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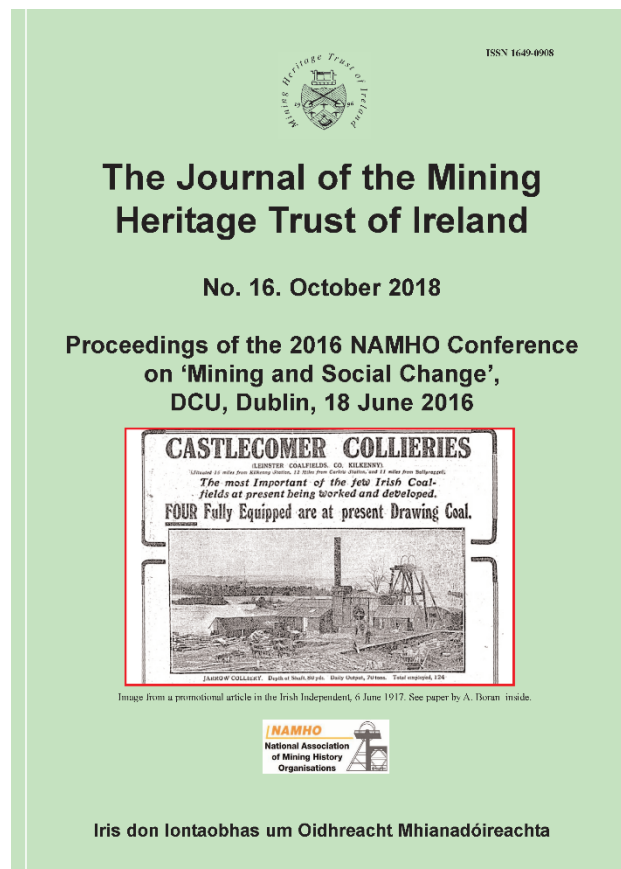
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# "WOLF HILL I DREAD YOU": THREATENING LETTERS AND OTHER ALTERNATIVE DOCUMENTARY SOURCES FOR THE LEINSTER COLLIERY DISTRICT

by Terry Dunne

**Abstract:** This paper presents some alternative documentary records: threatening letters; the ballad tradition; and the archive of the folklore commission; and attempts to show the insights they can give when used in conjunction with more conventional documentary sources in the particular case of the Leinster colliery district. Similar alternative records may exist for other nineteenth-century mining districts. *Journal of the Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland*, 16, 2018 33-37.

## INTRODUCTION

The key problem of historical research based on documents is a simple one to grasp: the production of documents is by no means a universal human activity. Even in societies of near-universal literacy there is a great unevenness to the written record: it is most obviously skewed along lines of class and gender. Beyond that, writing, or at least writing in volume, is a specialised activity, a fact which poses the question of the representativeness of any writing. To what extent is the writing of the social movement leader or intellectual representative of the social movement rank-and-file; or to what extent is the writing of the novelist representative of the wider society?

In researching nineteenth-century mining, the immediate problem we face is that for the most part the documentary record is an elite documentary record. Written sources produced by people who often, but not always, have interests diametrically opposed to the majority of the mining population. Who, moreover, are frequently simply ignorant of the subaltern classes, either from social blindness or because certain practices and opinions are deliberately hidden from them. This paper foregrounds some alternative documentary records: threatening letters; the ballad tradition; and the archive of the folklore commission; and attempts to show the insights they can give when used in conjunction with more conventional sources in the particular case of the Leinster colliery district. Similar alternative records may exist for other nineteenth-century mining districts.

The Leinster colliery district is a plateau straddling the north-east corner of County Kilkenny and the south-east corner of Laois (named Queen's County prior to the 1920s) with a small part jutting into the western edge of County Carlow. It was the site of intense social conflict a number of times in its modern history: the 1790s; the 1820s and 1830s; and, intermittently, the

1920s through to the 1940s. Both the threatening letters and the ballad examined here date from the late 1820s/early 1830s period. The account from the folklore archive dates from the early 1900s and gives us some sense of how the colliery district and its people were viewed by some within neighbouring communities.

From 1826 to 1834, the Castlecomer colliery, on the Wandesforde estate, and one of the three main collieries in the district, saw an attempt at radical transformation (Dunne 2018b). The hitherto existing system was one similar to what is now called artisanal-mining: relatively small-scale shallow pits with an average workforce of six, held by individuals under contract to supply coal to the estate at below market value.<sup>1</sup> Some individual contractors or master colliers held one pit, and probably worked it with family labour; some held multiple pits and presumably worked them with hired labour.<sup>2</sup> There was an attempt to change this to a situation of deep mining with a workforce directly employed by the estate.<sup>3</sup> This attempted transformation was overseen by managers and mining experts brought in from the North of England. The change was vigorously resisted.

