ISSN 1753-2396 (Print)
ISSN 2753-328X (Online)

Journal of
Irish and Scottish Studies

Articles

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Volume 8, Issue 2
Pp:126-142
2015
Published on: 1st Jan 2015

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ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

‘Better to die by the sword than to die of starvation’: Popular Resistance to Food Exports in Ireland and Scotland, 1846–7

John Cunningham

Two contemporary documents indicate a similarity in the responses of poor people in Ireland and Scotland to the crises arising from the potato failure of the 1840s:

> … We will not stand it if twice the number of troops come to town for to see our children starving and staring us in the face. It is better to die by the sword than to die of starvation.[1]
>
> … No expostulation or threats made the slightest impression on the mob, who said they might as well die by being shot as of starvation and they were determined to resist to the last the removal of any grain from the country ... but they did not proceed to use violence.[2]

The first extract is from a threatening notice posted in the town of Galway in the west of Ireland in 1846; the second from the report of a public official in Dingwall in the north-east of Scotland in 1847. Starting with these documents, this paper will make some connections and draw some comparisons between the popular mobilisations to prevent the export of the 1846 grain crop that occurred in several parts of Ireland in the two-month period from late September to November 1846 – the months of most intense and widespread protest during the Irish Famine – with those that spread through the north-east of Scotland in the two-month period January to March 1847. While the subject of protest has been largely neglected in the voluminous literature on the Irish Famine, the Scottish mobilisations of 1847 discussed here were the subject of a significant publication by Eric Richards.[3]

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[1] Cited in John Cunningham, *‘A Town Tormented by the Sea’: Galway, 1790–1914* (Dublin, 2004), 128. There is biblical allusion in both quotes to Lamentations, 4:9: ‘They that be slain with the sword are better than they that be slain with hunger.’

[2] Cited in Eric Richards, *The Last Scottish Food Riots, Past & Present Supplement*, No. 6 (1982), 11.

[3] Ibid., passim.

Any coincidence of mentality implied by the above quotations was not a result of direct connections between the west of Ireland and the east of Scotland *per se*, but a reflection of a moral economy and a repertoire of protest in relation to food supply which people in Galway and Dingwall shared with others throughout northern Europe. The conduct and outcome of the protests in Scotland were affected by the unrest in Ireland, however, not least because both places were subject to decisions of government in London.

Economically, Scotland and Ireland were increasingly integrated into the British market during the lives of a generation or two before the potato failure. A process of 'agriculturalisation', together with free trade and the protections provided by government for capitalist enterprises had undermined endeavours like kelp-making, poteen-making, and proto-industrial textile production, making the rural and small town poor more dependent on land. On the land, a combination of population and public policy pressures forced people into reliance on the potato, the only crop capable of supporting an average family for most of a year on an acre. Evidence given to the Devon Commission in the mid-1840s showed that an Irish farm labourer in the east of the country might pay back most of his year's wages to his employer in exchange for the sub-tenancy of an acre on which to grow potatoes for his family.[4] The commercialisation of farming in the east of Scotland similarly created a class of prosperous grain-growing farmers on the one hand, and on the other a growing class of landless proletarians – labourers and fishermen – dependent to a greater or lesser degree on small potato plots.[5] Potatoes purchased in the marketplace were also a considerable part of the diet of the urban poor.

The scale of potato-dependency, however, was rather different in the two places. Scotland's population in the 1840s was less than one third of Ireland's (2.6 million to 8.2 million in 1841), and Scotland was generally more industrialised, with the south capable of absorbing migrants from the north. Moreover, 'railway mania' was further advanced in Scotland than in Ireland, and employment in railway construction was available by the time of the potato failure. With its potato-dependent population at about half-a-million – one sixth of Ireland's figure – the challenge presented by potato blight was

[4] *Evidence taken before the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Law and Practice in Respect to the Occupation of Land in Ireland, part iii,* House of Commons, 19 (1845), 428, 445–6, 448.

[5] Liz Young, 'Spaces for Famine: A Comparative Geographical Analysis of Famine in Ireland and the Highlands in the 1840s', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, 21 (1996), 666–80.

more manageable in Scotland.[6] Indeed, boosted by an influx from Ireland, Scotland's population would grow during the 1840s (2.9 million to Ireland's 6.5 million in 1851), though young and old succumbed in the highlands. Distress, it should be noted, was also uneven in Ireland, with Connacht and Munster mortality rates greatly exceeding those of Ulster and Leinster.

