

The Threatening Notice in Pre-Famine County Tipperary

by Daniel Grace

The posting of threatening notices was the single most common crime in pre-famine Tipperary. Slightly over 1,000 were erected in the county during the eight-year period 1836-43, a figure that represented approximately one out of every five crimes reported by the police.¹ The number posted was actually higher than 1,000 for two reasons. Firstly, some victims concealed the fact that they had received notices for fear of drawing worse retribution on their heads. For example, on the night of 23 March 1842 shots were fired into the house of Stephen Cross of Gurteendevane, Clanwilliam, and a threatening notice was posted ordering him to dismiss his servant boy. The police discovered that a similar threat had been made some three weeks earlier but that Cross had kept the fact secret from them.² Secondly, the figure of 1,000 is calculated from the outrage reports and a number of those do not survive for Co. Tipperary for the years in question. For example, some are missing for 1836 and none survives for the months of November or December 1843. But the number missing is a small portion of the total and is not significant enough to affect any conclusions that may be drawn from the reports.

The practice of posting threatening notices was not peculiar to Tipperary. It prevailed in several Irish counties and was common in parts of rural England, especially during the so-called 'Swing Riots' of the 1830s.³ The threatening notice is probably best defined as a sharp warning to some person or group to carry out, or to desist from carrying out, some act at peril of terrible retribution. A typical example involved a Michael Hanly of Monaquill, Upper Ormond, who was warned in 1841 not to sell potatoes seized for conacre rent or else 'be assured of it that we will put the making of a lead spoon in your carcass'.⁴ These threats were usually made in writing, but some were delivered orally. The police increasingly classified the latter warnings as threatening notices as the 1840s progressed, which may explain the apparent increase in the crime during the course of that decade. An analysis of the outrage reports shows that threatening notices accounted for 28% of reported crime in Tipperary during the four-year period 1840-43 in contrast to 15% for the earlier four-year period 1836-39.

This study is based primarily on an analysis of the close on 5,000 outrage reports submitted by police in Co. Tipperary to Dublin Castle during the eight-year period 1836-43. The reports are housed in the National Archives of Ireland and detail a plethora of offences ranging from homicide to robbery, with every conceivable crime in between. As already stated, the posting of threatening notices accounted for approximately 20% of the total. However, the outrage reports were not concerned 'almost exclusively with agrarian crime' as claimed in a recently published guide to sources.⁵ Figures for the year 1844 show that

for Ireland as a whole police classed only one crime in six as 'agrarian', and that the ratio between 'agrarian' and 'ordinary' crime varied widely from county to county. It was as low as one in thirty-eight in the case of Co. Kildare, but rose to one in three for Co. Tipperary.⁶

An analysis of the outrage reports for the period 1836-1843 confirms the view that approximately one in three crimes committed in Tipperary had an 'agrarian' motive. The reports also suggest that the agrarian motive was higher for threatening notices than it was for crime in general. The outrage reports have been mined extensively for information on individual and often dramatic crimes, but less frequently for studying the subject in a comprehensive way, probably because of the sheer weight of documentation that needs trawling through. This article hopes to show that a systematic use of the outrage reports can be a rewarding means of investigating the history of crime, in particular a specific class of offence such as the threatening notice.

Fig 1: Threatening notices in each barony of County Tipperary, 1836-43

Barony	Number of threatening notices posted	Number of notices posted per 10,000 of population of barony
Lower Ormond	235	40
Upper Ormond	190	72
Owney & Arra	88	28
Ikerrin	73	24
Kilnamanagh	68	19
Eliogarty	41	10
Clanwilliam	157	30
Middlethird	121	26
Slieveardagh	44	12
Iffa & Offa West	40	9
Iffa & Offa East	18	4
<i>County Tipperary</i>	<i>1075</i>	<i>25</i>

Distribution of Notices

Fig. 1 shows (a), the number of threatening notices posted in each Tipperary barony during the eight years 1836 to 1843; (b), the number posted per 10,000 of the barony population during the same period. The figures indicate first of all that the crime was more prevalent in certain parts of the county. The highest number of notices was posted in Lower Ormond, followed by the baronies of Upper Ormond, Clanwilliam and Middlethird. The least number was posted in Iffa & Offa East, Iffa & Offa West, Eliogarty and Slieveardagh. It may be argued that the number of notices posted per head of population is a more accurate reflection of the distribution of the crime within the county. In that case Upper Ormond had a commanding lead, while Iffa & Offa East had the lowest number posted per head of population.

Baronies and principal towns of Co. Tipperary



The most striking difference was between the extreme north and extreme south of the county, with seven times more notices posted in Upper and Lower Ormond than in Iffa & Offa East and West, even though the latter baronies had slightly larger populations. Perhaps the *Nenagh Guardian* of 22 May 1841 was not unduly exaggerating when it claimed that threatening notices were flying about the Ormonds 'like a swarm of locusts'.

There appears to have been a close correlation between the distribution of threatening notices and the general level of crime within the county. For example, Lower Ormond accounted for 22% of threatening notices and 18% of total crime; at the lower end of the scale, Iffa & Offa East accounted for 2% of notices and 3% of total crime. The pattern was replicated in the remaining nine baronies of Co. Tipperary. Contemporaries, including the Deputy Inspector-General of Constabulary in Ireland, Lieutenant-Colonel William Miller, were aware of the variations in levels of crime within the county, but when pressed by the Devon Commission to account for it, Miller would only reply: 'I am quite unprepared to offer any explanation on the subject'.⁷

Fig 2: Motives for posting threatening notices in County Tipperary, 1836-43

Occupation of land	42%
Employment	21%
Conacre and potato prices	9%
Assisting in legal proceedings	5%
Dwellings	2.5%
Tithes	2%
Commonage	2%
Turbary	1.5%
Trespass	1.5%
Miscellaneous motives	5.0%
Motive not stated	8.5%
Total	100%

Motives for Notices

The threatening notice seems, at first glance, the crime best suited to an analysis of the motives involved because the evidence is literally written down in black and white. But this is not necessarily the case, especially from 1841 onwards when the format of the outrage report was changed and the police were no longer required to include the suspected motive in their description of the crime. Fortunately, many of them continued to add it, although it was omitted in some instances even where it was glaringly obvious from the text of the notice. The change to the format of the police report is the main reason why it is not possible to assign motive to a sizeable 8.5% of threatening notices reported from Co. Tipperary during the years 1836 to 1843.

There is no universally accepted system of classifying the motives for crime. One useful approach is to divide them into 'agrarian' and 'non-agrarian', but this raises the

difficult question of what exactly constitutes 'agrarian'. Should the term be confined to disputes over the occupation of land, or should it include more peripheral disputes connected with conacre, commonage, employment, rural dwellings, trespass, turbary, and even tithes? If all of those are regarded as 'agrarian', then that motive accounted for over 80% of all threatening notices posted in Tipperary during the period 1836-43.

But Lieutenant-Colonel Miller produced a lower set of figures for the year 1844, claiming that 56% of threatening notices posted in Tipperary and 48% posted nationally had an agrarian motive.⁸ Unfortunately, he was not questioned on the basis of his conclusions, which was a pity because the police seemed equally perplexed when it came to defining the nature of an 'agrarian' crime. Professor W.E. Vaughan has concluded that they used the term loosely as 'a convenient taxonomical receptacle for all disputes that were remotely connected with land'.⁹ The categories chosen in Fig. 2 (above) are no doubt open to question, but they have, at the very least, the merit of showing the type and range of motives involved in the posting of threatening notices.

Land and Employment

The largest category of motive at 42% concerned disputes over the occupation of land. This was hardly surprising because, as the *Nenagh Gazette* of 15 January 1841 so succinctly noted, 'the possession of a piece of land in Ireland is indispensable to existence; and to deprive a man of such a holding is tantamount to passing a sentence of death on him'. Conflicts over the occupation of land fell under three broad headings: (1) disputes concerning the level and payment of rent, (2) disputes over ejection from holdings, (3) disputes between persons competing for land. The latter was the most contentious issue of the three; a view firmly supported by the evidence of the outrage reports. Two well placed observers, William Kemmis and John Howley, respectively crown solicitor and assistant-barrister for the county, also believed that agrarian disputes in Tipperary were 'usually between two persons competing for land rather than between landlord and tenant'.¹⁰

The holdings at the centre of these disputes were usually what contemporaries would regard as 'farms', although the acreages involved were mostly small by modern standards. Joseph Tabeteau, a long-serving resident magistrate in the county, suggested in 1839 that any holding above three or four acres was considered a farm in Tipperary.¹¹ Most victims of threatening notices fell into the category defined by one source as 'cottier tenants', i.e. occupiers who held from three to ten acres of land in return for a money rent. This class would have seen itself as distinct from and socially superior to those described as 'cottier labourers', i.e. persons who held patches ranging from a quarter to three acres from farmers for which they paid their rent in labour. Tabeteau suggested that one of the great fears of eviction was that it 'throws them altogether out of their grade of life; out of the rank of farmers and into that of labourers'.¹² The status of victims of threatening notices will be discussed in more detail later in the article.

