Irish Secret Societies, The Times and the Biased Coverage of the Agrarian Violence in Ireland in the 1830s

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Abstract
One of the characteristics of Irish society in pre-Famine Ireland was agrarian violence and – linked to it – actions of oath-bound secret societies. Unable to redress their grievances in courts of law Irishmen took law into their own hands and turned to a form of rural vigilantism. It was triggered by actions endangering the lifestyle of Irish peasants such as the exacting of tithes or the enclosing of common land. Constant eruptions of violence in Ireland were a dominant topic in the news covered in the British press and especially in the most influential newspaper *The Times*. The actions of the Irish had, of course, an impact on the way Ireland and her inhabitants were perceived by the English. This paper discusses the phenomenon of Irish secret societies, examines the coverage of the events in Ireland in *The Times* in the 1830s, and tries to prove that *The Times* had its own agenda when reporting on the Emerald Isle.

Keywords: secret societies, Ireland, The Times, Tithe War, agrarian violence

Abstrakt
Jedną z charakterystycznych cech irlandzkiego społeczeństwa pierwszej połowy dziewiętnastego wieku była wiejska przemoc oraz związane z nią poczynania zaprzysiężonych, tajnych stowarzyszeń. W związku z tym, że Irlandczycy nie mogli walczyć o sprawiedliwość w sądach, wymierzali ją sami, tworząc pewnego rodzaju ruch samoobrony

obywatelskiej. Było to wywołane poprzez działania takie jak ściąganie dziesięciny lub ogradzanie wspólnot gruntowych, co stanowiło zagrożenie dla stylu życia irlandzkich chłopów. Wiadomości z Irlandii, które pojawiały się w brytyjskiej prasie, szczególnie w najbardziej wpływowym dzienniku „The Times", były pełne doniesień na temat częstych aktów przemocy w Irlandii. Poczynania Irlandczyków miały oczywiście wpływ na to jak Irlandia oraz jej mieszkańcy byli postrzegani przez Anglików. W niniejszym artykule został opisany fenomen irlandzkich tajnych stowarzyszeń oraz zostało ukazane to jak w latach 30. XIX wieku wydarzenia w Irlandii były przedstawiane na łamach „The Times". Autor stara się udowodnić, że redakcja „The Times" nie była obiektywna, relacjonując zajścia, które miały miejsce na Zielonej Wyspie w tym okresie.

Słowa klucze: tajne stowarzyszenia, Irlandia, The Times, wojna o dziesięciny, przemoc na wsi

> "It is a great misfortune of this country [Ireland], that the people of England know less of it than they know, perhaps, of any other nation in Europe. Their impressions, I do really believe, are received from newspapers, published for the set purpose of deceiving them."
> *Lord Clare's Speech on Catholic Relief Bill* (Greville 1845, ix)

> "For ourselves, we have always advocated every lawful expedient, and even every compromise, by which we could attach to the British rule and to the reign of peace the desultory affection of the Irish bosom. The Act of Union we have ever treated as more than a bargain–as a living and growing tie."
> *The Times* (6 February 1845)

Throughout the nineteenth century Ireland was not treated as on a par with England by the British press, even though since 1801 it was an integral part of the United Kingdom. The Irish were often portrayed in a very negative light by British periodicals (see De Nie 2004; Williams 2003). Particularly vitriolic and derogatory language was applied by the most influential British newspaper *The Times*. Despite the fact that pre-famine Ireland was known for its outbreaks of rural violence, *The Times* had its own agenda to exag-

gerate the extent of unrest in Ireland in the 1830s, which strengthened the stereotypical image of the Irish as prone to violence.

Negative events such as murders or other ghastly crimes have been considered as newsworthy by publishers from time immemorial. Until the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s the Emerald Isle had been plagued by oath-bound secret societies, which, fighting for better conditions for Irish peasants, resorted to violence and "carried out horrifying beatings and murders to ensure conformity" (Garvin 1982, 154). It is small wonder that the section with the news from Ireland in *The Times* was rife with such headings as "Atrocious Murder by Whitefeet", "Riot and Sacrilegious Murder–County Tipperary", "Incendiarism", "Savage Outrages on Cattle" or "Fratricide". However, the journal had other reasons to keep Ireland in the full glare of publicity.