The purpose of the popular anti-export mobilisations of late 1846 in Ireland and almost immediately afterwards in Scotland was to influence at local level the price and the availability of food staples – grain in particular, because it was a substitute for the failed potato. During subsistence crises historically, governments and local authorities had intervened in the food market in the interests of order and fairness, banning the export of grain (the term 'export' in this context meaning removal from the district where it was grown) and distilling so as to preserve scarce stocks. These interventions were elements of a 'moral economy', as defined by E. P. Thompson, and people came to expect them. With the rise of capitalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, political economists condemned civic and state efforts to regulate markets as contravening *laissez faire* principles, and ultimately counter-productive as far the poor were concerned. Members of economic and social elites were largely persuaded by the arguments of the political economists but poorer citizens continued to expect their customary and legal protections. And the predicament of the poorer citizens, if not necessarily their occasional protests, also continued to enjoy a measure of sympathy among the better-off.[7]

So-called 'food riots' at this time represented efforts by communities to assert laws which were being disregarded by the responsible authorities. As 'reserve' enforcers of law and custom in this regard, crowds of the common people generally behaved in a restrained and disciplined fashion, and any damage to property was usually limited and purposeful – the exemplary destruction of the scales which had been used to weigh overpriced potatoes or grain, for example. Such 'riots' were part of a type of bargaining process, and the crowds involved usually dispersed when offered a significant concession

[6] T. M. Devine, *The Great Highland Famine: Hunger, Emigration and Scottish Highlands in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1988), 12–18; Eric Richards, *The Highland Clearances: People, Landlords, and Rural Turmoil* (Edinburgh, 2000), 199–203, 324–6; Peter Gray, 'Famine Relief Policy in Comparative Perspective: Ireland, Scotland, and Northwestern Europe, 1845–1849', *Éire-Ireland: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal of Irish Studies,* 32 (1997), 86–108.

[7] E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present,* 50 (1971), 76–136.

by the authorities or by merchants, even if it was not precisely the concession demanded.

Outbreaks for the purpose of regulating food supply had come to be regarded as anachronistic in Britain by the 1840s. According to one authority, there were no significant 'food riots' in Scotland in the three decades after 1817, which was a year of widespread scarcity throughout the northern hemisphere due to the impact on crops of volcanic dust in the atmosphere. Food riots continued to recur in urban Ireland during the subsistence crises of the 1820s, 1830s and early 1840s, while the regulation of food supply and price was also a concern of the secret societies that thrived in much of rural Ireland.[8]

There were protests in Ireland throughout the Famine period, concerning a range of issues, from the operation of relief works and soup kitchens to the payment of rent and poor rates, but the period of most widespread, numerous and animated protests was between late September and November 1846.[9] The outbreak commenced soon after it was realised that the entire potato crop was lost, in a country already agitated following the partial failure of the previous year. The realisation that circumstances were to become much worse galvanised the people into acting to hold the remaining food at home. A few months elapsed before the two-month-long wave of Scottish unrest commenced. The Irish outbreak will first be examined, and then the Scottish.

Ireland, September to November 1846

Because Irish protests in these months were concentrated mainly in three regions, this section of the article will consider in turn the unrest in (i) Galway and Mayo; (ii) Limerick and Clare; (iii) Waterford and East Cork.

(i) *Galway and Mayo*

At 5 am on 21 September 1846, between 600 and 700 hundred people, men,

[8] John Cunningham, 'Popular Protest and a "Moral Economy" in Provincial Ireland in the Early Nineteenth Century'' in Francis Devine, Fintan Lane and Niamh Puirséil (eds), *Essays in Irish Labour History: A Festschrift for John and Elizabeth Boyle* (Dublin, 2008) 26–48; John Cunningham, '"Compelled to their bad acts by hunger": Three Irish Urban Crowds, 1817–45', *Éire-Ireland,* 45 (2010), 128–51; Richards, *Last Scottish Food Riots,* 4–5.

[9] A wider range of Famine-era protests is discussed by John Cunningham in '"'Tis hard to argue starvation into quiet": Protest and Resistance, 1846–47', Enda Delaney and Breandán Mac Suibhne (eds), *Ireland's Great Famine and Popular Politics* (New York, 2016), 10–33.

women and children, assembled in the coastal town of Westport, County Mayo, determined to prevent five cartloads of oats, the property of a local merchant, from reaching the quayside. Although, 'they did not offer the slightest violence,' the people forced the carts to return to the store through sheer force of numbers, declaring that 'they would not allow one grain of corn to leave the country.' Requesting additional cavalry and infantry, the resident magistrate advised that he did not have force sufficient to protect the property of the merchant who was exporting 'a very large quantity' of meal and flour on a daily basis.[10]