Threatening notices on the subject of employment accounted for slightly over 20% of the total posted in Tipperary during the period 1836-43. The 2.5% of notices concerned with disputes over dwellings should probably be added to that figure because a job as well as a house appears to have been involved in most of those cases, even though the police did not necessarily state that fact. Notices concerning employment tended to revolve around

three interrelated issues: (1) harsh working conditions, (2) rates of wages, (3) competition for places, which was the most prominent and contentious issue of the three. Notices opposing harsh working conditions were usually directed against landlords or the stewards they employed to oversee their labourers. A characteristic example concerned Robert Clarke, J.P., of Bansha, Clanwilliam, who was ordered on pain of death in 1838 to dismiss his steward because 'he was obnoxious to some of the labourers in his employment'.¹³ However, it did not follow that landlords were harsher to their labourers than farmers; indeed, the evidence suggests that the opposite was often the case. Landlords however, tended to employ larger numbers, so that disgruntled labourers were better able to make threats about their working conditions under the cloak of anonymity.

Threatening notices over rates of wages tended to occur more frequently in rural industries than in agriculture, notwithstanding the fact that the latter employed far greater numbers. Perhaps this was due to the fact that agricultural labourers were more vulnerable to detection because they tended to work singly or in small groups, unlike, for example, the large body of miners at Lackamore or the slate quarry workers at Portroe, both of whom engaged in frequent disputes over wages, resulting in the posting of several threatening notices.¹⁴

Competition for work, like competition for land, was a perennial source of conflict in pre-famine Ireland. Examples abound of local labourers and tradesmen offering fierce resistance to 'strangers' from outside their district who came to challenge them for the available employment. For example, Patrick Byrnes, described as 'a native of Co. Cork' and working for a farmer in Lower Ormond, was ordered in 1838 to 'quit that neighbourhood and go home', while John Whelan was warned to give up his contract for slating the workhouse at Roscrea because 'you or any other stranger will not be allowed to work here'.¹⁵ Employers who brought workers from outside the district were also threatened. Thomas Kearney of Cashel was ordered to dismiss a servant boy because 'he is not a native of this county'; Mrs Egan of Roscrea Brewery was threatened with death because 'strangers were taken into employment'; John Hogan of Borrisokane was ordered to 'turn away a servant boy he had from Connaught'.¹⁶ Likewise, a farmer living near Killenaule was warned not to bring reapers from Templemore to harvest his wheat because 'there are poor people enough in this neighbourhood who want work'.¹⁷

Conacre and Commonage

A Limerick newspaper claimed in 1841 that the determination to obtain potato ground was the root cause of agrarian conflict in Co. Tipperary. But the *Nenagh Guardian* disputed the claim, maintaining that little or no disturbance was due to that factor.¹⁸ The outrage reports support the latter view as only 9% of threatening notices involved disputes over conacre or the price of potatoes. Among several witnesses who proffered similar opinions to the Devon Commission was Thomas Bolton of Ballykisteen, Clanwilliam, who insisted that 'compared with other things, and considering how much the conacre system prevails, there are few cases of quarrels arising out of it'.¹⁹

During the 1840s disputes and threatening notices increasingly arose from an insistence on rent in advance for potato ground. Landowners erroneously believed that they were not legally entitled to seize the potato crop if the tenant defaulted on payment and this encouraged them to demand half the rent as down payment. The poor often found it

difficult to comply because of their straitened circumstances, so landowners were encouraged to rent out large acreages to so-called 'potato jobbers' for payment in advance. These would in turn re-let the ground in small lots to poor people at prices inflated by upwards of 25%. The outrage reports suggest a growing resistance to these demands. John Roberts, the resident magistrate at Cashel, noted in 1842 that 'a combination at present exists in this part of the country against the payment in advance for the land let for growing potatoes'.²⁰

While threatening notices concerning conacre were mostly directed at farmers, poor persons willing to pay high rent, or rent in advance, were also subjected to intimidation. Rev. Francis Cleary of Bournea, Ikerrin, discovered that not even Catholic clergymen were immune from intimidation when he let two acres of potato ground to 'speculators' and not directly to poor people. He was warned in a threatening notice that 'Captain Rock thinks as little about a priest when he turns a land jobber as he does of any common man'.²¹ Landlords were also intimidated, notably James Scully of Kilfeacle, Clanwilliam, who in April 1841 was fired at and wounded and had a threatening notice posted on his hall door. The police concluded that the motive for the attack was 'his refusal to let potato ground without a portion of rent in advance'. Scully was murdered later near his own home.²²

Disputes over commonage accounted for 2% of threatening notices posted in Co. Tipperary during the period 1836 to 1843. Such disputes were now mainly confined to upland districts where the voracious demand for land was pushing cultivation further up the slopes. Some landlords responded to the demand by fencing off wide tracts of former mountain commonage and letting it out to individual farmers, thereby depriving the neighbouring poor of their traditional privileges of grazing and turbarry. Those who lost out predictably reacted with threats of intimidation and acts of violence, usually against the tenants who took the disputed commonage. For instance, in April 1836 Patrick Ryan of Curraghmore, Owey & Arra, had his house attacked and his life threatened because 'he had lately taken 40 acres of the mountain of Duharra which is claimed by the surrounding peasantry as commonage'.²³

Two landlords particularly active in enclosing mountain commonage were Lord Glengall of Cahir and Rev. Massey Dawson of Ballinacourty. Police noted in 1836 that 'Lord Glengall is letting part of Rehill Mountain and is getting roads made through it, and there is a combination among the people in that neighbourhood to oppose the roads as it would facilitate the letting of the mountain, which they oppose'.²⁴ Similarly, a notice posted in 1842 warned that 'no one should enclose or cultivate the mountain commonage of Rossbeg, the property of Rev. Mr. Dawson'.²⁵ Not surprisingly, 80% of threatening notices posted in Co. Tipperary on the issue of commonage came from the baronies of Clanwilliam and Iffa & Offa West, both of which contained a sizeable portion of mountain land.

Turbarry and Trespass

Disputes over turbarry were behind 1.5% of threatening notices posted in Tipperary. Turbarry involved the right to dig and carry away turf from either mountain or bog for fuel or manure, a right sometimes resisted by landlords for what 'Charley Buckthorn' of Clogheen saw as their own selfish ends: 'Turbarries were intended by an all-wise Providence for the benefit of man, but, contrary to such intentions, they have been converted into covers for game to contribute to the amusement of the few at the expense of the many'.²⁶ Landlords who

attempted to prevent the removal of 'gor' or 'bog stuff' from mountain slopes were strenuously opposed, particularly in the baronies of Clanwilliam and Iffa & Offa West. In one instance in 1837 police reported that several threatening notices had been posted over Rehill Mountain in Iffa & Offa West where 'hitherto people had been in the habit of plundering it of turf surface'.²⁷ Disputes about access to turf banks were most frequent in Lower Ormond, a barony with a large expanse of raised bog. Several threatening notices were sent to Robert Hall of Merton Hall near Borrisokane, an 'improving' landlord whose refusal to allow his tenants cut turf on his bogs at Uskane was cited as one of the reasons for his widespread unpopularity and eventual assassination in May 1841.²⁸

