TOMMY DOWNSHIRE’S BOYS: POPULAR PROTEST, SOCIAL CHANGE AND POLITICAL MANIPULATION IN MID-ULSTER 1829–1847*

In May 1829, in the heart of Ulster’s weaving district, a canal barge carrying potatoes for export during a trade recession was attacked and destroyed near Portadown by an armed mob headed by a fictitious leader called ‘Tommy Downshire’.1 As the exporter was Catholic and the attackers Protestant, some contemporaries branded the attack sectarian. If so, it could readily fit familiar patterns. Mid-Ulster engendered the Orange and Defender societies in the 1790s, and was considered a bastion of Protestant political ascendancy after the Union. It is often seen as an irremediable cockpit of sectarianism, producing a range of problems from nineteenth-century riots to the modern ‘troubles’, when it encompassed the notorious ‘murder triangle’ and the Drumcree Orange parade dispute in Portadown.2 However, it is less well known that the area also had strong economic protest traditions which included a non-sectarian dimension and stretched back into the eighteenth century.3 Between 1829 and 1847 waves of ‘Tommy Downshire’ protests, sometimes involving both Catholics and Protestants, erupted against landlords and capitalist linen manufacturers. Newspapers likened these protests to the English ‘Swing’ riots and Chartism, and they featured extensively in the correspondence of magistrates, policemen and the government;

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2 The Orange Order began in 1795 after conflict between lower-class Protestants and Catholics organized as ‘Peep O’Day Boys’ and ‘Defenders’. Though it was originally plebeian, some local gentry sponsored Orangeism as a counterweight to the Society of United Irishmen.

yet, despite this contemporary notoriety, Irish historiography is silent on ‘Tommy Downshire’s Boys’.

I

Although Ireland, like Britain, experienced extensive protest in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it has only been systematically investigated since the late 1970s in studies inspired by the ‘history from below’ school of British Marxist historians like Eric Hobsbawm, George Rudé and E. P. Thompson.4 These pioneers saw method behind the madness previously thought to characterize protesting crowds. Thompson’s ‘moral economy’ thesis on eighteenth-century food rioting crowds remains especially influential. He argued that such activity was not mindless, but had clear aims to restore prices to customary levels accepted by a paternalist gentry and plebeian consumers, and based on shared notions of fairness. This traditional ‘moral economy’ was evoked in response to a modernizing ‘market economy’, and its restoration was sought by the calculated use of limited violence and ritualized threat.5 Such research stimulated further studies, some incorporating social science models to categorize types of ‘collective activity’ according to its traditional or modernizing nature. Most saw traditional ‘pre-industrial’ types of local reactive protest being replaced by progressive forms engendered by industrialization. This ‘modern’ form manifested itself on a wider geographical scale than traditional localized protest. It was organized on an associational rather than a communal basis, and was more proactive than conservative in its aims. Modernizing protest was linked to the development of class-consciousness. Food rioting declined and industrial strikes grew, with the 1830s being seen as the watershed.6

The ‘discovery’ of Irish protest stimulated studies of various movements ranging from the Munster Whiteboys to Ulster’s


Oakboys and Steelboys. The contemporary British impetus to fit protest to interpretative models migrated to Ireland, although Rude cautioned that ‘the forms and issues of rural Irish protest are so confused that it is hard to tell one movement or one type of protest from another’. Several historians found social change a causal factor and applied ‘breakdown’ models to situations where market forces disrupted customary relationships in the rural economy. Irish protest has also been tested against violence typologies. Adapting Thompson’s model, Thomas Bartlett argued that violent opposition to the 1793 militia levy foreclosed an Irish moral economy. Thus the Whiteboys and Steelboys of the 1770s were ‘conservative’ with limited violence, but the Defenders mark a ‘transformation’ in increased violence, a more formalized and wider organization and a sectarian, ‘anti-state’ ideology. Although ‘traditional’ violence lingered in places into the early twentieth century, the 1790s saw ‘modern’ patterns emerge, leaving older types in ‘rapid decline’ by the 1830s. Social protest has also been tested for its politicizing potential, revealing continuities between the experience of mobilization and the emergence of political nationalism, both insurrectionary and constitutional. Recent work has considered how far the British crowd historian Mark Harrison’s findings apply to Ireland. His study of English urban crowds questioned the ‘moral economy’ thesis by revealing that collective activity, including protest, often had elite sponsorship.