Secret Societies

One of the characteristics of Irish society in pre-Famine Ireland was agrarian violence and – linked to it – actions of oath-bound secret societies. The tradition of these societies dates back to the 1760s and the emergence of the Whiteboy movement in the county of Tipperary. Whiteboys were a form of rural vigilantism triggered by actions endangering the lifestyle of Irish peasants such as the exacting of tithes by farmers or the enclosing of common land. Wearing shirts over their clothes (hence their name), Whiteboys opposed such practices by making and carrying out threats, very often not shunning violence. They were also known as Levellers as they levelled fences used to enclose lands (De Beaumont 2006, 72; Young 1887, 32–33; Donnelly 1977–78, 20–21). Between the 1760s and the onset of the Famine in 1845 there were intermittent outbreaks of rural violence in Ireland. Throughout these years, along with Whiteboys, there appeared groups that were known as Rightboys, Oakboys, Steelboys, Threshers, Caravats, Rockites, Terry Alts, Whitefeet, or Ribbonmen (see Donnelly 1978, 120–202; Donnelly 1981, 7–73; Donnelly 1983, 151–169; Beams 1982, 128–143; Garvin 1982, 133–155; Katsuta 2003, 278–296). The terms "Ribbonism" and "Whiteboyism" were used generically in the nineteenth century to refer to all agrarian movements in Ireland (Garvin 1982, 22; Katsuta 2003, 278).

Another hallmark of early nineteenth-century Ireland was subdivision of land into small plots which allowed many a poor Irish peasant to subsist merely on a tiny potato patch. When in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars the prices of crops plummeted and

pasture became more lucrative than tillage, Irish landlords started consolidating their farms and ejecting unwanted tenants (Ó Tuathaigh 1972, 136–137). *The Times* states that this practice caused "the banishment and destruction of thousands of miserable families, ousted from their cabins with scarcely a garment to cover them, or the means of satisfying the keenest pangs of hunger" (*The Times*, 18 November 1830). No wonder that Irish peasants were dead set against evictions, something which was emphasised by George Cornewall Lewis: "[t]he poor Irish tenant clings with the tenacity of a drowning man to his cabin and patch of potato-ground; so that if a landlord, for the purpose of consolidating farms, wishes to dispossess several cottiers, he is often compelled to expel them by force, and to throw down the houses, as otherwise they would return" (1836, 78). In order to survive Irishmen resorted to violence and the consolidation of estates in Ireland was foiled to a large extent by the peasant resistance.

Consequently, the possession of land was the root cause of violent actions taking place in the Irish countryside. Irish peasants did not remain passive because, as stated by James W. O'Neill, "[t]heir tenaciously held belief that they were entitled to a plot of land, however small, was reinforced by variety of long-standing customs and traditions, the infringement of which constituted a moral transgression of such magnitude as to warrant direct and often violent action" (1982, 25). If to believe the reports from Ireland in *The Times* the possession of land in Ireland was a fixation to such an extent that allegedly a man who thought that he was going to be evicted could not bear it and "his mind became disturbed, and in a fit of derangement he murdered his wife with a hatchet, and nearly depraved his mother of life" (*The Times*, 27 March 1837). David Fitzpatrick claims that many of the committed crimes in Ireland actually stemmed from family feuds (1982, 58–62). James S. Donnelly, on the other hand, states that the majority of scuffles in the first half of the nineteenth century were conflicts between the organised poor and wealthy farmers. Donnelly claims also that the membership of agrarian societies depended on whether disturbances took place during the period of prosperity when usually landless peasants revolted or during depressions when agrarian societies were joined by substantial farmers (1983, 154–155).