Trespasses of various kinds accounted for a further 1.5% of threatening notices. Landlords prevented people from going onto their hills, bogs and private demesnes, occupiers closed up traditional rights of way, farmers disputed boundaries with neighbours and embroiled themselves in legal wrangling to prevent the trespass of farm animals. Those who felt aggrieved often responded with threats, and sometimes with acts of violence. Two specific notices will help to illustrate the issues involved. The first example came from the barony of Iffa & Offa West and concerned a William Walpole who came to reside at Whitechurch in 1838 and blocked off a passage through his yard that led to Quarry Hole Mountain. One night in early May the offending gate was smashed to pieces and shots were fired through Walpole's parlour window. 'General Rock' warned him in a notice that 'if we come any more we will not lose the night by you, we will come in the middle of the noon day and level both gaps and gate and take away your own life'.²⁹ The second example, from the barony of Middlethird, concerned a farmer named James Lonergan of Rathdrum who in 1840 was involved in a bitter dispute with a neighbour over the trespass of cattle. A threatening notice posted near his residence warned 'you may have your coffin ready at your door, the gun is prepared, the lead is ran, and there's no delaying drawing a tricker'.³⁰

Tithes and Other Threats

Tithe agitation cooled considerably after the passage of the Tithe Rent Charge Act in 1838, so it is not surprising that it accounted for only 2% of threatening notices during the period under review. Persons threatened over the issue fell into four groups, the largest comprising Catholic farmers such as Daniel Maher of Gurteen, Ikerrin, who was warned in 1840 that he would 'get plenty of powder and ball' if he paid them. Maher had agreed to give half tithes to his landlord, while most of his fellow tenants had refused to pay any.³¹ In similar vein, 'Captain Fearnot' threatened death on a farmer named Edmond Cormack of Boulantea, Middlethird, because in renewing his lease he had agreed to a rent of 22s per acre, 20s for the ground and 2s for tithes.³²

A small number of landlords were threatened for demanding tithe composition with the rent, while a few tithe proctors were warned off their activities during 1836 and 1837.³³ Protestant clergymen had been prominent targets during the height of the tithe agitation in Tipperary, culminating in the murder of Rev. Irwin Whitty of Golden in 1832.³⁴ However, during the period 1836-43 only three clergymen were threatened over the issue, all of them in the year 1836. Rev. John Swayne of Mogerban, Middlethird, and Rev. John Gallwey of Clonbeg, Clanwilliam, were both threatened with 'the fate of the late Mr. Whitty' if they took legal proceedings for the recovery of their tithes.³⁵ Rev. Henry Bagwell was warned to 'take a fool's advice' and not to sue for the tithes of the parish of Hoare Abbey because if he did

'in place of getting cash you will get a bit of lead'.³⁶

Approximately 5% of notices were posted to deter people from assisting the authorities in various types of legal proceedings. Individuals were warned not to give information to the police, not to prosecute persons who had injured them or their property, not to appear as witnesses at assizes or quarter sessions. Also included in this category are several cases where persons had already helped the authorities with information and the aggrieved party was now threatening to exact revenge. Two characteristic examples of this type of notice from 1837 will suffice to illustrate some of the issues involved. In May of that year shots were fired at, and a notice affixed to the door of the dwelling of a small farmer named Thomas Mannix of Coolboreen, Owney & Arra, warning him to drop legal proceedings against three men who had been apprehended for robbing him of a substantial sum of money the previous month.³⁷ The second example, posted on the chapel door at Cloncannon, Ikerrin, threatened the life of Thomas Wall because, as the notice claimed, he 'was guilty of the most infamous and false swearing and perjury at the bar of Clonmel against Thomas Hooley of Ashmeer', which had resulted in his transportation.³⁸

The 5% of notices classed under 'Miscellaneous' comprised a variety of motives too few and too diverse to treat individually. They included warnings over the price of meal and other foodstuffs (excluding potatoes); disputes over non-agrarian property; personal spleens between families or neighbours; warnings to farmers not to pay poor rates or county cess; threats of injury or death to men disinclined to marry young women they had 'wronged'.

Only eleven of more than a thousand notices posted in Co. Tipperary between 1836 and 1843 had a political motive, some of which were tinged with a sectarian hue. Seven notices were directed at voters who had supported Conservative candidates at either parliamentary or Poor Law elections, two others were threats of an unspecified political nature. The tenth was a warning to John Kempston of the Nenagh Guardian because 'you are a great tyrant against the priests and Repeal', while the final one of the eleven threatened Rev. Eden Close of Emly 'for speaking ill of O'Connell'.³⁹

Perpetrators and Victims

Most threatening notices were erected under the cover of darkness on or near the dwelling house of the intended victim. About one notice in ten was sent through the post office, the majority of these to members of the landed gentry. The purpose of using the post office may have been to lessen the possibility of detection, particularly as the police tended to be more active in their investigation of threats to members of that class. The landed gentry were usually well armed, thereby posing a physical threat to anyone caught prowling about the big house at night. Characteristically, Rev. Standish Parker of Castlough, Owney & Arra, had a licence to keep no fewer than twenty guns and pistols in his house in 1844.⁴⁰ About 10% of notices were delivered less quietly, accompanied by acts of violence such as smashing property, firing shots through windows and doors, or breaking in and roughing up the inhabitants.

The identity of the writers of threatening notices is, regrettably, shrouded in obscurity. It is unclear if the notices were the work of the aggrieved parties themselves or were written on their behalf by members of well-organized secret societies variously referred to as 'Rockites', 'Ribbonmen', 'Terry Alts' or 'Whiteboys'. The similarity of language found in

several notices from different parts of Co. Tipperary might suggest a common origin; yet it may only mean that the writers were adopting turns of phrase common to the speech patterns of the countryside. The widespread use of conventional pseudonyms such as 'Captain Rock' and 'Captain Terry Alt' also suggests wider involvement; but again, as Gibbons convincingly argues, it probably means no more than that those responsible were 'adopting a well-understood convention'.⁴¹ The belief that 'the country people generally get schoolmasters to write their letters' was undoubtedly true in some, although perhaps not in the majority of cases.⁴² The involvement of schoolmasters may however help to account for the high level of literacy displayed in some notices, a fact sometimes commented on by the authorities. In the case of a notice sent to John Bayly of Ballinaclough, Upper Ormond, police reported that it was 'written in a remarkable hand and apparently by some person of superior education'.⁴³

Fig 3: Occupations of victims of threatening notices in County Tipperary, 1836-43

Occupation	Percentage
Cottier/Farmer	42%
Caretaker/Herd/Labourer	14%
Landlord	10%
Agent/Steward	6%
Others	10%
Not Known	18%
Total	100%

The identities of the victims of threatening notices are somewhat clearer, but for a number of reasons are not as well defined as one would wish. Firstly, the information found in the outrage reports is at times incomplete and is often implicit rather than explicit. Secondly, there is the difficulty of drawing clear boundaries between the different social classes, particularly evident in the case of the cottier and the farmer. Thirdly, in approximately 18% of cases there is no evidence in the outrage reports to suggest the social or occupational background of the victim. These limitations mean that the figures above must be viewed only as tentative.

Victims who tenanted at least some land have been classified under 'cottier/farmer' and comprise 42% of the total. Those whose main source of income was paid labour, even though they may also have had access to a garden plot or conacre, have been categorized as 'caretaker/herder/ labourer' and account for 14%. 'Landlords', again a notoriously difficult group to define, make up 10%, while their 'agents/stewards' comprised a further 6% of all victims.

Those classed as 'Others' ranged through a variety of occupations from mill owners through schoolmasters to tradesmen and the occasional female threatened for some reason other than being a landlord. Thirteen Protestant clergymen are also included, a high number certainly compared to their two Catholic counterparts, one of whom was threatened

over conacre and the other in a dispute over a farm. However, apart from three Protestant clergymen warned over tithes and a fourth for bringing a schoolmaster into his parish, the rest were threatened not as ministers of religion but as employers or landlords.