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7 Whiteboys were agrarian protesters active in the 1760s, 1770s and the early nineteenth century. Oakboys and Steelboys were Ulster protest movements of 1763 and 1770–2 respectively, whose participants complained about county taxation (cess), tithes and the increased cost of lease renewals.


Research into several types of Irish crowds has found similar interactions between various elites and the lower classes. Historians broadly agree that Irish protest, like its British counterpart, fits into ‘modernization’ patterns. However, there is less unanimity about protest as an indicator of the nature of underlying social structures. Some regard class division and economic experience as the essence of community, while others see it grounded in religious adherence; but the consensus is that political and religious divisions were paramount. Where Thompson saw embryonic English working-class consciousness in the 1790s, ‘no such consciousness — or class — developed’ in Ireland; instead ‘class antagonisms were confused, if not always submerged, by political and religious differences’. In recent studies of early nineteenth-century unrest, the magnetic polarities of Catholic nationalism and Protestant ‘ascendancy’ still exert a powerful influence. Cork’s ‘Rockite’ protesters of the 1820s, once thought to embody agrarian grievances and sectarianism, now emerge as combining these traditional and locally focused dynamics with linkages to wider Catholic nationalism.

Studies of protest and collective action in Ulster are dominated by variants of this politico-religious paradigm. It is often argued that shared religious affiliation between the gentry and their Protestant tenantry engendered cross-class affinity. The Oakboys, Steelboys and United Irishmen all challenged this nexus briefly, but in mid-Ulster, even before 1798, the Protestant gentry and their plebeian co-religionists closed ranks in Orangeism and in the yeomanry, in ‘resounding confirmation’ of their ‘special relationship’. In the early nineteenth century, rebellion memories, emigration and the tenant right custom eased land pressure and guaranteed cross-class solidarity.

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15 The Irish yeomanry was a part-time military force raised by landlords from amongst their tenantry. The yeomen were predominantly Protestant and, by the 1820s, often Orangemen. Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly Jr (eds.), *Irish Peasants, Violence and Political Unrest, 1780–1914* (Wisconsin and Manchester, 1983), 146–7 (introduction to section II: ‘Land and Religion in Ulster’), ‘Tenant right’: where an incoming tenant paid the outgoing one for the ‘goodwill’ of the holding.
violent protests of the south, despite economic slumps in the 1830s and 1840s. Protest per se seems to disappear altogether: Ulster is not mentioned in a survey of nineteenth-century rural unrest patterns. The federated structures of Orangeism and its Catholic equivalent fit the politicizing/modernizing model. Ulster’s collective activity was typified by the sectarian riot; indeed a ‘sectarian moral economy’ has been posited, institutionally embodied in the Orange Order and yeomanry in a ‘simple implicit contract’ between the plebeian membership and most of the Protestant elite.

Recent work detects class-based agitation amongst Belfast’s proletarianized weavers, sparked by industrial crises after the Napoleonic wars. This continued until the mid 1820s, but ‘by the 1830s . . . strong or violent social or class conflict amongst Protestants in Belfast and elsewhere in Ulster seems to have virtually disappeared’. This transformation apparently occurred when the Protestant landed and mercantile classes united against recalcitrant tenants and workers. Then, by ‘the creation and continual reinforcement of a sectarian moral economy’, they successfully imposed ‘capitalist relations and mores on Ulster’s Protestant poor’ to achieve a cross-class sectarian political identity. Plebeian Protestants were brought into line by ‘mechanisms of elite persuasion’ including the ‘coercive mechanisms of the post-union British state’, corrective institutions, philanthropy, ‘pan-Protestant’ evangelical revivalism, and the status derived from membership of loyalist organizations like the yeomanry.