Unable to redress their grievances in courts of law, Irishmen took law into their own hands and meted out justice on landlords, their staff as well as middlemen, agents and even on other peasants. In fact, any fellow peasant who refused to swear an oath and join a secret group, or someone who moved in on the land of a dispossessed person, was the most popular target of secret societies. This was especially the case as landlords were more elusive targets because they lived in well-guarded houses and were usually escorted

by armed servants (Christianson 1972, 371–372). One of the main catalysts that could spark off a violent action against somebody was informing local authorities or testifying against members of peasant coalitions. How dangerous it was to defy agrarian groups is mentioned in *The Times* in an article on the slaughter of Henry Maunsell Franks' family by Whiteboys, who "murdered the old man by discharging a blunderbuss through his side, and his wife and son, by beating out their brains with a bar of iron" (*The Times*, 16 September 1823). The article states that Whiteboys killed the family because

> they acted in pursuance of the system which for the last two years has afflicted the south of Ireland, and that this lamented and respectable family have been thus inhumanly massacred, in consequence of Mr. Franks and his son having prosecuted to conviction, at the last spring assizes, Cornelius Sheehan, for assaulting Mr. H.M. Frank, with the intent to rob him of his arms, and for administering to him a Whiteboy oath (*The Times*, 16 September 1823).

In their acknowledgment of the disproportions between the amount of money paid by a head tenant to a landlord and the amount collected by a head tenant from sub-tenants, secret societies fought for just and legal rent (O'Neill 1982, 23–26; Cornewall Lewis 1836, 102). In a letter to *Farmer's Magazine* an inhabitant of the province of Connaught says that Ireland differs from England, and Ireland is in a poor condition because there is not a healthy relationship between tenants and landlords. He adds that this stems from the fact that lands are let for long periods of time and with the increasing value of land tenants with long-leases let land to numerous sub-tenants. As a result, between a direct landlord and a person who tilled the land there were four to five other persons profiting from the land (*Farmer's Magazine*, 24 May 1823).

The situation in Ireland was further aggravated by the existence of rack-renting, that is, demanding exorbitant rents from desperate peasants. William Conner states that rack-renting caused "wretchedness for which Ireland has long been the by-word and the burning shame among nations" (1843, 6). Conversely, Kevin O'Neill argues that the amount of rent charged by landlords in the first half of the nineteenth century was "capitalistically rational" (1984, 14). The Irish correspondent of *The Times* relating the death of man stoned to death states that "it is not necessary to look to political differences in Ireland as the origin of deadly feuds; they make a good deal of noise in the newspapers, but are not nearly so productive of bloodshed and death as those unfortunate rack-rent and tithe ones" (*The Times*, 14 March 1833). In one of the editorials *The Times*

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expresses the same view saying "the great and general cause of the present and much former bloodshed in Ireland is one for which neither peasants nor soldiers are responsible; that it is the existence of the tithe system, of which the pressure has been intolerably aggravated by the concurrent necessity of paying a rack-rent to the landlord" (*The Times*, 27 December 1834).

The justice-seeking Irish peasants' modus operandi comprised of threatening, maiming cattle, burning property, beatings and in the worst case murder and rape. Lewis distinguishes two kinds of crimes committed in Ireland: those whose purpose was to avert something or to punish somebody and those which were perpetrated for somebody's gains (1836, 94–97). R. M. Beams underlines that committing murders in order to achieve a goal was the characteristic that differentiated Ireland from the rest of the British Isles in the first half of the nineteenth century (1978, 75). It was typical for the Irish countryside to post threatening notices, which were to convince a person to do something or dissuade somebody. The contents of such notices were sometimes reproduced in *The Times* in the section with the news from Ireland. For instance, one of the notices has the following message

> Notice. Take notice Mr. John Waters of Stripe hat [sic] unless you give up your transgressing and violating and attempting persecuting poor objects or poor miserable tenants remark the country is not destitute of friends or otherwise if you do not give your foolishness or ignorance you will be made an example in the country that never was beheld. Here is our foe of Stripe. Mr. John Waters, Esq., and I would be sorry to be in your clothes. CAPTAIN ROCK, ESQ (*The Times*, 11 December 1835).