'I were a bad righter'

Since few threatening notices survive in their original form, it is difficult to generalize on the writing materials used in their production.⁴⁴ In the case of a notice posted in Upper Ormond police reported that it was written in 'a kind of roan colour ink' and concluded that it would be difficult to detect the culprit because 'that kind of ink is to be found in most country houses'.⁴⁵ But roan-colour ink was not invariably used, a surviving notice from Iffa & Offa East was written in black ink, while one from Slieveardagh and another from Clanwilliam were both written in pencil.⁴⁶

The materials used sometimes led the police in the direction of the culprit. A notice addressed to a farmer named John Butler of Clonboo, Ikerrin, was written on a page torn from a schoolboy's copybook, and after a visit to the local school the police traced the author through the boy's handwriting on the back.⁴⁷ Similarly, a notice posted in the market place in Thurles, warning persons not to take land at Drish from which Philip Lahy had been ejected, led the police to suspect his daughter Judith from some writing found on the back.⁴⁸

Although Gibbons suggests that threatening notices argue 'for an increasingly literate countryman', it is doubtful for several reasons if they can be used to support such a claim.⁴⁹ Firstly, in every decade they may have been written by a small literate group, not necessarily representative of society at large. Secondly, few originals survive so we are mainly reliant on transcripts made by the police, and these do not indicate the original level of penmanship and in several cases appear to have had their spelling corrected. But even where originals do survive, the evidence is inconclusive because some notices display a high level of penmanship and spelling, while others have a poor standard of both. Indeed, there was sometimes a dichotomy between the two, as in the case of the notice sent to Maurice Davin of Deer Park, Iffa & Offa East, which police described as 'well written, but badly spelled'.⁵⁰

We should be wary also of accepting the evidence of the writing and spelling at face value because one or both may have been disguised to help avoid detection. For example, police reported in relation to a notice sent to John Lanigan of Templemore that 'the writing was so small as if at all disguised'; while they remarked that the spelling of one sent to Rebecca Grubb of Clonmel 'was very bad and seems to have been done on purpose'.⁵¹ But most writers of threatening notices were probably more concerned with the message rather than the medium, which was certainly the case with the person who warned Rev. Standish Parker of Castlelough that 'I were a bad righter, butt I hav a good shot, Sir'.⁵²

Language of Notices

The language used in threatening notices was usually plain and terse in keeping with the blunt message being delivered. For example, Patrick Ryan of Killoscully, Owney & Arra, was warned to desist from acting as caretaker over ejected land, or 'by God, Paddy, we will disjoint some of your bones'.⁵³ John O'Brien of Caher was ordered not to become agent over the property of Thomas Jackson of Millgrove, or 'we will visit your body with lead, we will hole your belly in shot'.⁵⁴ William Fennell of Rehill, Iffa & Offa West, was warned 'we will

meet you on the road and blow out your brains', while Walter Costello of Kilebeg, Kilnamanagh, was ordered not to take a certain piece of ground, 'or the roof of your head will be blown off'.⁵⁵ John Hanny of Knockane, Upper Ormond, was ordered to give up a holding at Toomevara, 'if not, by Jaysus, the grass will grow over your skull'.⁵⁶

Sometimes the language was more effusive and had what Hobsbawm and Rude referred to in the case of the 'Swing' notices as 'a gay, lyrical quality'.⁵⁷ Rody Hogan of Ballinacur, Upper Ormond, was warned to give up certain land, 'or you will be like a hare among a pack of hounds'.⁵⁸ George Weyland of Ballywalter, Kilnamanagh, was advised to use every effort to free those in custody for the Cooper murder, 'or else bespeak your everlasting jacket, that is the coffin'.⁵⁹ Denis Leahy, the builder of Nenagh workhouse, was ordered to stop oppressing his workmen or he would 'be suddenly surprised by a rebel shot' and his workmen would follow his funeral procession 'not with grief or wild accents of despair, but with gladdening hearts and glistening eyes at the premature death of a tyrant'.⁶⁰ Edward Banks of Ballythomas, Lower Ormond, was advised to remove his cow from grazing on disputed land, 'or I will cut off her head with the light of the moon, or the light of the stars, or with the sunbeams in the day'.⁶¹

The language on occasion had a tinge of black humour to it. John McInerney of Marblehill, Middlethird, was warned if he had anything to do with the farm from which the Widow Donnell had been ejected 'you will shortly have a farm that you will have a longer lease [lease] of than you had of Marblehill'.⁶² Edwin Taylor was ordered towards the close of December 1838 to send away a blacksmith he had brought to Clogheen, 'if not your family won't get a Merry Christmas'.⁶³ James Quigley of Raroo, Slieveardagh, was told not to take a farm from which another had been ejected, 'or else you will get your length and breadth of ground'.⁶⁴

The notices sometimes employed exaggeration to impress on the recipient the fate he would suffer if he did not desist from his actions. Laurence Creagh of Castlepark, Clanwilliam, was threatened with 'a death that would be spoken of for twenty years to come'; Connor Cormack of Ballinastick, Slieveardagh, driver over the lands of Poinstown, was warned 'if you don't resign it, you shall meet the most barbarous death that ever man got'.⁶⁵ Michael Wall of Tubrid, Iffa & Offa West, was warned that 'the ocean of fire and blood that will attend your house will be a wonder to the nation'.⁶⁶ 'Darby Breakskull' boasted to Joseph Cooke of Cordangan, Clanwilliam: 'I'll send your blood-stained apostatized soul cantering into the fiery gulph where Isear with his iron flail will cause poor blindfolded Joe to wail'.⁶⁷

At times the tone was milder, implying that the writer was moved more to sorrow than to anger by the victim's misbehaviour. James Hogan of Urra, Lower Ormond, was instructed to turn off a workman with the reminder that 'only that you are a respectable man we would not notice you a second time. We never serve any man the second time'.⁶⁸ Stephen Starr of Garryard, Lower Ormond, was told he was being warned because 'we would be delicate to do anything without acquainting you first', while Mary Gleeson of Mohernenagh, Lower Ormond, was informed that on this occasion she was being warned rather than assaulted because 'we do not like to treat you as bad as if you were a man'.⁶⁹ It was pointed out to Rev. Henry Bagwell of Clonkelly, Kilnamanagh, that 'you were always an inoffensive man and you have a large family, and perhaps they may be worse off without you, for that

reason we will not take you short without this notice'.⁷⁰

Warnings in Verse

Authors of threatening notices occasionally added a few lines of doggerel verse to bolster their stark warnings. This was hardly surprising since ballad and poem played such an important role in articulating the hopes, fears and aspirations of ordinary people in nineteenth-century society. Most of the verse was short and sharp, usually consisting of just two lines. For example, a strong farmer residing near the village of Toomevara was ordered to give up land taken from an evicted tenant in a notice that concluded with the warning:

*'Captain Rock is my name,
Do not forget what I am sayin'.*⁷¹

Another farmer residing in the same district was warned to pay his labourers better wages than the 'paltry sum' of 6d per day. He was reminded in the notice that:

*'In this place I'm known as Captain Starlight,
Who sleeps by day and walks by night,
Who carries a gun that kills at a far sight'.*⁷²

Richard Holmes of Holmes' Grove in the Glen of Aherlow was cautioned not to give evidence against a defendant at Cashel quarter sessions in a notice signed:

*'Lieutenant Power and Major Ball
Who never broke their words at all'.*⁷³

'Captain Fearnot' warned the recipient of a notice posted near the town of Templemore that he should never feel secure because:

*'We, though living remote and far away,
Walk through the country night and day'.*⁷⁴

A notice found fixed to the door of a farmer at Bawn outside Nenagh boasted that:

*'This notice is sent by Moll of the Glynn,
Who has the command of six and forty men'.*⁷⁵

In 1840 Denis Leahy, the contractor for the new union workhouse at Nenagh, was involved in a dispute with his workers over rates of pay and working hours. He was given a 'friendly' warning in a notice written in a clearly superior style:

*'Mr. Leahy, it's repaying evil with good,
To forewarn you of the spilling of blood,
Which will be your fate to suffer by and by,
If you don't treat with justice the men you employ'.*⁷⁶

'Yours truly, Captain Rock'

Even though newspaper reports liked to highlight the prevalence of pseudonyms such as 'Captain Rock' and 'Captain Starlight', an analysis of the outrage reports for the five years 1836 to 1840 shows that only one notice in five from Tipperary had a signature of any kind on it. This may not be entirely true as the police tended to send a synopsis rather than a verbatim copy of the notice to headquarters and they may have omitted mentioning the signature in some instances. Where notices were signed, over 80% of them had a military designation, usually 'Captain', but occasionally rising to the rank of 'General' or falling to that of 'Lieutenant' or 'Sergeant'. Some of those military pseudonyms had their origins in

the eighteenth century, although several of the more prominent ones appear to date to the early nineteenth century.⁷⁷ The use of military titles was partly an act of bravado and partly a means of creating the impression that the writer had a large force at his command to back up his threats.