Similar scenes might have been anticipated fifty miles south of Westport, in Galway, a town of somewhat under 20,000 with an established flour and grain trade.[11] That trade had been subject to interruption during previous seasons of scarcity, with crowds mobilising to retain food at home or at least to secure assurances that an affordable supply would be made available to them. Insofar as such popular efforts had been successful, this was due to the determined leadership of the fishing community of Claddagh, a Gaelic-speaking suburban village which housed about one-sixth of Galway's population. Claddagh people had a strong sense of their traditional rights generally, having been active in resisting fishing practices in the bay that they considered anti-social, notably the incursion of commercial trawling interests.[12] The characteristic Galway 'food riot' of the pre-Famine period was a ritualised affair, with the following features: a demonstration / blockade led by the women and children of Claddagh; the fishermen preventing grain ships from leaving, either by confiscating their sails or blockading the harbour; limited exemplary damage to the property of the exporting merchants; a confrontation with police or soldiers, followed by the disbandment of the crowd. Usually, the demobilisation of the crowd was quickly followed by a concession, either by merchants making a portion of their cargo available at a 'fair price', or by the opening of a subsidized food store.[13] If no adequate concession was made, a further mobilization would ensue.

In November 1845, following the first partial failure of the potato crop, a planned blockade was thwarted. According to the resident magistrate, he was alerted to the fact that 'emissaries from the town' had approached the

[10] National Archives of Ireland (NAI), Outrage reports, Co. Mayo, 1846, 21/26029.

[11] Cunningham, *'A Town Tormented'*, 18

[12] John Cunningham, 'The mayor/admiral of Claddagh', in Emmet O'Connor and John Cunningham (eds), *Studies in Irish Radical Leadership: Lives on the Left,* (Manchester, 2016), 22–34.

[13] Cunningham, *'A Town Tormented'*, 86–98.

Claddagh fishermen, requesting that they prevent ships carrying grain from sailing. The magistrate informed one of the Dominican priests who lived in Claddagh and were greatly respected there. For his part, the priest duly persuaded the fishermen not to act. An admiralty steamer was dispatched to Galway to protect trade, along with two regiments, satisfying the resident magistrate that he had at his disposal sufficient force for the purpose of 'overawing the mob.'[14]

With the second failure of the potato, popular excitement was at an even greater pitch in the autumn of 1846 than it had been a year earlier. In early October, with demands being heard to blockade exports, the authorities again deployed gunboats at the port 'to protect the river between Claddagh … in case the Claddagh men should be persuaded to join the townspeople'.[15] Frustrated, the townspeople turned their attention to provisions, including relief provisions, which were leaving by road for inland towns. Car men were obliged to take oaths to the effect that they would not carry any flour or meal from the town. Tragedy struck on 8 October 1846, when a vigilante force organised by a Catholic priest came into conflict with a crowd determined to turn back a convoy of meal bound for Tuam. One of the blockaders, Bridget Kelly, fell under a cart-wheel and lost her life.[16]

The authorities succeeding in protecting trade in Galway but, significantly, the safe passage of relief provisions had to be overseen by voluntary effort. Naval vessels, including twelve men-of-war, had been deployed to assist with the movement of Indian meal acquired by the government, but the commanders of these vessels were under instruction to 'preserve' their military character so as be in a position to intervene 'in case of outbreak'. Naturally, particular attention was paid to places engaged in the grain trade, especially those, like Galway, with a history of anti-export protests.[17] Given the extent of the crisis of 1846, however, it was not possible to secure the trade in every place.

From the town of Ballinasloe, County Galway, a resident magistrate alerted his superiors in mid-October to an incident involving 'considerable numbers 'of the townspeople, who had compelled a grain buyer, one Horsman, to

[14] NAI, Outrage papers, 1846, Co. Galway, 11/19343.

[15] Ibid., 11/27341.

[16] Cunningham, '*A Town Tormented',* 134.

[17] *Belfast Newsletter,* 6 October 1846. See also British Parliamentary Papers, *Accounts and Papers; Relief of the Distress in Ireland:* Commissariat series (1847), 151 (Hewetson to Trevelyan, Limerick, 11 October 1846), 171 (ibid., 9 December 1846), 352 (Pigot to Routh, Cork, 16 October 1846). W. J. Lowe, 'Policing Famine Ireland', *Éire-Ireland: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal of Irish Studies,* 29 (1994), 47–66.

return to the countryside with grain he had purchased there. The crowd indicated a willingness to allow the supplies to be brought to the stores of Mr Hood, because, unlike Horsman, he 'retails out small quantities at moderate price'. The magistrate had been unable to intervene, lacking the force to do so, but the Catholic clergy had prevailed upon the people to disperse.[18] In another incident a few days later, the Ballinasloe crowd prevented an unnamed would-be-purchaser from buying grain at the weekly market and obliged the sellers to withdraw it from sale. Seven men judged to have been 'ringleaders' in this instance were charged but treated leniently on the instruction of the resident magistrate.[19] Other interventions in the county's food trade during these weeks took place near Dunmore, where a trench was dug across the road to prevent grain carts from leaving the district.[20] A number of small appropriations took place near Clonfert in the east of the county, where portions of supplies bound for Ballinasloe Asylum were taken by groups pleading hunger, but maintaining an almost apologetic demeanour.[21]

