

The I.R.B., Labour and Factional Politics; Some Tipperary Facets of the 1890s

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There was considerable interest by the constabulary, the R.I.C. in January 1894 in the Thurles Working Men's Club, as it became the arena for a struggle between the I.R.B. and the Anti-Parnellites, mirroring events elsewhere in the South-Eastern R.I.C. Division.

'There has been a decided increase in the activity of the members of the I.R.B. in Thurles, County Tipperary North Riding' the constabulary report began, noting that 'the Working Men's Club has completely changed its character and has practically become (as we expected it would) a centre for the spread of the I.R.B.'¹ It is in tracing the context of that police report on the operations of that organisation that this present study explores the friction that existed in County Tipperary in the early to mid 1890s, as the I.R.B. was seen to exploit for its own purposes both the factionalism within the Irish Party following the deposition of Parnell and the grievances and organisations that both urban and rural labour presented at that moment in time. It will be seen, for instance, that, if the I.R.B.'s support for Parnell compounded clerical condemnation of the advanced nationalists, already embroiled in a struggle with the clergy within the G.A.A., the suspicion that the I.R.B. was hand-in-glove with the socialism that pervaded the labour movement added grist to the condemnations.

But, let events, and circumstances as they arose from the beginning, be allowed to tell their own story of how that contretemps in the Thurles Working Men's Club arose. At the outset it should be said, that the I.R.B. organisation was deemed to be at a low ebb in the early 1890s for a number of² reasons, and the factionalism that followed the split in the Irish party, which saw the organisation gravitate to Parnellism, proved a rather mixed blessing for the movement. Certainly, in December 1890, the constabulary, as it noted the actions of John Shelly and Denis McCarthy, President and Secretary respectively of the Thurles Labour Federation, and the local I.R.B. operatives were of the view that the rank and file of the secret organisation were disenchanted with the maladministration of the movement and, even if subscriptions were being used to buy arms, that the spy Le Caron had put the wind up the membership.³

That said, in the same summation, it was surmised that the rabble of the different towns, and the young, and the more ambitious and enterprising of the rural population were the strength of the organisation, both there, in North Tipperary and generally, and that should the Federated Trade and Labour Union, and the National Foresters be taken on board as mediums for advancement, Parnellism was likely to have a sound base there. It was also attested, however, that there was strong opposition by the clergy in the town of Thurles to labour organisation there, as they saw the Federated Trade and Labour Union as but an instrument for the spread of Fenianism.

Where, of course, in terms of the political alignment of the classes, labour, both rural and urban, were deemed to be on the side of Parnell,⁴ the parallel ability of the I.R.B. to draw support from the disaffected labourers, trades and shop boys of the rural towns, such as Thurles, Clonmel, Cahir and Nenagh in County Tipperary, was not a surprise. It was further supposed that while agricultural labourers in the surrounding countryside were doing well, in terms of wages and of the benefits of the Labourers Acts, the precariousness of work, the squalor of living conditions, and the addiction to drink, in the towns, fuelled the discontent there that made for recruitment by the I.R.B.⁵ The presence of P.N. Fitzgerald and P.J. Hoctor, the I.R.B. men in Nenagh, in October 1890, had done nothing, at any rate, one supposes to allay the concern of the Thurles⁶ clergy.

In terms of organisations, needless to say, constabulary estimates of the strength of labour movements, from 1889 to December 1892⁷, indicate the new surge in the labour movement in general in those first years of the decade, whether as rural labour bodies that emerged out of discontent with the National League or as the new militant general trade unions that spilled over from Great Britain and manifested itself among urban workers, all of them seemingly marked with the imprint of the I.R.B. not least the Federated Trade and Labour Union that had emerged in Dublin in 1889.⁸

The presence of a labour delegation from Cullen at Davitt's establishment of the Democratic Labour Federation in Cork, in January 1890, that sought to progress the interests of skilled and unskilled workers, pointed to a capacity within Tipperary for organisations beyond parochial boundaries.⁹ Those constabulary estimates,¹⁰ moreover, for December 1889, note, alone in County Tipperary, the twenty-six members of the Cahir Trade Association. By December 1890, while Tipperary North Riding still had no recorded labour organisation, the South Riding boasted of 160 members of the Dock Labourers Union, as well as, by this stage fifteen members of the Cahir Trades Association.