Another notice warned

> Take notice, you are required to surrender the ground you have lately possessed and to quit the country, or if not prepare yourself for the death of Cooper–Not more at present you Invitirate [sic] Enemy–Captain Black Face, &c., &c (*The Times*, 13 October 1838).

Threats were often signed with militaristic sobriquets, as in the examples above. Captain Rock was the most popular name used at the time and Joep Leerssen states that it was "the floating signifier on crude blackmailing and letters from the disaffected, silenced Irish" (1996, 83). The message of some of the notices was reinforced with crudely

drawn sketches. *The Times* reports that one of agents in Ireland "has been served with a Rockite notice, decorated with the figure of a coffin" (*The Times*, 12 December 1842). Another report says that at the bottom of the notice received by Mr. Nicolls, a steward, "was a sketch of a tall man, like him, in the act of falling from a shot fired at him by a small man, with the mark of the wound on one side of his temple, and blood on the other, as if the ball had passed through his head" (*The Times*, 31 March 1845). Threatening notices, some written in rhyme, were often penned by hedge schoolmasters, who were often district secretaries of secret societies (De Beaumont 2006, 74–75).

Victims of secret societies were also subjected to brutal and painful tortures such as those thrust naked into a hole filled with thorns. Some people were forced on a horse or a mule whose saddle was studded with metal or wooden spikes and which then was galloped. The severest ordeal was caused when a victim had to go through "carding", namely, when a person was placed on a hard surface and another person lacerated his back with a board covered with metal spikes or nails causing serious wounds (Young 1887, 34; Cornewall Lewis 1836, 107, 146–147; Christianson 1972, 373). In order to disclose their identities and evade the police, members of secret societies were sent from one district to another to commit a crime (Christianson 1972, 377; De Beaumont 2006, 76). On top of that, they were difficult to catch because they were supported by fellow parishioners, who refused to name names. Sometimes, the Irish peasantry did more to protect members of peasant coalitions and, as related in *The Times* in an article culled from the *Limerick Chronicle*, five policemen who caught two men administering the Whiteboy oath were stoned to death by the local peasantry (*The Times*, 11 April 1831).

The British government tried to crack down on the agrarian violence in Ireland by suspending habeas corpus and passing such acts as the Insurrection Act, the Gun Powder Act, the Ammunition Act, and the Importation of Arms Act. These actions, according to a contemporary author of a publication on rebellions and disturbances in Ireland, had no effect and "only cauterized, but did not heal the public wounds" (*Historical Notices of Several Rebellions* 1822, iv). The most popular and commonly used measures against Irish perpetrators were the suspension of habeas corpus and the Insurrection Act, which were employed intermittently in the early nineteenth century. In accordance with the Insurrection Act, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland could proclaim a district to be in a state of disturbance. Consequently, a curfew was imposed and a person to defy it was tried by two justices of the peace, in time by magistrates, and as a form of a punishment made to serve in the fleet or the army and later on sentenced to seven years transportation.

What is more, a person caught administering an unlawful oath was sentenced to death and a person swearing such an oath was sentenced to transportation, which was amended in time and in the case of the former a death sentence was changed to transportation for life (Crossman 1991, 314; McDowell 114–115).

The actions of the Irish had, of course, an impact on the way Ireland and her inhabitants were perceived by the English. Lewis says that the people in England ascribed the proclivity of the Irish to violence and rebellion to their inferior character, inherent savageness, religion, hatred towards England, omnipresent poverty and the lack of an education. Contrary to the popular beliefs, Lewis puts the perennial upheavals in Ireland down to the colonial policy of England towards Ireland, the relationships between landlords and tenants, overpopulation, the subdivision of land, unemployment and the abject poverty (1836, 1, 46–93). Lewis presents in his book two general views on the Irish character that were common among the British in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the drawbacks of the Irish were believed to stem from the checkered history of Anglo-Irish relations, that is, the ages of oppression and misgovernment by the English. On the other hand, the disreputable habits of Irishmen were put down to their supposedly innate Celtic traits (Romani 1997, 194).