(ii) *Limerick and Clare*

County Clare was noted for the extent of violent class conflict there in the pre-Famine period, perpetrated by agrarian secret societies, the Terry Alts and Lady Clare's Boys. By contrast with the food regulating crowds described, the modus operandi of the secret societies was violent and secretive. Along with conacre rents, evictions, wage rates and the employment of 'strangers' the agrarian underground had taken an intermittent interest in the regulation of food supply and price, and the earliest efforts to prevent grain sales in Limerick-Clare area in the autumn of 1846 were taken by small groups drawing on this tradition.[22] They targeted better-off farmers. On 18 September 1846, ten armed men, wearing women's clothing and with faces blackened, visited Richard Floyd at Ballycar, near Newmarket-on-Fergus, to warn him not to sell any more grain. Before departing, members of the

[18] NAI, Outrage report, County Galway, 14 October 1846, 11/28027.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 11/27843.

[21] Ibid., 11/29375, 11/30877.

[22] Andrés Eiríksson, 'Crime and Popular Protest in County Clare, 1815-52', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Dublin, 1991), passim; Joseph Power, *A History of Clare Castle and its Environs* (Ennis, 2004), 133-46. Famine-era protest in the region has also been considered by Eiríksson: 'Food Supply and Food Riots', in Cormac Ó Gráda (ed.), *Famine 150: Commemorative Lecture Series,* (Dublin, 1997), 69–94.

gang beat Floyd's workman and fired a shot.[23] A week later, three other farmers in Ballycar received similar visits from an estimated thirty men.[24] More pointed warnings were given during the same week. In two townlands in the Newmarket-on-Fergus area, on the night of 19-20 September, three horses were shot dead in their fields by way of punishing their owners for selling grain at the Limerick market.[25] Three horses in harness were shot near Ennis on 10 October, while conveying grain to the market in Ennis.[26] On 2 November 1846, at Ballykilty, in the same general area, the families of two farmers who had sold grain were assaulted in their houses by fourteen armed and disguised men. Another farmer was served with a threatening notice warning him not to sell grain outside the community and setting the price at which he should sell it locally. On the following evening, a farmer who had allowed his horse to be used in the transport of grain was visited by men with blackened faces.[27]

In Limerick city, which had a history of anti-export activity similar to that of Galway, there was relatively little popular excitement during the autumn of 1846.[28] At the end of September notices appeared throughout the city, calling people to a public meeting at the racecourse to draw attention to their condition. Recognising that such assemblies had been the prelude to popular protests and blockades on previous occasions, a Catholic priest, Fr O'Connor, determined to put a stop to it. As the crowd assembled the priest addressed them, warning of the futility of violence and persuading the organisers to postpone the meeting for a few days. 'But for this timely interposition of the faithful clergy of the people', observed the *Limerick Reporter,* 'there is no knowing what might be the consequence.' O'Connor's promise was that relief works would be quickly initiated, and indeed merchant interests in the city were already lobbying for the wherewithal to commence harbour improvements.[29] But if disorder was averted in Limerick itself, the city's merchants were affected by unrest in the city's hinterland – and not only by the secret society activity described above.

Ennis, the inland county town of Clare with a population of about

[23] NAI, Outrage report, Co. Clare, 19 September 1846, 5/25309.
[24] Ibid., 26 September 1846, 5/26693.
[25] Ibid., 20 September 1846, 5/25629, 5/26631.
[26] Ibid., 12 October 1846, 5/27697.
[27] Ibid., 6 November 1846, 5/31105.
[28] See Cunningham, 'Three Irish Urban Crowds, 1817–45', 128–51.
[29] *Limerick Reporter,* 2 October 1846; Limerick Chamber of Commerce minutes, 2, 9 October 1846.

