, resources and connections, the particular merchants that supplied them with money for the fix'd purpose of effecting a general rising to overturn our happy constitution in Church and State; and I also pointed out the particular house and place where all those treasonable dispatches from the court of France (where this conspiracy was first form'd) might with certainty be found and the whole plott and contrivers of it fully discover'd. But peace being then ratified with France it was not deem'd prudent, I do suppose, to rake those dangerous embers lest a fresh war be thence kindled and by this neglect one of the honestest and most candid informers I ever yet met with for whose life the publick faith was pledged was unfortunately sacrificed; who, had his life been preserved, as he merited by his sincerity wou'd not only have restored perfect tranquillity and security to this Kingdom but effectually have prevented all future insurrections. These discoveries were made to me in Clonmell in the presence of Major Genl. Harcourt, then Lt. Colonel of Ld. Drogheda's Light Dragoons (whose particular zeal and activity at a very important crisis was of singular utility to the publick welfare) and several other gentlemen, by the late Mr. James Farrell of Redhill a young man of very considerable property in the county of Tipperary and a capital leader among the Whiteboys, bearing a double commission in their service as a major and muster-master of all their forces which at that time he declared amounted to fifteen thousand strong. This young man, sincerely penitent for the part he had acted agst. the public peace and willing to make atonement for it by a candid confession, gave me a written paper under his own hand a full detail of this wicked conspiracy in the presence of those gentlemen together with a list of the chief conductors of it advising us at the same time to probe the wound to the bottom since we cou'd now do it on good grounds, otherwise, he averred, this spirit of insurgency would break out in future time into an open and armed rebellion. And to corroborate the truth of his assertions, he offer'd to bring in other concurrent testimonies and also to produce his commission provided his pardon was granted and life and liberty secured. His pardon was promised to him and yet his life was forfeited. The same judgement and advice was given to me before by others of the insurgents whom I had apprehended for high treason, particularly by an honest, worthy popish priest beneficed at the time and still living in the county of Tipperary who actuated by a principle of Christian charity voluntarily disclosed to me their evil design as well agst. my own life which he after saved, as agst. the safety of his Kingdom.

All these matters and discoveries I laid fairly before government as it was my duty, and the late earl of Carrick finding no happy effect from my frequent warnings towards eradicating this evil spirit but that on the contrary it daily gained ground, determined to wait on his Majesty's person and to lay before him a true state of those disorders and accordingly he sent to me for copies of all my discoveries and informations for these were no others and with these he set out for the court of London and being presented to his Majesty by General Conway, then secretary of state, he delivered to his Majesty a narrative of those risings drawn from my inform[ation]s which his Majesty most graciously received at his hands and highly approved of and as a mark of his approbation he conferr'd on his Ldship. a pension of one thousands pounds *per annum*



on the Irish establishment. The originals of these discoveries etc. are still in my possession together with the late earl's letters on that occasion.

This same spirit of tumult and opposition to the laws of the land which has subsisted with little intermission these 30 years past in the southern parts of Ireland has broke out afresh with great violence tho' in a different form in the persons and actions of the Rightboys. These recent insurgents to elude the operation of the penal laws enacted agst. nocturnal insurrections perform their expeditions in the open daylight in very numerous bodies but without arms, swearing and enlisting into their confederacy both Protestant and Papists indiscriminately under the pretext of changing the modus of tithe, reducing the price of land and abolishing his Majesty's hearth-money. The measures they have adopted for effecting these ends are very alarming for they have gained over to their interest the advice and assistance of several of his Majesty's Protestant subjects who, either envious of the clergy's prosperity or indifferent to all religion, or ambitious of popish applause readily concur in any scheme that suits their several purposes. But from my long experience and thorough acquaintance with this spirit of insurgency I am thoroughly convinced, and the records I have now in my possession will clearly prove it, that those recent risings of the Rightboys as they call themselves in the southern part of Ireland are the genuine offspring of that same rebellious spirit which originated in the court of France in the year 1759 with a view to embarass his Majesty's government here and that it is still foster'd by some secret and disaffected members probably in the interests of that court [*sic*], for the same evil purpose.

[Signed] John Hewetson

[Postscript]

The present state of this kingdom in point of tranquillity and security tho' perhaps thought of, stands now in a very critical situation. A strong coalition of very contrary interests and views being lately form'd by two powerful partys (neither of them thoroughly well affected to our happy constitutions for very different purposes), the one in support of Paine's principles to establish his *Rights of Men* [*sic*] and a republican government, the other the rights of franchise without injury to monarchy. Shou'd this franchise be refused them at our next meeting of parliament, for it will then most certainly be demanded and shou'd the French revolution stand its ground, beyond all doubt this Kingdom will be a scene of bloodshed and confusion nor can any remedy be found to restore it to order and tranquillity so effectual as an entire union with England.

Source: National Army Museum, London, Townshend MSS, 6806/7/6-1.