By May 1892, while Tipperary North-Riding is still not registering any labour organisation, surely an inaccuracy in the light of the Thurles Labour League, Tipperary South Riding has been credited with two branches of federated labour organisation with a member of 630. By December of the same year Tipperary North Riding was finally credited with 1 branch of a non-federated labour society, with seventy-eight members, most likely the Thurles Workman's Club, as it was now termed, while, South Riding was noted as, by now, having three branches of a federated labour organisation, and a membership of 240.

Whether the two labour organisations noted as being established in Fethard and Killenaule constituted two of those branches of a federated movement is uncertain, but the constabulary certainly recorded them as being non-political in their thrust, but part of the Trade and Labour Union.¹¹ In the context of Parnellite affiliation, of course, the address made to Parnell in April 1891, by the Clonmel Trade and Labour Federation, signed by Morgan Jones, its President, and James McCarthy, its vice-president, as part of Parnell's meeting with what was termed the Clonmel Congregated Trades Society, certainly had political import, as did the similar address on that occasion from the Thurles National Labour Federation, read by the ubiquitous Denis McCarthy¹². That protean organisation was, of course, still being watched by the constabulary, in July 1892, and its officers, John Shelly, President, Denis McCarthy, Secretary, and William Mansfield, Treasurer, monitored closely, as representing the Thurles Trades¹³. In June, of the same year, what was termed the Clonmel Labour League, with its 500 membership, industrial and trades, was also under scrutiny by the constabulary.¹⁴



Thurles WMC, 1895

Certainly, in February 1891, police information has been that a formal labour link with Parnellism was being created in Thurles¹⁵ and we do know that, in January of that year, Denis McCarthy, Secretary of what was termed the Thurles Labour League, was in attendance at Parnell's rally in Limerick¹⁶. If Parnell's apocryphal appeal to the hillside men in January, moreover, supposedly brought the I.R.B. to his support, the constabulary in North Tipperary were in little doubt that in both National League and Labour circles, trouble lay ahead.¹⁷

When, indeed, later in the year, in August, Parnell did visit Thurles, the occasion was marked by the de rigeur presentation of addresses, including that of the Thurles Trade and Labour League¹⁸, while in October on his visit to Clonmel, the Labour Federation there represented by Edward Walsh, its Secretary, James Cahill, its vice-president, and by Edward Hogan, marked the occasion, with its presentation¹⁹. It was in Clonmel, of course, that the constabulary had noted the organisational work of the suspected I.R.B. figure P.J. Maher, where in November 1891²⁰, the Labour Federation there was based, reportedly, on trade and industrial members.²¹

While earlier it had been supposed that trouble had lain ahead, by July 1891, the general population was judged to be too concerned with day-to-day practical matters than to be bothered with the concerns of²² the I.R.B. By December of that year, indeed in Thurles, the opinion was that the Labour Federation, as it was termed, was the latest throw of the dice by that same I.R.B., locally, its dominance within the G.A.A. having been weakened. That said, the assessment went, the town was so much under the influence of the clergy there that their opposition to anything like the organisation of the labourers was likely to prove a stumbling block.²³

If, as we have seen, the Thurles Labour Federation continued to be monitored in July 1892²⁴, by November of that year, the well-being of the agricultural labourers was cited as

precluding that class from being recruited into the I.R.B. but the labourers in the towns were still suspected as being likely recruits to the organisation²⁵. That said, by March 1893, in North Tipperary, the police were supposing that the Labour League was moving towards an agitation for better cottages for the farm workers and noted that, on February 5th, a meeting at the Town Hall, in Nenagh, presided over by Dean White, the P.P. and attended by an assemblage of 300, largely labourers, had highlighted the bad condition of the labourers houses in²⁶ the district. Indeed, an earlier constabulary report of February 26th, have led the general absence of the farmers and clergy from the campaign to right the discontent brought on by wretched housing, the worst in the country, it was said.²⁷

That move in the Nenagh area was still simmering by years²⁸ end, and endeavouring to get cottages sanctioned under the Labourers acts, in several of the Poor Law Unions, eighty labourers, indeed, descended on Nenagh Workhouse for the inquiry into the situation in early December, although it was the constabulary opinion that while housing conditions within the town were certainly very bad, the Labourers Acts had been somewhat abused, with houses being placed on farmers lands where not required and many, who were not even agricultural labourers, getting cottages on a pretext, while those deserving of cottages had been overlooked.