10,000, supplied the Limerick export market, via the quays on the River Fergus at Clarecastle, about three miles from Ennis itself.[30] The town had a tradition of resistance to grain exports and a notably volatile crowd. As recently as 1842, five of its people had lost their lives in the course of a food riot.[31] On 5 October 1846, an Ennis crowd of about 500 'turned back the horses and carts laden with oats for shipment', warning the boatmen 'not to take any more food from the county.'[32] Some days later, an anonymous notice was posted on the Catholic chapel door, convening a meeting to convey to the government the consequences of the loss of the potato crop. 'No apology' would be accepted for non-attendance and 'persons considering themselves invested with authority' were warned not to remove the notice.[33] On 10 November, an 'efficient force' of police was mustered to face down the populace of Ennis, with a view to escorting a large cargo of grain from stores in the town to the Clarecastle quays. The cargo was much smaller than it might have been, because only three cars could be procured, the owners and drivers of the others having been intimidated into refusing the merchants' custom. About 400 people were assembled at Clarecastle, but the constables in this instance were able to force their way through. When they reached the quay however, they discovered that 'the same degree of intimidation which prevented a sufficient supply of cars also operated in the minds of the boat owners.'[34] On 24 November, there was further contretemps on the Clarecastle quays, the outcome of which was the return to Ennis of the unloaded carts of grain. Two 'ringleaders' of the crowd, however, were apprehended.[35]

Elsewhere in County Clare, a number of anti-export mobilisations took place on the River Shannon. On 28 October, a boatload of oatmeal and flour left O'Briensbridge under police escort. Within a few hundred yards, a crowd of several thousand forced the boatmen to return the cargo to the mill from which it had come, threatening to throw it overboard if they did not. Later, the crowd laid siege to the mill, but were persuaded to disperse by a Catholic priest.[36] Next day, in the course of a further mobilisation at the mill, the crowd extracted an undertaking from the mill-owner that he would sell oatmeal at

[30] Power, *A History of Clare Castle,* 133–46.
[31] Cunningham, 'Three Irish Urban Crowds', 147–8.
[32] NAI, Outrage report, County Clare, 5 October 1846, 5/22855.
[33] Ibid., 5/27697.
[34] Ibid., 10 November 1846, 5/31485.
[35] Ibid., 24 October 1846, 5/33233.
[36] Ibid., 28 October 1846, 5/29933.

2s 8d per stone, provided he could acquire oats for 1s 8d per stone. He was assured that local farmers would be persuaded by the people to accept 'the stipulated price'.[37]

Upriver, at Scarriff on 30 October, more than 500 people surrounded the mill there, demanding that the mill-owner, Charles Walnutt, make meal and flour available in small quantities and at reduced prices. When the owner protested that the prices were too low, given 'the prices the farmers were demanding', the leaders of the crowd responded that if the farmers would not cooperate, they 'would go and thresh every stack yard in the country and bring him the grain.' Before departing, the crowd obliged Walnutt to give refunds to all those he was considered to have overcharged before he had agreed to the price reductions.[38]

Elsewhere crowds blocked roads to prevent convoys from reaching Limerick. In mid-October, it was reported that several cartloads of oats had been unable to get through the village of Hospital, while in Broadford, through which 'a great portion of the corn of this country normally passes', repeated mobilisations of the people had resulted in suppliers in that area ceasing to supply Limerick.[39] At Birdhill, close to Limerick but in the county of Tipperary, 'a large, armed group, three to four hundred strong' prevailed over a small detachment of police on 31 October, obliging farmers to return home with their grain. The farmers, it was reported, were waiting until 'a larger force can be found to protect its route to Limerick.'[40]

(iii) *West Waterford and East Cork*

The Irish famine protests best-known to contemporaries and to posterity were the outbreaks in Dungarvan, County Waterford, and twenty miles away in Youghal, County Cork. Their renown was due to the fact that artists from *The Pictorial Times* and *The Illustrated London News* were on hand in late September 1846 to record riotous proceedings in one instance and aftermath in another. The dynamic image of a man leading a crowd outside a Dungarvan baker's shop while holding a long pole with a loaf affixed (a recognised symbol of distress) has had an especial resonance. The disturbances in Youghal and Dungarvan that have been remembered, however, were not even the most

[37] Ibid., 29 October 1846, 5/29929.
[38] Ibid., 30 October 1846, 5/29941.
[39] Ibid., 12 October 1846, 17/27705, 17/28773.
[40] NAI Outrage reports, County Limerick, 1 November 1846, 17/29875.

dramatic of the many protests that took place in that region over a period of several weeks.[41]

Widespread protest began on 13 September when, according to a report from the resident magistrate in Dungarvan, the 'country was lighted as far as eye could see with signal fires' and crowds were heard 'traversing the country and making the most hideous noises.' The demonstrators were hoping to intimidate proprietors and cess-payers in advance of special presentment sessions at Dungarvan. About 4,000 assembled at the courthouse on 14 September, and they refused to allow the members of the gentry attending to leave the building until they approved a number of public works, and agreed to a daily wage on these works of a shilling. Outside the courthouse, Catholic clergy appealed to people to disperse so as to avoid coming into conflict with the authorities, to which the popular response was as follows: 'life is a battle for us, and the sooner we lose it the better.' Eventually the crowd dispersed of its own accord, only to muster again for the reconvened sessions a few days later, following another night of bonfires and horn-blowing. There were similar scenes at meetings in a number of other parts of Ireland during these two months, notably at Kells, County Meath, and Newcastle West, County Limerick, where it took the intervention of Catholic priests to secure the release of committees of local notables.[42]