Simultaneously, to the north of Castlecomer, both within the mining district proper and in adjacent areas, there was a series of attempts, some successful, some not, at clearances of peasant-smallholders (Gibbons 1999). Consequently, the upland border territory of Kilkenny and the Queen's County was one of the main centres of the Whitefeet: the latest in a long series of mostly peasant-based movements (c. 1760 - 1850) generically known as whiteboys and employing a repertoire of violent, often clandestine, direct action (Beames 1983).

<sup>1</sup> On present-day artisanal mining see <http://www.artisanalmining.org/>, accessed 20/01/2017. Kildare Dobbs to CHBCS Wandesforde, 13 Nov. 1829 (N.L.I., Prior-Wandesforde, MS 35/568/1).

<sup>2</sup> No. 1 Colliery Contract Book 1828 -9 (N.A.I., Business Records/Kilkenny/44/1); Colliery Contract Book (N.L.I., Prior-Wandesforde, MS 14/192). List of Contractors, n.d. (N.L.I., Prior-Wandesforde, MS 35/574/5).

<sup>3</sup> *Report from the Select Committee on the State of Ireland; with the minutes of evidence, appendix and index*, pp 161-2, H.C. 1831-32 (677), xvi, 1 (chaired by Sir Henry Parnell and henceforth cited as *Parnell Comm.*).



*Detail of Daniel Cahill's 1805 map of the Queen's County, showing Wolfhill colliery and the Grand Canal Company's colliery at Doonane/Newtown and the location of the Lordship or Castlecomer colliery on the Wandesforde estate in County Kilkenny. This image is reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Ireland [16 H. 18/4].*

## THREATENING NOTICES

Threatening notices or threatening letters, sometimes also known to contemporary state authorities as 'illegal notices' or 'rockite notices', can be most basically understood as a means of anonymously issuing demands. The tactic of the threatening notice was predominantly used in class conflict, though by no means exclusively. In fact, notices can be found in a wide range of different situations, including sectarian conflict, inter- or

intra-family disputes and electoral intimidation. Similarly, though such notices are typically associated with whiteboy movements, the tactic is in fact independent of such movements. That said, it is likely that the bulk of early nineteenth-century threatening notices were indeed produced within whiteboy movements. The first notice discussed here was found in the Wandesforde estate papers (in the National Library) and the

second was reported in a newspaper. However, most surviving notices are to be found in state records, specifically in the 'State of the Country' and 'Outrage Papers' in the National Archives (Griffin 2005).

Thompson argued that: 'The anonymous threatening letter is a characteristic form of social protest in any society which has crossed a certain threshold of literacy, in which forms of collective organised defence are weak, and in which individuals who can be identified as the organisers of protest are liable to immediate victimisation.' (Thompson 1977, p. 255)

Randall qualified this interpretation to a degree, claiming that the threatening letter was 'a typical tool of effective negotiation in all sorts of labor disputes' which protected individuals from 'employer retaliation' but should not necessarily be taken as 'indicative of an essential weakness in bargaining position'; as even 'skilled workers often conducted negotiation in this way' (Randall 2004, p. xv). Additionally, the notice had a symbolic value beyond its utility as a means of anonymous communication. Hence, on occasion, threatening notices were actually publicly delivered (Dunne 2017, 2018a).

Threatening letters were described by Gibbons as 'an enormous body of clandestine literature which had a significant part in nineteenth-century Irish history' (Gibbons 2004, p. 10). But even more than that, they are one of the very few access points we have into the attitudes, outlooks and opinions of persons within the subaltern classes of early nineteenth-century Irish society. As Thompson pointed out in regard to the British context: 'these letters are, in many cases - and over many decades - the only literate expression of the "inarticulate" which has survived. The "dark figure" of the crime itself is dwarfed by the even darker figure of the plebeian consciousness through much of the eighteenth century and, in rural areas, well into the nineteenth' (Thompson 1977, p. 304).

The 'dark figure of crime' being the extent to which the practice went unreported and so unrecorded. What he writes of 'the even darker figure of the plebeian consciousness' is even truer of the situation in Ireland.

## THE BONEYARROW NOTICE

'Thomas Potts Thomas Johnson James Scott and all your Country men, ye managers of the Castle Comer Colliery we Ribbon Men Give ye timely notice that if ye don't drop year dominering tyrannising ways and let poor Collars have midling good wages tradesmen likewise have the same wages they had labourers the same and be vearey civil with the peoplle if ye don't do that after a little time again we give ye timeley notice to quitt this countrey or we will give ye the same usage as hanlon and his Bad Managers Got or worse.'<sup>4</sup>

The letter had been thrust under the door of Thomas Potts. As is pretty apparent this notice was issued during the course of a

wage dispute. The conflict was taking place at the Boneyarrow pit: a new pit, the development of which was part of the attempted revolution in production relations in the Castlecomer colliery as referred to above. The management team named were some of the specialists brought over from the environs of Newcastle-on-Tyne. The calls to 'drop year dominering tyrannising ways' and to 'be vearey civil with the peoplle' give us some sense that this was a new management style and new level of work discipline. The Hanlon referred to, operated a colliery to the north of Castlecomer in Modubeagh (or Modibeadh) and had recently suffered an arson attack subsequent to his threat to evict some tenants.<sup>5</sup> It was fairly typical for threatening notices to make reference to other incidents in this manner - usually to assassinations.