Daniel O'Connell and the Whigs

The Times was well known for its scathing criticism and animosity towards Daniel O'Connell, the most renowned Irishman at the time (Lecky 1912, 36). While the journal renounced political allegiance to neither of the political parties, when O'Connell and his fellow Irish MPs agreed to cooperate with the Whigs in 1835 *The Times* started favouring the Conservatives (MacDonagh 1989, 125). Supporting the Tories, the newspaper went to great lengths to highlight the precarious state of Ireland, which the compact between the Whigs and the O'Connelites was supposed to ameliorate. In one of the articles *The Times* expresses its disfavour with the cooperation of the Whig government and the Irish stating that

> Our Private letters intimate what is going on throughout Ireland, that pleasure-ground of Mr. Daniel O'Connell, where outrage, robbery, persecution, and murder, may, it appears, be carried on to any extent without at all impairing that happy *tranquility* which

> has been the hourly boast of the Melbourne and Mulgrave Administration (*The Times*, 20 January 1836).

The Times was intent on dispelling the notion that the situation of Ireland improved although there appeared evidence indicating a decrease in crime rates. In the article on the declining number of crimes in Ireland *The Examiner* points out that "[t]he production of this documentary evidence has driven the Tory press to their wits' end" (*The Examiner*, 22 October 1837). As pointed out by *The Examiner*, these revelations dismayed particularly *The Times*. Despite such evidence *The Times* unabashedly proclaimed that "there never was a more frightful series of crimes" (*The Times*, 7 February 1837). The journal did not forget to underscore that "[t]he accounts from Ireland are, as usual, characteristic both of the morality of that semi-barbarous island, and of the honour and veracity of the KING's Ministers" (*The Times*, 11 April 1837).

The coverage of events taking place in Ireland in *The Times* was evidently subjective and politically-tainted. The credibility and objectivity of the reports from Ireland is further undermined by the fact that in January 1839, one day after the other, there appeared two articles about the robbery of arms. The two news items are exactly the same, word for word, except that in the case of the first one it is stated that the robbery took place in the county of Cork and in the second in the county of Limerick (*The Times*, 28 January 1839; *The Times*, 29 January 1839). When it could have been a pure oversight, the studied action on the part of *The Times* cannot be ruled out.

Stereotypes

Filling its columns with descriptions of ghastly crimes perpetrated in Ireland *The Times* not only deprecated the Whig ministry, but also perpetuated negative stereotypes about the Irish. This was particularly harmful, as Fowler states that shocking events "reinforce a stereotype, and, reciprocally, the firmer the stereotype, the more likely are relevant events to become news" (1991, 17). Therefore, an Irishman in the eyes of an Englishman was inexorably a violent, pugnacious person or just a savage. This view of Irishmen was widely held at the time and propagated through various media and in diverse discourses. The common practice of linking the Irish with violence and crimes is also pointed out in one of the articles of the radical, satirical magazine *Figaro in London*.

In an article upbraiding brutal actions of the British military towards an English mob, it is stated that "[i]n Ireland, where a mob too often commit murder, there may have been a *shadow*, a shadow only, of excuse–but in England, where the mob usually scamper, like crows at the smell of powder, and where a collision with the military is of rare occurrence, an order like this is tantamount to a cold blooded murder" (*Figaro in London*, 20 June 1835). Perceiving Irishmen as inextricably linked with violence is also mentioned by Lewis who says that people in England tend "to conceive that there is an innate and indelible tendency in the Irish to disturbance and outrage; that Ireland has been cut off by nature from the rest of the civilized world, and been foredoomed to a state of endless disorder" (1836, 1–2). L. Perry Curtis Jr. admits that reports concerning outrages in Ireland were generally true, nevertheless, ubiquitous discourse linking the Irish with crime and violence only convinced subsequent British ministers that Ireland needed coercive laws (1968, 61).