Fig 4: Military pseudonyms found on threatening notices in County Tipperary

Captain Rock	Captain Steelribs	Captain Whitefoot
Captain Terry (Alt)	Captain Bryer	Captain Cheer
Captain Starlight	Captain Firelock	Captain Lightsop
Captain Fearnot	Captain Flintlock	Captain Coughlin
Captain Kill Proctor	Captain Black	Captain Toothman
Captain Doe	Captain Regain	Captain Nobody
Captain Lightfoot	Captain Bloodspill	General Powder
Captain Moonlight	Captain Thunderbolt	Major Ball
Captain Hellfire	Captain Strong	Lieutenant Sledge
Captain Hotfoot	Captain Shot	Sergeant Loveflame
Captain Heapeany from the Devil Noes Where	Bold Captain Croker of Cappawhite	Captain Percival of the New Troop

Fig. 4 lists some thirty military pseudonyms found on threatening notices in Tipperary during the 1830s and '40s. Since most were used only once or twice, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusion about their overall distribution. The four most prominent names were 'Captain Rock', 'Captain Terry' (often 'Captain Terry Alt'), 'Captain Starlight' and 'Captain Fearnot', which together comprised two-thirds of all signatures on notices. 'Captain Rock' was the most popular and mostly widely distributed of the four and examples abounded in every barony of the county. The popularity of the name explains why police and newspapers commonly referred to these threats as 'Rockite notices'. Some writers also claimed that their notices had been sent from a place called 'Rock Lodge'.⁷⁸ The name 'Rock' was reputed to have originated in West Limerick with a man named Patrick Delane who recruited four others in 1821 to help him shoot a land agent named Hoskins on the Courtenay estate. The party used to assemble at night at a particular rock, hence the name. Delane, who was described as 'a most wretched looking man', apparently betrayed his companions for the government reward and was afterwards spirited away to America.⁷⁹

The name 'Terry Alt' was believed to have originated in Co. Clare with a poor Protestant pensioner who came to live at Corofin. Some midnight marauders wished to deceive the police into thinking that he was their leader, so whenever they struck a blow they would cry out loudly, 'Well done, Terry Alt'. The police took up poor Alt, but quickly discovered their mistake.⁸⁰ The Clare origin of the name is evoked in a notice of 1839 to Rody Maher of Killough, Middlethird, in which 'Terry Alt' warned him that 'I have lately taken a tour from the County Clare to see justice done in this county'.⁸¹ There is a less convincing claim that the name originated with a Mid-Tipperary gentleman farmer called Terry O'Meara Alt ('Big-Ankled') who was forced into a life of crime through the cruel murder of his wife and young children by yeomanry forces during the 1798 Rebellion.⁸²

Fig 5: Non-military pseudonyms used on threatening notices in County Tipperary

Simon Sharp	A Friend	The Terror of Tirrants
Mr Blood	Liberty and Fair Play	John Doe
Your Warner	Darby Breakscul	The People
Mr Fearnot Any Man	Shanavest Starlight	Samuel Shenstone
A Knight Rambler	Lady Alt	Moll of the Glyn
A Friend to the Distressed	One of the Determined	The Deputy of the
		Midnight Ranger, Ould Beat the Wheat

Fig. 5 lists the non-military signatures found on threatening notices in Tipperary during the 1830s and '40s. Most of the names are commonplace and appeared only once or twice. But a few are of particular interest, especially 'The People', 'Liberty and Fair Play', 'A Friend to the Distressed' and 'The Terror of Tirrants', because they reinforce the notion of the writer as the defender of the public good, a concept that will be discussed in more detail later in the article.⁸³ When the writer of a notice posted at Ballingarry, Slieveardagh, boasted 'I am Captain of the Shanavests still', he was evoking the name of the great East Munster faction which engaged in deadly enmity with another great faction known as the 'Caravats'.⁸⁴ But the fact that the name 'Shanavest' appeared on notices only once or twice, and 'Caravat' not at all, tends to support the view of Major George Warburton, Inspector General of Police, that these factions were mere fighting groups rather than part of a movement of agrarian protest as more recently claimed.⁸⁵ Both factions had sprung up during the first decade of the nineteenth century as a result of either 'a foolish dispute about May poles' or a callous remark made at Clonmel in 1805 while a man named Nicholas Hanley was being hanged.⁸⁶

'Samuel Shenstone' and 'John Doe' were names imported from England, although the relevance of the former to nineteenth century rural Ireland remains obscure. A single example was found on a notice posted at Curraheen, Eliogarty, which warned a Pat Tobin to 'work no more for Clarke the Orange tyrant'.⁸⁷ The name 'John Doe' appeared on a notice posted in Middlethird and on a second from Slieveardagh barony in the form, 'Captain Doe'.⁸⁸ The name was a legal fiction common in English lawsuits from the fifteenth century onwards where the plaintiff was seeking to recover property from which he had been ejected. It accordingly had a certain resonance to the agrarian situation of nineteenth century Ireland. The name is of course currently used in America to signify an unidentified dead male.

It was hardly surprising to come across names such as 'Lady Alt' and 'Moll of the Glyn' since it was common for attackers to disguise themselves in women's clothing. The practice was particularly evident in Co. Clare during 1830-31 where it was reported they 'used to go out dressed in women's clothing and they call them Lady Clares'.⁸⁹ It evidently continued in the county because in January 1846 there were reports of 'men in women's clothing' going about near Newmarket-on-Fergus, serving threatening notices

against the payment of rent.⁹⁰ Similar cases were also reported from Tipperary. For example, the man who shot dead William Shea in Ryan's shebeen at Ardmayle, Middlethird, in August 1832 was dressed in a woman's petticoat, hat and cloak, while the fellow who handed a threatening notice to the caretaker of the lands of Poinstown, Slieveardagh, in 1836 was also dressed in 'female apparel'.⁹¹ The practice was particularly widespread in Wales during the so-called Rebecca Riots of the early 1840s.⁹²

Stratagems of Fear

A striking feature of the threatening notice is the variety of stratagems employed to instill fear in the hearts of the recipients. The first stratagem involved heaping invective on the head of the victim and stigmatizing him (occasionally, her) as unworthy of consideration because of his shameful misconduct. John Doolan of Carrigahorig, Lower Ormond, was branded 'a common pig-boy'; Michael Wall of Kilbahy, Iffa & Offa West, a 'murderer breed'; Sam Penders of Borrisokane, an 'adder in human form'; Joe Abbott of Roscrea, a 'bloody informer, skulk and spy'.⁹³ Richard Farrell of Druminahane, Lower Ormond, was reviled as an 'obnoxious beast and traitor'; John Lloyd of Honeymount, Ikerrin, as 'a basterly fiend'; Samuel Switzer of Cashel as 'this Orange spawn'; Mary Whelan of Ballingarry, Lower Ormond, as 'a lying, tattling, disturbing strumpet'.⁹⁴

A second stratagem was to create the impression that the writer had a large band of followers behind him from whose vengeance the victim could not possibly escape. This point is underscored in the texts of several notices. 'Lieutenant Starlight' boasted to George Weyland of Ballywalter, Kilnarnagh, that he had 'ten thousand at my command at one moment's warning', while 'General Terry' threatened John Fogarty of Druminahane, Lower Ormond, that 'I will visit you with a band of unmerciful Alts who will stain their hands in your mortal wounds'.⁹⁵ 'Captain Rock' reminded General Sir William Parker Carroll of Lissenhall, Upper Ormond, that 'I can, by any of my agents, take you off at any time and in any place', while he cautioned Jack Costelloe of Ballinaclough in the same barony that he would be shot 'even if we have to follow you to Merrion Square, Dublin'.⁹⁶ Michael Hogan of Clash, Upper Ormond, was warned in a threatening notice posted on a tree near his home that 'we will conflagrate you and all your family for there are one hundred and fifty men appointed for the work'.⁹⁷