Such unrest, however, had no bearing on the events that, as we took note of them briefly at the beginning of this study, unfolded in Thurles Working Men's Club at the end of that year. In September 1893, the constabulary had already taken note of that august body and observed that the membership at that point amounted to sixty-eight, with the I.R.B. it was said, firmly in control of the organisation. The assessment was, indeed, that the Workman's Club had begun to be more prominent in its politics as time went on, 'showing itself in its true colours', as the constabulary had it.²⁹

As the local clergy, advised the constabulary, Fr. Fennelly and Fr. Raftery, the P.P. began, indeed, to made a bid to gain control of the Workman's Club, the I.R.B. were adamant that they would not have the clergy in the premises. Matters, it would appear, came to a head when the I.R.B., through the Workmen's Club, made an address to John Redmond, on the occasion of his visit, on behalf of the Parnellite wing of the Irish Party to the town, an occasion when Redmond was at pains to emphasise Parnell's debt to the working class for all that had been achieved.³⁰

When confronted by one of the clergy, Fr. Ryan C.C., about its political leanings, the constabulary report would have it, his subscription had been handed back to him, resulting in the refusal of the priest, thereafter, to enter the Club at all. Where, in September of that year, the membership was deemed to be, in a constabulary report of that time, sixty-eight, by December that figure had reached 108, and the police advice was that still more young men would join as the I.R.B. influence over the Workman's Club grew.³¹

If thirteen of the McCarthyite members resigned following that impasse over Redmond's visit, the January 1894 constabulary report noted the further developments that ensued, observing that the Workman's Club had by then changed its name to the Thurles Independent Workmen's Club, the Independent nomenclature having as much inferences of the new Parnellite Independent Party as it was an indication of independent control³². In any case, the police letters to Dublin Castle had it that on January 5th, the McCarthyite members were formally told 'that they were no longer required as members, as the club's committee had decided that Parnellites only should be elected in the future.

That dénouement had, in fact, stated the letter to Dublin Castle, completed the withdrawal of the priests and the McCarthyites, or National Federation, from the membership of the Workman's Club, so that there were left ninety-eight members 'all of whom are Parnellite and many of them members of the I.R.B.' Where moreover, the report added, the Irish National League had been keeping pace with the progress of the Workmen's Club, with membership overlapping, John Kelly, the National League organiser, was now said to have made the club premises his headquarters following the January coup, and busied himself travelling through the Tipperary North Riding re-organising both the Irish National League and the I.R.B. In fact, it was now certain, the police believed, arising out of a meeting of December 10th, and confirmed at a gathering at Hayes Hotel on January 15th, attended by Kelly, P.J. Hoctor, the I.R.B. leader, John Courtney from Nenagh, D.H. Ryan, the Thurles I.R.B. Centre, and Andy Callanan of Thurles, that the I.R.B. had created a new base in Moycarkey and a second base in Thurles itself.³³

While the Moycarkey organisation was nominally the National League, added the reports, it was clear that twelve of the eighteen man committee there were in fact members of the I.R.B., the National League itself in the area being moribund, virtually, the farmers being tired of agitation, it was said. A further report, at any rate, of a meeting of February 8th in Thurles, noting the attendance of the I.R.B. figure, P.N. Fitzgerald, Kelly Callanan and Ryan, and recording also the presence of the men, Pat Butler, Matthew Maher, Martin Egan, and John Fitzgerald, some of whom may have been from Moycarkey too, noted also that while the Moycarkey base progressed, it was decided to forego for the moment the development of the second branch in Thurles itself. The reason given, according to the constabulary, being 'as the priests are very busy inquiring into the condition of affairs in the Workmen's Club and in the town generally'.³⁴

Be that as it may be, the report observed, what was of interest was that the Workmen's Club had procured an additional room 'which is being fitted up as a Committee Room' and the fact that it would not be open to ordinary members and would probably be the place for the I.R.B. men to meet, and would, indeed, be used as a venue for the second I.R.B. circle.

Whatever of that, moreover, it was believed, in April, that there was a new interest generally in the I.R.B. in the South Eastern R.I.C. Division including Carlow, Kilkenny and Tipperary, although the I.R.B. itself was not in a position yet to have a more public influence on affairs³⁵, while in May, the continued vigilance of the clergy against Fenianism was noted.³⁶ That said, and while the movements of D.H. Ryan, especially in connection with the G.A.A. were monitored in October,³⁷ it was a possibility of more sinister moves that exercised the minds of the local authorities in November of that year, word having come from Glasgow that the I.R.B. emissary, a man named Heffernan, had left for Ireland with a black bag containing twenty-four revolvers.³⁸

At Thurles, therefore, the arrival off a train of a mysterious stranger attracted the attention of the local R.I.C. Sergeant, who duly noted the stranger's putting up in Mrs Ryan's Hotel, although no name was given. In the following days, moreover, the repeated contact of the stranger with the Workman's Club, to the rear of Mrs Ryan's hotel, was not lost on the constabulary. That the mysterious individual should then leave on the Monday, without being picked up, added mystery to mystery, and added an aura of intrigue to the Workman's Club's affairs. In a sense, it added piquancy to an institution that, in terms of the I.R.B., Labour and Parnell, had left its imprint on the early 1890s.