On the third day of the disturbances in Dungarvan, matters took a turn for the worse as far as the authorities were concerned, when it came to their attention that eighteen carts of grain bound for the Waterford market had been turned back by a crowd at Kilmacthomas. Over the following days, other crowds acted in a similar fashion in relation to convoys going to other markets in the area. On 22 September, the lighting of bonfires at night was again reported, but from a larger area – the triangle formed by Fermoy, Lismore, and Youghal. Throughout this area, the movement of grain was obstructed during the daytime. Lacking the resources to disperse the people, magistrates tried to expedite the commencement of relief works, calculating that if there were fewer idle people, protests would be more easily controlled.[43]

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[41] This unrest is discussed by William Fraher, 'The Dungarvan Disturbances of 1846 and Sequels', in Des Cowman and Donald Brady (eds), *The Famine in Waterford, 1845–1850: Teacht na Bprátaí Dubha* (Dublin, 1995), 137–52.

[42] NAI Outrage reports: County Meath, 23 November 1846, 22/34165; County Limerick, 3 November 1846, 17/30671. For similar, see County Cork, 24 September 1846, 6/25979; County Kerry, 29 October 1846, 12/30085; County Kilkenny, 24 September 1846, 14/25789; County Carlow, 19 September 1846, 3/25885.

[43] NAI, Outrage papers, County Waterford, 22 September 1846, 29/25731.

By 23 September, the unrest had spread to the River Blackwater, along twenty-five miles of whose banks 'numbers of men armed with stones and other weapons . . . wholly intercepted the transport of corn, flour and other provisions.'[44] Two naval vessels were sent to protect navigation. The captain of one of the vessels reported that the crew of one lighter was persuaded to attempt the journey to the river-mouth, but that the crowd followed all the way, 'pouring into the town' of Youghal. In the town itself, there was already great excitement. A public meeting had brought a large crowd to the central Mall, and from there the participants had marched to the quays, where they seized vessels that were loading grain and refused to allow them to sail. Grainstores were surrounded, and convoys of grain entering the town were forced back. The crowd next seized the portcullis bridge over the Blackwater, a short distance from the town, thereby preventing trade by road and preventing military reinforcements from reaching the town. With the arrival of the large crowds on 23 September, the Relief Committee hurriedly put numbers of them to work 'levelling a hill', and had placards posted announcing a reduction in the price of meal.

In Dungarvan, tensions remained high. On 28 September, open conflict resumed, when a crowd of some hundreds assembled outside a grain store and warned the owner not to export any corn. The crowd swelled to several thousand in the course of the afternoon, and was perceived to threaten the grain stores near the quay. Evidently, the fishermen had already been active in this regard, maintaining a blockade of the port. A few 'ringleaders' were arrested on the instruction of the resident magistrate, to the great irritation of their followers, who began to throw stone at the police. A troop of the Royal Dragoons, brought into the field when the police were forced to withdraw, suffered similar treatment. Given the authority by the magistrate the soldiers fired, injuring several people and causing the crowd to disperse. One of those injured, Michael Fleming, would die of his injuries a few weeks later in the workhouse hospital.[45]

On the day after the shooting, 29 September, the people mobilised again in opposition to the merchants. Unemployed labourers began 'parading', compelling some who were at work to leave their posts and join them, and summoning others with a bell. Numbers quickly grew to 3,000. The next day, 30 September was fine, so the fisherman abandoned their blockade to go fishing. The women of the community, however, took steps to prevent ships

[44] Ibid., 23 September 1846, 29/25931.

[45] Fraher, 'Dungarvan disturbances', 143.

loading, throwing stones at dock workers and those protecting them. The workers loading the ships were so intimidated 'by the yells and the threats that they struck work', according to the resident magistrate. Having secured their initiative, the women indicated that they would allow business to resume only when a supply of cheap meal was provided, refusing to accept mere promises in this regard.[46]

In the wider area, in early October, efforts to prevent the movement of grain by land and by waterway continued. On 6 October, it was reported from Stancally on the Blackwater that 'a large number of persons from both sides of the river, who threatened and threw stones at the boatmen, were preventing lighters from proceeding to Youghal, obliging them to return to Janeville Quay, near Tullow [County Carlow].' The boatmen were refusing to identify their attackers.[47] By this point another form of protest had also become widespread in east Waterford. A movement of labourers which had begun in a small way in Donamon on 26 September or thereabouts had spread through Cappoquin towards Dungarvan, where 'bodies of 500 to 600 were going through the countryside demanding that farmers refund conacre rent.' The labourers involved were sub-tenants of potato ground and they were insisting that the farmers from whom they rented their patches should bear at least part of the cost of the potato failure. Through force of numbers, they secured refunds in at least some instances.[48] This mobilisation of the conacre labourers was the last significant episode in the three-week-long wave of unrest in west Waterford. Repression, tempered by modest concession, restored an uneasy peace in the region.