Writers of threatening notices also liked to boast that no level of protection—human or supernatural—could save the victim from his bloody fate. 'Captain Steelbones' taunted Robert Minnitt of Annaghbeg, Lower Ormond, that 'if what peelers and soldiers were in Limerick were around you, you will fall by powder and ball'.⁹⁸ 'Sir William Terry Alt' boasted to John Doolan of Carrigahorig in the same barony that 'if you had all the forces of Borrisokane at your command you will fawl sure'.⁹⁹ A notice posted at Lisboney, Upper Ormond, bragged that 'the peelers will not frighten us with their guns no more than if they were cabbage stumps'.¹⁰⁰ Michael Wall of Kilbahy, Iffa & Offa West, was reminded that 'even if you had ten peelers and twenty devils to guard you, we will drive a lead ball through your dirty carcass'.¹⁰¹ The author of a notice to Thomas Jackson of Millgrove, Iffa & Offa West, boasted 'if you had fifteen devils to guard you it will happen to you as it did to Cooper and Weyland'; another to John and Thomas Scanlan of Gaile, Middlethird, mocked that 'the priest, the bishop, the pope will not spear ye your lives'.¹⁰²

A fourth stratagem was to remind the recipient of the terrible fate that had befallen some local victim who had defied the orders of Captain Rock. The notices frequently evoked the names of recently murdered members of the peasant class, so we find people threatened with (among others) 'the death of Storman', 'the death of Kitchen', 'the death of Donoghue of Lisboney', 'the death of Murphy shot at Doneskey' and 'the death of Kennedy of the Whitebarn'.¹⁰³ But it was more common to hold out members of the landlord class as examples, thus we find persons threatened with 'the death of Captain Maguire', 'the fate of that bloody Cooper', 'the death of Weyland the tyrant', 'the death of Mr. Wallard [Waller] of Finnoe', 'the death of Mister Hall', 'the same fate as Charley O'Keeffe'.¹⁰⁴ Each of those was a Tipperary landlord who had been murdered in such highly publicized circumstances that even the most illiterate peasant could hardly have been unaware of the details. Cooper and Weyland were the names most commonly evoked, sometimes individually, but usually coupled together as both had been the victims of an infamous double murder at Ballintemple, Kilnamanagh, on 5 April 1838.¹⁰⁵ The focus on the landed elite was probably a none-too-subtle message that if such influential people had fallen victim, no one could possibly escape retribution if he defied the will of Captain Rock.

Mention of the word 'coffin' was a recurring feature of threatening notices. Victims were reminded with almost tedious regularity to 'remember the coffin', 'prepare your coffin' or 'have your coffin made'. Some writers were not content to rely solely on words, preferring to augment their threats with illustrations of coffins and other symbols of death. The coffin illustrations were usually prominently displayed and shaded in black to emphasize the fatal association.¹⁰⁶ While the coffin was the most common illustration, it was sometimes supplemented by drawings of pistols, blunderbusses, bullets and the occasional death's head.¹⁰⁷ The drawings were almost certainly meant to reinforce the written warning, in particular for persons who were either partially or totally illiterate. There were several instances also where the outline of a grave was dug in addition to erecting the threatening notice. One such incident occurred at Moatfield, Lower Ormond, in 1840 where a grave was cut out in a grass field with the letter 'D' carved at the head and a large stone resembling a tombstone placed at the foot. Robert Daly of nearby Moatfield House was being warned on pain of death to dismiss his steward.¹⁰⁸

'The sentiments of my mind'

In traditional rural societies the peasantry often had its own code of 'popular morality' that overrode the 'official morality' of the ruling elite.¹⁰⁹ The *Nenagh Gazette* of 15 January 1841 put the matter as follows: 'In Tipperary, in particular, the poor man is as determined to evade starvation by a rigid observance of his secret law as the rich man is to maintain his estate by the acts of an imperial parliament'. There was a well-understood code of behaviour – or 'rules of the country', as a notice posted in Upper Ormond put it – to which people were expected to adhere or run the risk popular retribution.¹¹⁰ This code demanded that no one should seek exorbitant rent for land or conacre; should not eject a tenant from his holding or take land from which another had been cast out; should pay fair wages to labourers and craftsmen and not bring in 'strangers' to undercut local employment; should not assist the authorities, particularly in cases of agrarian crime. Most of the available sources reflect the

establishment attitude to crime and they rarely consider the matter from the perspective of the perpetrator or of those who sympathized with his objectives. One importance of threatening notices is that they sometimes give a valuable insight into the peasant viewpoint, or reveal what the writer of a notice posted in 1836 referred to as 'the sentiments of my mind'.¹¹¹

While it would be naïve to believe that perpetrators of crime were all disinterested parties, untainted by personal greed or private resentment, they nevertheless commonly portrayed themselves, not as lawbreakers or wrongdoers, but as defenders of the common good against unreasonable 'tyrants' who refused to conform to 'the rules of the country'. These sentiments are expressed in several threatening notices. One posted at Clashnevin, Upper Ormond, insisted that 'Captain Lightfoot' was 'a just and impartial volunteer, ever on the alert to suppress unjust and inhuman proceedings', while another posted at Coolkipane, Kilnamanagh, claimed that 'it is for the service of the country we are doing this work'.¹¹² When 'Captain Terry' ordered William Darcy of Prospect, Lower Ormond, to restore two dismissed labourers to his employment, he explained: 'Now Sir, do not think that any dishonourable motive induces me to this, for I'd do the same for the greatest Orangeman that the County Antrim ever bred. I cannot sanction a wrong'.¹¹³ Such was the perceived justice of their cause that the writer who threatened death on John Ellis of Dovea, Kilnamanagh, could insist that in murdering him they would only be committing 'a venial sin or crime, as we think it no more'.¹¹⁴

The most common accusation levelled against recipients of threatening notices was that they were guilty of 'tyranny'. A notice addressed to Hastings Atkins of Monaquill, Upper Ormond, was 'sorry to see you taking pattern by the tyrants of the country in putting out tenants without some way of living'.¹¹⁵ George Roe of Loran Park, Ikerrin, was cautioned to 'turn from your tyranny to what you were heretofore', while John Ellis of Dovea, Kilnamanagh, was warned he would 'meet what you long since deserved for your tyranny'.¹¹⁶ Accusations of tyranny were not confined to members of the landlord class. Matt Quinlisk of Loughourna, Lower Ormond, was indignantly asked, 'how dare you have the presumption to tizenize over Widow Welsh', while John Storman of Nodestown, Middlethird, was brusquely warned, 'I am sworn by the Holy Evangelist to keep all such tyrants down'.¹¹⁷ One notice proudly boasted that 'you will find that Tipperary is not entirely bereft of all her intrepid sons who will hazard their lives to crush oppression and to trample down tyranny'.¹¹⁸ In some cases the alleged wrongdoer was informed that he had been tried and found guilty of tyranny at the court of public opinion. John Doolan of Carrigahorig, Lower Ormond, was told 'we held a special commission on you a few nights ago', while William Matthews of Ballyquirke in the same barony was warned 'you were tried and found guilty'.¹¹⁹

The threatening notices do not appear to support the suggestion by Beames that Whiteboyism expressed a 'willingness to envisage a different set of socio-economic arrangements'.¹²⁰ On the contrary, the notices imply an essentially conservative outlook on the part of the peasantry and a willingness to accept the existing social order so long as those with power and authority exercised them with justice and fair play. The frequently voiced admonition 'to become a better landlord' is probably best illustrated in two examples from opposite ends of the county. In 1837 'Captain Terry' warned Lower Ormond landlord

George Waller that he would 'leave Wood Park without a house' if he persisted in bringing in 'strangers' to work on his estate. But he softened his threat by adding that he had no wish to drive the landlord away: 'I give you to understand there is no man more welcome to live in Wood Park than the son of the late George Waller, Esq.-if he recalls his misconduct'.¹²¹ The same year, William Fennell of Rehill, Iffa & Offa West, was warned that his brains would be blown out if he dismissed a workman from his employment. The notice pointed out that 'you and your sons were well liked in the country before now', but that lately you have 'behaved a traitor to your nabors and your country'.¹²² The implication in both notices was that Waller and Fennell would regain the favour of the community if they mended their unacceptable behaviour.