Interestingly, the police reports on the crimes committed by the Irish in Great Britain released at the time alleged that these crimes were usually petty and inferior because they stemmed from intoxication and involved only Irish immigrants. The general opinion was that the Irish–due to their inherent inferiority, penchant for drinking and rowdiness–were incapable of committing intricate crimes such as fraud (Tracy 2009, 69–74). In addition, practically in every article in *The Times* describing a murder or an affray that took place in Ireland one reads that somebody's skull was fractured with a stone, spade, pitchfork, or by a gunshot. The supposed use of different implements in duels and scuffles by the Irish was in contrast to the English who were believed to use only fists in fights, where such a difference of approach suggested that Englishmen "practice a less cowardly form of fighting than the Irish" (Tracy 2009, 71).

For instance, one of the reports describes an outrage perpetrated in the county of Tipperary saying that a man "was way-laid by three men, who beat him most unmercifully with stones and bludgeons, knocked out three of his teeth, and left him lying in a state of insensibility on the road" (*The Times*, 18 September 1837). In an account from the county of Sligo one reads that after having fired a volley of shots at a house a group of perpetrators inquired about one farm servant and finding him in bed "they dragged him out of the house in a state of nudity, and beat him most savagely with the butt-ends of their guns and pistols; and their wretched victim was lying in a state of insensibility on the ground, the demons cut off both his ears, and inflicted a frightful gash on his left cheek, it is supposed with reapinghook [sic] from the manner in which

the unfortunate man's head is mangled" (*The Times*, 14 December 1838). The reports did not exclude gruesome and graphic details of crimes. It was not uncommon to come across articles detailing a condition of a victim of a brutal attack containing such a description: "weltering in his gore, his head literally smashed to pieces, so as to permit the protruding of the brains in several places" (*The Times*, 12 June 1837). Reporting the agrarian unrest in Ireland in this manner only relegated the Irish further to less civilised human beings.

The Tithe War

Many of the outrages that were perpetrated in the 1830s in Ireland were the result of the Tithe War. The conflict broke out in the early 1830s because Irish Catholics as well as Protestant dissenters in Ireland were made to pay for the Anglican Church of Ireland. Samuel Clark points out that the campaign against tithes was of great importance, as it was the first nationalist movement in Ireland spearheaded by farmers and for farmers, and, in addition, it was supported by the Catholic clergy and some of the Irish landlords (1982, 20). According to Patrick O'Donoghue, the Tithe War was caused by such factors as the dramatic plunge of crop prices in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, additionally exacerbated by the crop failure in 1829, the relationship between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, the imposition of tithes on potatoes in some parts of Ireland, the extensive coverage of the conflict in the press and the influence of O'Connell's political campaigns (O'Donoghue 1965, 7–29; O'Donoghue 1966, 69–70).

The payment of the tithes was mainly opposed by Irish peasants by their refusal to buy anything that was confiscated in lieu of tithes. *The Times* did not care that people, who were impoverished, were coerced to give up part of their produce for the establishment that was not theirs. Instead the journal used the war to condemn the Irish Catholic clergy and O'Connell asking in one of the leaders: "[i]s it because a man of this stamp [O'Connell] unhappily exists amongst us, that we are to reduce the Protestant clergy of Ireland to a state of beggary" (*The Times*, 6 August 1836). The Whigs were also pilloried for hampering the work of the police and magistrates in Ireland and *The Times* even asks a question whether the Whig ministers "deserve to be tolerated, either by the Irish whom they have betrayed, or the British whom they have deceived!" (*The Times*, 30 October 1839).

In the 1830s *The Times* used its pages to highlight outrages that were committed in Ireland in order to tarnish the reputation of the Whigs and O'Connell. The coverage of the events in Ireland, focusing on crimes and despicable actions carried out by secret societies, was without a doubt slanted and served the interests of the Conservatives. By doing so *The Times* propagated and reinforced the stereotypical image of the Irish, especially as shocking events strengthened the stereotype (Fowler 1991, 17). What is more, *The Times* aggravated the already strained relationship between Ireland and England and, by depicting Ireland as dangerous, put off potential investors and stymied the improvement of it.

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