East of Scotland Protests

A definitive account of the disturbances in the north-east of Scotland in the period January to March 1847 has been provided by Eric Richards. It remains to provide a brief summary of developments there and to identify points of comparison with the slightly earlier wave of unrest in Ireland.

In the winter of 1846–7, public alarm grew throughout Britain in response to rising food prices and to reports of the crisis in Ireland, leading to outbreaks of protest in the English West Country, and also on the island

[46] NAI, Outrage reports, County Waterford, 1 October 1846, 29/26755.
[47] Ibid., 1846, 29/26961, 6 October; 1846; 29/27299, 4 October 1846.
[48] Ibid., 26 September 1846, 29/26359, 2 October 1846, 29/26761, 3 October 1846, 29/26911.

of Jersey. These episodes, however, were on a smaller scale than many elsewhere in northern Europe.[49] In eastern Scotland, there had already been a few riotous efforts to block the export of potatoes to London. These took place in Inverness and nearby Nairn during February 1846, and were singular enough as to prompt comparisons with the last-remembered food riots in that area, which had taken place as long ago as 1796.[50] Notwithstanding these apparent warnings, the outbreaks of the following year took responsible authorities by surprise.

The disturbances of January 1847 began about sixty miles east of Nairn at Macduff in Banffshire on 15 January. Over the following weeks the unrest spread west and north along the coast for a distance of 200 miles, reaching Thurso in the far north. Richards identified forty 'locations of riot' over the period, some of them hosting protracted or repeated outbreaks.[51] The wave began, 'almost spontaneously' according to a magistrate, with a movement among the fishermen and the general population along the Moray coast, to block the removal of all types of grain by sea, and sometimes to set a 'people's price', as had occurred in Ireland, notably along the River Shannon.[52]

At Avoch, on the Moray Firth, poorer people were angered in mid-February that farmers had commenced to ship grain, breaking an undertaking which had been read aloud by a representative at a public meeting in the previous week to retain grain for sale at in the district. Acts of popular resistance included the turning back of carts, the cutting open of grain sacks, and the seizure of a vessel:

> They had continued during the night to unmoor the vessel and had barricaded the access to the pier with boats drawn across which were literally covered with women … As the tide did not permit the vessel to approach the pier for a number of hours, we could take no steps to put the grain on board.[53]

When soldiers were deployed against them, the people of Avoch greeted

[49] Richards, *Last Scottish Food Riots,* 3-4; Manfred Gailus, 'Food Riots in Germany in the Late 1840s', *Past & Present,* 145 (1994), 157–93; Eric Vanheute, Richard Paping and Cormac Ó Gráda, *The European Subsistence Crisis of 1845–50: A Comparative Perspective,* IEHC (2006) Helsinki: Session 123, 17–18.

[50] *Nairnshire Mirror,* 7 February 1846.

[51] Richards, *Last Scottish Food Riots,* 7–20.

[52] Ibid., 8.

[53] Cited in ibid., 11.

them with a barrage of stones and snowballs.[54] These events were replicated in other places as indicated by the following excerpt from a letter published in *The Scotsman* in early March: 'Within fifteen miles of each other are three shipping places, Balintraid, Invergordon, and Foulis, all of which have been under mob domination during that time [the past month] so as to prevent export of a single quarter of any kind of grain.'[55]

Invergordon was the centre of the most determined, durable, and disciplined action – although the discipline of all the Scottish crowds involved was much remarked upon. Beginning in early February and extending over several weeks, the town was in the hands of a crowd which prohibited all food exports – and not just of staples. Women were especially prominent, sabotaging carts by removing the pins from their axles and deliberately frightening horses. A team of people's 'inspectors' checked all carts entering the town. It was from Invergordon that that the strategy of mixing differing grains – precluding its sale but not its use as food – was first reported, and it quickly spread throughout Easter Ross. This strategy was not noted in Ireland at this time, though it had been reported from Carrick-on-Suir during the unrest of 1812.[56] The relative freedom of action of the crowd in Invergordon was due to a lack of soldiers in the area, and to delays in sending them. Troops were tied up in trying to subdue the notably militant crowd at Burghead and a few other places, leaving small bodies of police to contend with the clamour elsewhere. By the time military reinforcements arrived in the disturbed region, protests had got a grip and the protestors had gained confidence.