The issuers of the notice describe themselves as 'we Ribbon Men'. There were actual Ribbonmen organisations, which were a mixture of an insurrectionary nationalist underground, a confessional defence force and a sort of mutual-aid faction. But these were either mostly urban-based in Dublin and in the diaspora, or in Ulster. The name, and perhaps elements of the organisation, were adopted at times and used for their own purposes by elements within the more rural and agrarian whiteboy tradition. The presence of the term here should not be taken as meaning that there was an actual presence of the actual Ribbon formal organisation within the colliery district. The authors of threatening letters were typically promiscuously ecumenical in their adoption of motifs from other movements in other times and places (Dunne 2016, 2018a). On the other hand, there was a Ribbon presence in the canal system and coal transport did link the canal system closely to the colliery district (Beames 1982, pp 128-9).

## THE NEWTOWN NOTICE

A threatening letter found in Newtown in October 1831 is unusually conciliatory in its attitude to colliery lease-holder John Edge. Newtown, to the immediate north of the Castlecomer colliery, was one of the three main collieries in the district along with Castlecomer and Clough. This notice had been found tied to the horn of one of two cows which had been beaten close to death.<sup>6</sup>

Edge had been manager of the colliery for the Grand Canal Company and manager of Clonbrock farm, part of the same leasehold, and had been the company's agent in dealing with their tenants (many of whom were miners). He had recently taken on the leasehold himself and was the progenitor of a local nineteenth-century mining dynasty. There was an issue with Edge seeking rent arrears, which is mentioned in the letter, which opens thus: 'Mr. John Edge, take no erairs [arrears] of rent any mor from the pore tennans [tenants], any man who will pay it he shall be no more ; but let him pay his half-year's rent, and If he does not he must lose house and land, and I will essist [assist] Mr. Edge with seven hundre men'. Note the respectful tone and use of the honorific title, coupled with conciliatory

<sup>4</sup> John Hewetson to C.H.B.C.S. Wandesforde, 19 Jun. 1829 (N.L.I., Prior-Wandesforde papers, MS 35/567/8).

<sup>5</sup> Sir John Harvey to William Gregory, 4 May 1829 (N.A.I., C.S.O.R.P. 1829/1652/H26).

<sup>6</sup> *Leinster Express*, 22 Oct. 1831; the entire notice has been republished in Gibbons, 2004, pp. 231-2.

content offering compromise and assistance with policing compromise, all of which is quite different from many threatening letters. Edge appears to have acceded to the demand not to claim rent arrears.<sup>7</sup> He was probably popular, as prior to him taking over the lease from the Grand Canal Company - who had been trying to surrender it - the landlords, Bowen and Lecky, were demanding vacant possession, that is to say that the lands be cleared of sub-tenants before it was returned to them.<sup>8</sup>

While opposition to accumulation from above can be clearly identified in coal-mining on the Wandesforde estate, that is to say opposition to the landlord's programme of dispossessing small-scale producers, the Newtown notice is interesting in its opposition to accumulation from below - to the little capitalist entrepreneurs emerging from the ranks of the tenantry. It admonishes 'Let them have now [no] pit but one': referring to a number of named individuals as the holders of multiple pits. This also indicates that the system of small-scale mining was current not only in Castlecomer but also in Newtown (though Newtown already had deep-mines, direct labour and steam-engine operated pumps). The closing line in the main body of this notice is the surprisingly human, or guileless, 'I roat that bad I was tired'.

## A WHITEFEET BALLAD

The following extracts are of a song text collected in Carlow in the mid-1830s. The ballad was given the name 'Last Saturday night as I lay in my bed' by song collector and antiquarian George Petrie and has been performed in the present day by Seán Corcoran using the title 'Captain Carder' (Copper 2002, pp 132-3).<sup>9</sup>

'Last Saturday night as I lay in my bed,  
The neighbours came to me, and this 'twas they said:  
Are you Captain Lusty? - I answered them - no!  
Are you Captain Carder? - Indeed I am so.  
Get up Captain Carder, and look thro' your glass,  
And see all your merry men just as they pass;'

The figure of the captain was also a recurrent motif within threatening notices as well and likely relates to the captain role within folk rituals marking marriage and/or the succession of the seasons (Dunne 2017).