References

- ¹ National Archives (hereafter NA) DCCI, Cn.3, Feb. Report 1894, South-Eastern Division. See also DCCI, Ctn.9, a, and DCIS, Cn.5, for reports from Tipperary for that division.
- ² O.McGee *The I.R.B.: The Irish Republican Brotherhood from the Land League to Sinn Féin* (Dublin 2005), pp. 174-211.
- ³ NA., DCCI, Ctn. 3, for Dec. 1890
- ⁴ NA. DCCI. Ctn. 3, 5 Mar. 1891, 4 Nov. 1892 and see Ctn. 9.
- ⁵ NA. DCCI, Ctn. 3, Nov. 1893
- ⁶ NA. DCCI, Ctn. 3, 9, e.g. Oct. 1890.
- ⁷ NA. S Files, 5006/S, 1891; Intelligence Notes, Ctn. 1: DCCI, Ctn. 9
- ⁸ C.D. Greaves, *The Irish Transport and General Workers Union: The Formative Years* (Dublin 1982) .p. 1-9
- ⁹ United Ireland, Jan. 25th, 1890, *Freeman's Journal*. 22 Jan. 1890.
- ¹⁰ NA., S. Files, 5006/S 1891, Intelligence Notes, Ctn. 1: DCCI, Ctn 9.
- ¹¹ NA, DCCI, Ctns. 3, 9, 4 Nov. 1891, May, 7, 1892.
- ¹² NA, DCCI, Ctns. 3, 9, e.g. May 2, 1891.
- ¹³ NA, DCCI, Ctns. 3, 9; DCIS Ctn 5, eg. Jul 2, 1892.
- ¹⁴ NA, DCCI, Ctns. 3, 9, e.g. 3 Nov. 1891, 8 Jun, 1892.
- ¹⁵ NA, DCCI, Ctn. 3, 28 Feb, 1891.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*
- ¹⁷ NA, DCCI, Ctn. 3, 28, Feb. 1891, and DCIS ctn, 5.
- ¹⁸ United Ireland, Aug 8, 1891, NA, DCCI, Ctn. 3, Aug 1891
- ¹⁹ NA, DCCI, Ctn. 3, Oct, 1891.
- ²⁰ NA, DCCI, Ctn. 3, Nov. 1891.
- ²¹ NA, DCCI, Ctns. 3, 9, eg. 3, Nov. 1891, 8 Jun, 1892.
- ²² NA, DCCI, Ctn. 3, Jul, 1891.
- ²³ NA, DCCI, Ctns. 3, 9, Dec. 10, 1891; and see W. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics, 1884 - 1924*.
- ²⁴ NA DCCI, Ctn. 3, Jul. 1892, *United Ireland*, Jul. 2, 1892.
- ²⁵ NA, DCCI, Ctns. 3, 4, e.g. 4 Nov. 1892.
- ²⁶ NA DCCI, Ctns. 3, 9, e.g. 6 Mar. 1893.
- ²⁷ NA, Ctns. 3, Feb, 16, 1893.
- ²⁸ NA, DCCI, Ctn. 3, Oct 7, Dec. 1893.
- ²⁹ *ibid*
- ³⁰ *United Ireland*, Dec. 16, 1893, NA, DCCI, Ctn. 3, 7 Nov. 10, Dec. 1893.
- ³¹ NA Ctns, 3, 9, e.g. 11 Nov. 1893, Jan 1894.
- ³² NA, DCCI, Ctn. 3, Jan, 1894.
- ³³ NA, DCCI, Ctn. 3, Feb, 1894.
- ³⁴ NA DCCI, Ctn. 3 Feb, 8, 1894.
- ³⁵ NA, DCCI, Ctn. 3, Apr. 1894.
- ³⁶ *ibid*, May 1894.
- ³⁷ *ibid* Oct 1894.
- ³⁸ *ibid* Nov. 1894.