The question of military and naval resources, in fact, are the key to explaining the different outcomes of the unrest in Ireland and Scotland in the autumn/winter of 1846-7. As we have seen, up to twenty naval vessels were deployed around the Irish coast in late 1846, engaged mainly in relief distribution but available for law enforcement. The authorities in Scotland had at their disposal only one slow and cumbersome Admiralty vessel to patrol 200 miles of coast, and there were fewer than 300 soldiers at the end of January 1847 in the entire of the area that would be affected by the unrest.[57] The quiescence of a whole generation of Scots had made the authorities complacent; the uneasy state of Ireland led to delays in the deployment of reinforcements.

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[54] Ibid., 11.

[55] Ibid., 12.

[56] Cunningham, 'Popular Protest and a "Moral Economy" in provincial Ireland', in Devine, Lane and Puirséil (eds), *Essays in Irish Labour*, 26–48.

[57] Richards, *Last Scottish Food Riots,* 50.

Their different religious loyalties notwithstanding, clergymen in both places proved to be reliable auxiliaries to civil authority. In Ireland, as we have seen, Catholic priests had dissuaded crowds from forming in some instances and persuaded them to disperse in others. Church of Scotland ministers were likewise active. The volatile crowd at Burghead and nearby Hopeman was calmed by the local minister, while others in Banffshire used their pulpits to explain proposed relief schemes and to urge patience while they were in preparation. Clergymen generally were advocates of 'peaceful calm', and in places like Ennis, County Clare, where notices on their church doors urged popular action, it is unlikely that these were posted with clerical approval. Only one instance was recorded in which militant action was organised in a church building, and that was a chapel of the dissenting Secession Church at Lossiemouth, the port of Elgin in Moray.[58]

The role of fishermen in the agitation is worthy of note. Fishing communities were certainly the most dynamic in the Scottish events; indeed, only a few confrontations took place away from the coast. In Ireland the most effective anti-export blockade was raised by the fishing community at Dungarvan, while it has been shown that the authorities took considerable care to neutralize the seasoned food rioters at Galway's Claddagh. Of Claddagh, it has been argued that discipline required of the fishermen in their day-to-day work was what made them effective as leaders of protests. Significantly, like some of their Scottish counterparts, they were also involved in 'moral' agitation and resistance to commercial fishing interests whom they considered to be rapacious and oblivious to the need to maintain fishing stocks.[59]

Conclusions

If the outcomes were not the same in the two places, the Irish and Scottish crowds discussed above mobilised for essentially the same purpose, which was to prevent the removal of the grain crop of 1846 from the district in which it was grown, or at least to hold that crop 'hostage' until alternative means of subsistence were secured. No larger radical political objective was apparent in either place. And if the Irish crowds involved were prevented by the considerable military and naval presence from exercising the same degree of hegemony as did the coastal communities of the north-eastern

[58] Ibid., 14.

[59] Cunningham, 'The Mayor / admiral', 27–31; James R. Coull, *The Sea Fisheries of Scotland: A Historical Geography* (Edinburgh, 1996), 140–2.

Scotland, many of them secured some temporary relief by their efforts. This phase of Irish Famine protest petered out due to the strong opposition it faced in November 1846; the Scottish wave ended abruptly in mid-March, by which time sufficient temporary employment had been made available to convince protesting communities that their position was secure until the commencement of the fishing season in May.[60] Whatever successes were won were facilitated by a degree of sympathy among the better-off, reflected for example in generally lenient sentencing and in the difficulty in raising special constables to restore order in Scotland.[61] With a small number of exceptions in Ireland, moreover, the crowds in both countries were not especially hungry at the time of their mobilisation; rather, they anticipated that they and their dependents would go hungry in the near future if they did not take action.

In their disposition these crowds, while determined, were overwhelmingly disciplined and peaceful – though in the heat of confrontation with police and soldiery a misinterpreted gesture followed by an over-reaction from either party did occasionally lead to a general melée or worse. And there were striking similarities in the 'repertoire of protest' in the two countries. Apart from the prominence of women, a feature of protests of this nature historically, there were other similarities in strategies and tactics: in the intimidation of boatmen and car-drivers; in the seizing of the sails of ships engaged in the grain trade, in the blocking of cart-roads, in the 'rough music' of trumpets.[62]

NUI Galway[63]

[60] Richards, *Last Scottish Food Riots,* 54.

[61] Ibid., 41.

[62] A tried and tested tactic of the Galway crowd (see above), the seizure of sails was reported from Banff in 1847 (Richards, *Last Scottish Food Riots*, 14).

[63] I wish to thank Florry O'Driscoll, Ailbhe O'Leary, and Claire Smith for their contribution to the research for this article.