Difficult to detect

Gerald Fitzgerald, a long-time resident magistrate at Killenaule, claimed in 1837 that the posting of threatening notices was 'a crime the most difficult of all others to detect or repress'.¹²³ This was hardly surprising considering the lack of forensic tools available to nineteenth-century police, allied to the fact that most notices were erected by stealth under cover of darkness. There was the added difficulty of proving authorship of the notice if the case eventually came to court. For example, when a Frank Stapleton appeared at Nenagh summer assizes of 1842 for sending a threatening notice to a Pat Ryan the case was dismissed because Ryan could not be certain of the author 'as the hand-writing was like the general writing of the country people'.¹²⁴

Fitzgerald's claim is borne out by the fact that during the twelve-year period 1834-45 as few as eighty-eight persons were committed to trial for posting threatening notices in Tipperary, notwithstanding the fact that it was the single most common crime in the county.¹²⁵ The committal rate was even lower at national level because only 321 individuals were committed to trial for the crime during the same period. Perhaps the number committed is a slight underestimate because posting threatening notices was sometimes coupled with another crime – most notably, 'assault on a habitation' – and in some instances the defendant was charged with the latter only, probably because it was easier to get a conviction. However, any slight upward adjustment of the figures does not alter the fact that posting threatening notices was a crime difficult to detect and problematic to prosecute.

It is interesting to follow the fate of the eighty-eight persons committed to trial on suspicion of posting threatening notices in Co. Tipperary. Twenty-two were discharged for lack of evidence, while juries acquitted a further forty at assizes. Of the twenty-two found guilty, half were sentenced to terms of seven years' transportation each and the remainder to periods of imprisonment ranging from six months up to two years. The conviction rate in Co. Tipperary for posting threatening notices accorded closely to the national conviction rate of 25% for the crime. But that figure of 25% was well below the conviction rate for crime in general, both nationally and in Co. Tipperary.

Were threatening notices effective?

The question of how seriously threatening notices should be treated was a matter of some

debate, even among the police. George D. Comyns, chief constable at Thurles, was of the opinion that 'many notices of this nature are circulated where there are trifling disputes as to the possession of ground; and I believe of them without the intention of following up the threats contained in such notices'.¹²⁶ Edward Dalton, a substantial farmer living at Ballygriffin near Golden, was equally dismissive of the threats posed. When questioned on the subject by the Devon Commission, Dalton replied: 'No, not in one case out of six does an outrage follow. I have got a good many notices in my time and no outrage followed any of them'.¹²⁷ However, Lieutenant-Colonel Miller, Deputy Inspector-General of Constabulary, was not convinced that threatening notices should be so lightly dismissed. He told the Devon Commission that 'these intimations are not to be disregarded' and believed that more serious outrages frequently followed them.¹²⁸

The reaction to threatening notices varied, depending on whether the recipient was of nervous disposition or was a person 'whose nerves are brass, veins steel or entrails iron', to quote a notice posted on the chapel gate at Toomevara in 1840.¹²⁹ Undoubtedly, a second consideration was how well the person threatened could defend himself or his property from possible attack. A landlord or gentleman farmer in a well-secured slated house was more likely to spurn warnings to beat him up or burn him out than a poor peasant living in an isolated cabin with a thatched roof and a mere hasp to secure his door. This point was illustrated in a report of a threatening notice sent to George Burgess, steward of the Bellgrove estate on the outskirts of Borrisokane. The police anticipated that in the event of an attack Burgess would offer 'determined resistance' as his house had high windows, an uninterrupted view of all the approaches, coupled with the fact that the steward had formerly been a soldier and was licensed to keep firearms.¹³⁰

There are several illustrations of the contrasting reactions to the posting of threatening notices. In 1836 a Thomas Ryan was threatened with death for taking land from which tenants had been ejected at Shower near Newport, but police reported that 'Ryan says he will not be intimidated'.¹³¹ In November 1840 Thomas Jackson of Millgrove, Iffa & Offa, was threatened with death for appointing John O'Brien of Caher as agent over his property. O'Brien was similarly threatened in a separate notice. But neither notice had the desired effect because some seven weeks later the sender was forced to post a second notice as 'we see you made nothing of the warning we sent you'.¹³²

In contrast, a cottier named Hogan reacted very differently when he was warned to give up two acres of disputed land at Ballycapple near Cloughjordan. Police reported that 'he was so terrified as to sell his interest in it last week'.¹³³ John Shoebottom, a farmer living at Crowle near Borrisokane, was equally frightened by a notice posted on his door on the night of 17 May 1842, threatening him 'with the death of Michael Roberts'. Shoebottom had agreed earlier that day to set his barn as a temporary police barracks, but next morning a clearly terrified Mrs Shoebottom hurried to Borrisokane to tell police that her husband would not set them the barn even if they 'put down a thousand pounds'.¹³⁴

The absence of follow-on evidence in the outrage reports suggests that the threats were not carried out in the majority of cases. Whether this was due to a reluctance on the part of perpetrators to carry the matter further, or whether the recipients made it unnecessary through succumbing to the threats is not certain. Both probably played a part. But there is

no doubt that ignoring such warnings proved fatal in certain instances because threatening notices preceded several of the agrarian murders committed in the county during the 1830s and '40s. For example, when the herdsman, Conor Murphy, was shot dead at Doneskeagh, Clanwilliam, in June 1836 there was a report that a warning to quit his employment had been served on him some time previously.¹³⁵ Likewise, when John Kennedy of Curraghneddy, Upper Ormond, was murdered in July 1838 for acting as steward over ejected land, it was noted that 'he had been repeatedly served with threatening notices'.¹³⁶ Thomas Hennessey of Graffan, Kilnamanagh, under-agent to James Black, had also been threatened prior his murder in August 1843, as had process server Thomas Shanahan of Pallas near Borrisoleigh shortly before his in October 1844.¹³⁷ These examples show that the recipients of threatening notices were wise to be fearful rather than dismissive of them, particularly where violent passions were aroused by a bitter agrarian dispute.

References:

1. The outrage reports in the National Archives of Ireland are the main source for this article and all figures and conclusions are based on these reports unless otherwise stated. The outrage reports referred to in the text are identified in the footnotes as follows: National Archives of Ireland (NAI), followed by Outrage Report (OR), followed by the particular year (e.g. 1842) and the registration number of the individual report (e.g. 27/5249). The figure '27' was assigned to Co. Tipperary as it was the twenty-seventh county in Ireland in alphabetical order. Placenames mentioned are identified by townland and barony, except for towns. Spelling has been left uncorrected in quotations from the threatening notices.
2. NAI, OR, 1842, 27/5249.
3. The best published collection of Irish threatening notices is Stephen Randolph Gibbons, *Captain Rock, Night Errant: The Threatening Letters of Pre-Famine Ireland, 1801-1845* (Dublin, 2004), hereafter Gibbons, *Captain Rock*. For England see E.J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969); Andrew Charlesworth, *Social Protest in a Rural Society: The Spatial Diffusion of Captain Swing Disturbances of 1830-31* (London, 1979).
4. NAI, OR, 1841, 27/785.
5. Brian Griffin, *Sources for the Study of Crime in Ireland 1801-1921* (Dublin, 2005), p. 28.
6. *Devon Commission, evidence*, pt iii, Parl. Papers, 1845, xxi, appendix 36, pp. 118-119.
7. *Devon Commission, evidence*, pt iii, Parl. Papers, 1845, xxi, p. 90.
8. *Devon Commission, evidence*, pt iii, Parl. Papers, 1845, xxi, appendix 36, pp. 118-119.
9. W.E. Vaughan, *Landlords and Tenants in Mid-Victorian Ireland* (Oxford, 1994), p. 147.
10. *Devon Commission, evidence*, pt i, Parl. Papers, 1845, xix, p. 92; *ibid* pp. 6-7.
11. Minutes of evidence taken before the Select Committee of the House of Lords appointed to enquire into the State of Ireland since 1835, in respect of crime and outrage (hereafter State of Ireland since 1835), pt ii, Parl. Papers, 1839, xi, p. 750.
12. *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*, pt ii, Parl. Papers, 1836, xxxiv, appendix H, p. 4; *State of Ireland since 1835, evidence*, pt ii, Parl. Papers, 1839, xi, p. 750.
13. NAI, OR, 1838, 27/330.
14. For example see NAI, OR, 1838, 27/503; OR, 1838, 27/558; OR, 1840, 27/18203; OR, 1843, 27/8747.
15. NAI, OR, 1838, 27/82; OR, 1840, 27/19749.
16. NAI, OR, 1838, 27/94; OR, 1838, 27/265; OR, 1837, 27/599.
17. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/368.
18. *Limerick Reporter* quoted by *Nenagh Guardian* 29 Dec. 1841.
19. *Devon Commission, evidence*, pt iii, Parl. Papers, 1845, xxi, p. 279.
20. NAI, OR, 1842, 27/1061.
21. *Nenagh Guardian* 12 June 1841.
22. NAI, OR, 1841, 27/6811; *Tipperary Constitution* 19 April 1841. For Scully assassination see Denis G. Marnane, *Land and Violence: A History of West Tipperary from 1660* (Tipperary, 1985), p. 56.
23. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/149.
24. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/613.
25. NAI, OR, 1842, 27/19057.
26. *Tipperary Free Press* 28 July 1832.

27. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/23. An interesting account of making turf from 'gor' is found in IFC, Schools' Collection, Ms S575, p. 346.
28. Daniel Grace, 'The Murder of an Improving Landlord' in Elaine Burke Houlihan, (ed), *Tipperary: A Treasure Chest* (Nenagh, 1995), pp. 3-11.
29. NAI, OR, 1838, 27/272.
30. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/16127.
31. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/8431.
32. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/569.
33. For example see NAI, OR, 1836, 27/36; OR, 1836, 27/65; OR, 1837, 27/48.
34. Noreen Higgins, *Tipperary's Tithe War 1830-1838* (Tipperary, 2002), pp. 118-28.
35. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/27; OR, 1836, 27/25.
36. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/490.
37. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/335.
38. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/217.
39. *Nenagh Guardian* 11 Nov. 1843; NAI, OR, 1843, 27/22313.
40. NLI, Ms 11,420, Parker-Hutchinson Papers: Licence to carry arms granted to Rev. Standish Parker of Castlough, 13 Jan. 1844.
41. Gibbons, *Captain Rock*, p. 13.
42. *Nenagh Guardian* 6 Aug. 1842; Gibbons, *Captain Rock*, p. 40.
43. NAI, OR, 1842, 27/8119.
44. Gibbons, *Captain Rock*, p. 10.
45. NAI, OR, 1839, 27/8163.
46. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/298; OR, 1836, 27/395; OR, 1840, 27/10569.
47. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/17333.
48. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/2155.
49. Gibbons, *Captain Rock*, p. 40.
50. *Tipperary Constitution* 10 Jan. 1843.
51. NAI, OR, 1838, 27/634; OR, 1840, 27/18487.
52. NLI, Ms 11,420, Parker-Hutchinson Papers: Threatening notice to Rev. Standish Parker of Castlough, 1846.
53. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/148.
54. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/18769.
55. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/545; OR, 1837, 27/148.
56. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/20643.
57. E.J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 173.
58. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/326.
59. NAI, OR, 1838, 27/589.
60. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/9817.
61. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/9903.
62. NAI, OR, 1842, 27/22949.
63. NAI, OR, 1838, 27/713.
64. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/47.
65. NAI, OR, 1835, 27/43; OR, 1838, 27/719.
66. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/181.
67. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/553.
68. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/387.
69. *Nenagh Guardian* 24 Mar. 1841, 8 Jan. 1842.
70. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/490.
71. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/4121.
72. *Nenagh Guardian* 15 May 1839.
73. *Tipperary Constitution* 28 June 1842.
74. *Nenagh Guardian* 19 June 1841.
75. *Nenagh Guardian* 23 Mar. 1842.
76. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/9817.
77. For a comprehensive list of signatures see Gibbons, *Captain Rock*, p. 14.
78. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/17333; *Nenagh Guardian* 10 April 1841. *The Tipperary Free Press* 12 May 1838 claimed that 'Captain Rock is the government of North Tipperary'.

79. *State of Ireland since 1835*, pt ii, Parl. Papers, 1839, xi, p. 577; Shunsuke Katsuta, 'The Rockite Movement in County Cork in the early 1820s', *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. xxiii, no. 131 (May 2003), p. 279.
80. *State of Ireland since 1835*, pt ii, Parl. Papers, 1839, xi, p. 585.
81. NAI, OR, 1839, 27/8199.
82. IFC, Schools' Collection, Ms S530, pp. 422-3.
83. NAI, OR, 1839, 27/8200; OR, 1840, 27/20737; OR, 1838, 27/516.
84. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/17145.
85. *State of Ireland since 1835*, pt ii, Parl. Papers, 1839, xi, p. 77; Paul E.W. Roberts, 'Caravats and Shanavests: Whiteboyism and Faction Fighting in East Munster, 1802-11', in S. Clark and J.S. Donnelly Jr. (eds), *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest 1780-1914* (Wisconsin, 1983).
86. *Tipperary Advocate* 8 June 1878; IFC, Schools' Collection, Ms S562, p. 209; Roberts, 'Caravats and Shanavests', p. 68. The *Clonmel Advertiser* 1 Jan. 1834 has an interesting report of a Caravat and Shanavest encounter at Coalbrook, Slieveardagh.
87. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/322.
88. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/1485; OR, 1836, 27/248.
89. *State of Ireland since 1835*, pt ii, Parl. Papers, 1839, xi, pp. 578, 585.
90. *Tipperary Constitution* 24 Jan. 1846.
91. *Tipperary Free Press* 23 Mar. 1833; *Clonmel Herald* 13 Jan. 1836.
92. David Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, (Cardiff, new ed. 1998).
93. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/181; OR, 1836, 27/148; OR, 1837, 27/210; OR, 1845, 27/5209.
94. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/441; OR, 1837, 27/494; OR, 1839, 27/7132.
95. NAI, OR, 1838, 27/589; OR, 1837, 27/441.
96. *Nenagh Guardian* 30 Jan. 1839.
97. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/6299.
98. NAI, OR, 1845, 27/5209.
99. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/181.
100. *Nenagh Guardian* 22 June 1842.
101. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/148.
102. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/18759; OR, 1840, 27/14731.
103. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/30719; OR, 1840, 27/20575; OR, 1841, 27/55227; OR, 1837, 27/380; *Nenagh Guardian* 29 Aug. 1838.
104. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/419; OR, 1838, 27/210; OR, 1838, 27/476; OR, 1844, 27/13487; OR, 1841, 27/8387; OR, 1840, 27/19543.
105. *Clonmel Herald* 7 April 1838; Marnane, *Land and Violence*, pp. 53-55.
106. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/288; OR, 1837, 27/745; OR, 1845, 27/2637.
107. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/619; OR, 1839, 27/7035; *Nenagh Guardian* 20 July 1842.
108. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/958. For other examples see NAI, OR, 1837, 27/135; OR, 1840, 27/1009; *Nenagh Guardian* 3 May 1845.
109. Bob Bushaway, *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and Community in England 1700-1880* (London, 1982), pp. 10-12; Michael Beames, *Peasants and Power: The Whiteboy Movements and Their Control in Pre-Famine Ireland* (Sussex, 1983), p. 89.
110. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/214. See also NAI, OR, 1837, 27/135, *Nenagh Guardian* 3 May 1845.
111. NAI, OR, 1841, 27/275.
112. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/391; OR, 1836, 27/328.
113. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/296.
114. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/303.
115. NAI, OR, 1839, 27/866.
116. NAI, OR, 1841, 27/459; OR, 1836, 27/303.
117. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/364; OR, 1841, 27/275.
118. *Nenagh Guardian* 23 Mar. 1842.
119. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/181; OR, 1845, 27/5209.
120. Beames, *Peasants and Power*, p. 97.
121. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/160.
122. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/545.
123. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/279.
124. *Nenagh Guardian* 2 Aug. 1842.
125. Calculations in this and following paragraph based on returns of committals for years 1834-45 in Parliamentary Papers.

126. NAI, OR, 1837, 27/175. See also Gibbons, *Captain Rock*, p. 41.
127. *Devon Commission, evidence*, pt iii, Parl. Papers, 1845, xxi, p. 90.
128. *Devon Commission, evidence*, pt iii, Parl. Papers, 1845, xxi, p. 906.
129. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/6705.
130. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/6789.
131. NAI, OR, 1836, 27/151.
132. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/18759, 27/18769, 27/20665.
133. NAI, OR, 1840, 27/4029.
134. NAI, OR, 1842, 27/8863.
135. *Clonmel Herald* 22 June 1836.
136. *Clonmel Herald* 25 July 1838.
137. NAI, OR, 1843, 27/17809; Tipperary Constitution 18 Aug. 1843, 30 Oct. 1844.