The problem with this Hiberno-centric focus and its linking of protest to emergent political divisions is that it risks neglecting valuable new thinking from elsewhere. Many British historians now shun models that artificially divide protest into rigid dichotomies like ‘pre-industrial’ and ‘industrial’, or that impose category

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boundaries between violent machine-wrecking and an organized ‘labour’ approach. Early labour protest is now seen as sometimes overlapping with food riots, and being strongly influenced by local employment and community structures and their associated traditions. Protests are analysed to access participants’ concerns rather than used as a litmus test for class-consciousness. Freed of these conceptual straitjackets, rituals and rhetoric are seen as a repertoire of resources. Research in the broader field of popular politics revises assumptions about English loyalism and argues that participation in loyal associations was not necessarily deferential but could be ‘empowering’. Such approaches are especially apposite for mid-Ulster which, with its mechanizing and capitalizing rural industrial structure, is comparable with British textile districts. Moreover, since institutionalized loyalism has been represented as the crucible of an elite–plebeian Protestant bond, new thinking on its radically empowering potential raises crucial questions about mid-Ulster, where popular loyalism coexisted with capitalizing rural industry. My research investigates how the structures of loyalism were used instrumentally in the Tommy Downshire protests alongside the harnessing of cross-sectarian protest traditions and the manipulation of local social, political and economic structures. The responses of the authorities are also considered to see what the protests reveal about wider law and order developments. First, however, a profile of the area must be provided.

II

The protest area straddled north Armagh and west Down, with its epicentre in the Down parish of Tullylish (see Map). Landownership was fragmented and few of the main landowners were resident. The largest proprietor was Lord Castlereagh’s nephew, Alexander Robert Stewart. An absentee, he owned an estate at Clare, and scattered townlands (that is, units of land) controlled by an agent, Henry Hamilton of Gilford House, who also managed several properties outside the main estates. Gilford village was part of Sir William Johnston’s estate, which also included

several rural townlands. The marquis of Downshire was the largest County Down landowner, with several extensive estates, two fringing the protest area: the Banbridge estate to the south and the Kilwarlin estate, which included Moira, to the north-east and managed from 1818 until the early 1840s by Downshire’s chief agent, William Reilly. Smaller Down landowners whose property was affected included the Warings of Waringstown. Several large estates also ringed the Armagh side. The De Salis property comprised rural townlands to the north-west of Tandragee, while to the north was the extensive estate of Charles Brownlow MP, which included Lurgan. Brownlow was an improving and periodically resident landlord who employed an active agent, William John Hancock. Lord Mandeville owned the towns of Portadown and Tandragee, and some surrounding rural townlands. He was an evangelical and an absentee who employed a ‘moral agent’. Lieutenant-Colonel William Blacker’s Carrickblacker estate was smaller but significant, due to its proprietor’s local political influence. Most landlords were Anglican, but Nicholas Charles Whyte, who owned substantial property at Loughbrickland, was Catholic.

The landed gentry were politically divided. In the 1820s the division was over Catholic emancipation; afterwards the split was between conservatives, liberal reformers and radicals, some of whom supported O’Connell’s campaigns to repeal the Act of Union. Mandeville was conservative and anti-Catholic, as was Brownlow until 1825 when he changed sides. Hancock, his agent, was still more radical in his active support for the Catholic Association. Lord Downshire was an aristocratic Whig, who supported emancipation but not O’Connell’s populist politics. His family, the Hills, traditionally contested the Down county representation with Lord Castlereagh’s family, the Stewarts, but since 1812 had agreed an electoral pact. By the 1830s Downshire, like the Stewarts, embraced Toryism, though neither encouraged Orangeism. Evangelical landowners like Mandeville backed the Orange lodges and organized Brunswick clubs in 1828 to oppose emancipation. Smaller gentry like Blacker and Holt Waring were


22 The right of Catholics to sit in parliament, conceded in April 1829.
strongly conservative and Orange, having been involved in the lodges since their inception. Blacker, who would play a key role in the protests, derived his significance from a network of connections and positions, central and local. Blacker’s title derived from a lieutenant-colonelcy in Armagh militia, but he was better known as an active yeoman captain and a prominent Orangeman, locally and in the Dublin Grand Lodge. He was also a magistrate and chairman of Portadown petty sessions and had important governmental connections, having served as vice-treasurer of Ireland.

Despite the fact that the area was renowned for sectarian conflict, it had earlier traditions of economically driven communal protest. The Oakboys began on the Brownlow estate in 1763. Though Presbyterian-led, these protesters included Catholics in their ranks. This pattern was continued in the Steelboy troubles of 1771–2. This agitation enveloped large swathes of central and eastern Ulster, but around Gilford the ‘Oakboy’ title was retained. Their most audacious local proceeding was an attack on Gilford castle to rescue prisoners from Clare, a townland with a religiously mixed population. This affair became notorious because one of the castle’s defenders, a Presbyterian clergyman, was killed. Even at Bleary, scene of sectarian clashes in the 1790s, Orangemen and Catholics combined in 1808 using Oakboy-like rituals such as mock hangings to oust Protestant outsiders who outbid locals for land.