Carder is in reference to carding, an early stage in the processing of sheep's wool, in which was used a rectangular piece of wood with sharp points or nails on one side. This tool was also used as an instrument of torture, so carding also comes to refer to this torture and it gives its name to the Carders, a whiteboy movement circa 1813-16.

Here's luck to Kilkenny, and sweet Ballyroan -

As for Timahoe town, we may call it our own;

In Timahoe town we may march up and down,

And at Billy Dunne's corner we'll make them lie down.

Success to the Whitefeet - there's a few of them here;

We'll toast their good health in both whiskey and beer;

And long may they reign over country and town'

For they are the boys that keep land jobbers down!'

There is something of a claim on territory here: the fourth verse's extolling of Timahoe town, a small town in the south-east of the Queen's County, just above the northern perimeter of the coal-mining district, is of special interest. This village was, according to a local Catholic clergyman, an early organising hub of the Whitefeet in the autumn of 1828.<sup>10</sup> While much of the reported activity of the Whitefeet was clandestine, the openness suggested by parading is not unheard of. For example, in Athy, in County Kildare and about twenty kilometres east of Timahoe, in the summer of 1832, one magistrate reported on: 'large groups of persons calling themselves Whitefeet shouting and parading the streets, to the great dread and terror of the peaceable inhabitants, in fact the town presented the appearance of being completely in the hands of those ruffians'.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the final line's reference to 'land jobbers' is a reference to persons taking land illegitimately; i.e. taking land from which others had been evicted or taking land over the heads of existing tenants.

## FOLKLORE ARCHIVE

The following document is an oral history account held in the folklore commission archive: the recollections of a 70 year-old Carlow man recorded in 1908. It gives some sense of the somewhat negative attitude some people from adjacent areas had towards the distinctive colliery population. It also gives a sense of the extent to which carmen dominated the image of the colliery district. Carmen were the people who transported coal and culm to market (for more on carmen see Conry 2001).

'Thousands of car left the collieries (Wolf Hill & Cretty yard) with their loads of coal in all directions. Hundreds more passed Castlecomer per week. Each collier generally had a donkey to help his horse up hill. Coal was bt. [bought] for less than 10/. [shillings] per ton at that time - when I was a boy. The colliers were rough, uncultured, half-civilised "clan" - given to drink and fighting. Last woman to be hanged (Mary Daly) was one of them. She murdered her husband with aid of her lover. They generally slept on their return journey, but their horses were so well trained that an 'accident' never occurred. When the 'lighting up laws' came into force the horses used to stop on the out-

<sup>7</sup> Parnell Comm., pp 170-1.

<sup>8</sup> 28 August 1830 meeting, Minute book of the court of the directors of the Grand Canal 1830/1831 (National Archives of Ireland, Office of Public Works/10/1/69), p. 100.

<sup>9</sup> Captain Carder, online at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZY7Tgce2F28](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZY7Tgce2F28), accessed 12/08/2014.

<sup>10</sup> Parnell Comm., p. 251.

<sup>11</sup> James Tandy to Sir William Gosset, 9 May 1832 (N.A.I. C.S.O./R.P./1832/1091).

skirts of each town & [shake?] his winkers until his owner awoke & lit to lamp. It is alleged the colliers wet the powder on the 'rebels' in 1798. They inflicted serious loss on the bailiffs and proctors during the Tithe Wars. "Wolf Hill I dread you", became a watch word. Police & bailiffs shun the collieries to the present day. They fielded a much feared football team for many years'.<sup>12</sup>

This distrustful attitude likely reflects a particular context. The people of the coal-mining area were distinctive. There was a greater density of population in that area, and that population was much more proletarian. Additionally the colliery district was, and is, in agrarian terms, a poorer 'mountainy' area. Despite the distrust, an appreciation of the skill of the carmen shines through.

The account also illustrates the jumbled-up-ness of oral history: the coal-mining area was not a major centre of the Tithe War but of the concurrent, but separate, Whitefeet. One gets the impression that the purpose of the history is to explain a current (1908) concern with the success - and perhaps the skill and aggression - of Wolfhill Gaelic Football club.

## CONCLUSION

It is most likely not possible to find these sort of alternative documents for all periods. The heyday of the threatening letters was at the early nineteenth century beginning of mass literacy, the folklore archive is mostly based on the memory of mid-twentieth century old people. When it is possible though, our understanding is immensely enriched by accessing traces of voices which usually went unrecorded and forgotten. The perspectives in the above Boneyarrow notice, or in the above Whitefeet ballad, are sharply different from what is found in the correspondence between mine managers and estate owners, or in reports made by magistrates or constables.

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<sup>12</sup> National Folklore Collection 407: 86; Pádraig MacDomnaill (70), estate manager, Castletown, Co. Carlow. Collector: Peadar MacDomhnaill, August 1908.