The area’s population had been increasing since the late eighteenth century: by 1831 Tullylish alone had over 10,000 inhabitants, evenly divided between 3,779 Anglicans, 3,137 Catholics and 3,479 Presbyterians. This growth was related to the area’s centrality within Ulster’s ‘linen triangle’. Domestic spinning and weaving flourished, while the River Bann’s proximity encouraged bleaching. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries weavers ‘wove for the market’, buying raw materials to spin and weave and marketing their webs in towns like Banbridge and Lurgan. When trade was good they could subsist well on small


25 First Report of the Commissioners of Public Instruction, Ireland, Parliamentary Papers (hereafter P.P.), 1835, xxxiii, p. 188a.
plots. In 1814, 37 per cent of holdings on the Johnston estate were between one and five acres, and 24 per cent were between five and ten acres. This complex economic structure rested on a narrow base, supportable in good conditions but precarious during slumps, which also impacted on tenancy arrangements. After the wartime boom, many landlords replaced the traditional ‘lease for lives’ with yearly tenancies.26 The conjunction of population growth and reduced availability created land hunger: men were driven into debt in order to meet the initial tenant right payment plus ongoing high rent without the protection of a lease. Additionally, cottier-weavers paid cess and tithe at levels often set under wartime conditions. More pressure on the poor came from estate consolidation. The dogma of agricultural improvement held that estates were more productive if not, as Blacker put it, ‘cut to ribbons and set out in patches to the very lowest of the low’.27 The 1826 Sub-Letting Act allowed landlords to stop under-tenants sub-leasing to smaller occupiers, and the 1829 Catholic Relief Act provided further incentives by replacing the forty-shilling freehold vote with a £10 franchise. Estate consolidation was often crudely accomplished by hiking up rents.

Structurally, the linen industry changed rapidly from the late 1820s when local manufacturers copied British innovations by investing capital in ‘putting out’ yarn for handloom weavers. One man, who started in the 1820s as a country market linen buyer, employed 950 ‘operative’ weavers by 1840. Local entrepreneurs adopted the wet spinning process in 1829, thus removing spinning from its domestic setting. These changes had a profound impact. In 1838, a weaver of forty years’ experience on the Brownlow estate told parliamentary commissioners that weavers could no longer afford to work independently because the trade was now dominated by the manufacturers, and competition drove prices and wages down. ‘The machinery has thrown our families idle’, he complained, while ‘the poverty of the people,


27 Porter to Dodsworth, 13 Nov. 1835: PRONI, Tandragee Estate Papers, D1248/LB/1; Blacker Day Books, 6, 352–3: Armagh County Museum.
and their numbers always places it in the hands of the masters to pay what they please'.

The balance between central and local government was also shifting, especially regarding law and order. In Ireland, the county governor was the senior magistrate who recommended appointments to the bench. However, the position was considered open to electioneering and was replaced by English-style county lieutenancies in 1831, making the office more amenable to government control. These new positions continued to be occupied by aristocrats: Lords Downshire and Mandeville were the first Down and Armagh lieutenants. Below them, deputy lieutenancies were filled by gentry figures like Blacker. The active magistracy of both counties mainly derived from the gentry and absentee’s agents. By the 1840s, some of the more respectable manufacturers were admitted to the magistracy, but the overall landed dominance continued. Since the county constabulary’s establishment in 1822, police were the usual peacekeeping instrument. The yeomanry formerly had a similar role, but had fallen into functional atrophy, though they were maintained locally for drills and parades because their strongly Orange character made their dissolution politically difficult. The gentry had enjoyed substantial discretion in the yeomanry, but the police represented encroaching central power. However, following opposition to the police bill, compromises allowed magistrates to retain some controls, though Armagh and Down were among the last to organize police, in 1824 and 1825 respectively. The new constabulary had four provincial inspector-generals and, beneath them, government-appointed chief constables in each county subdivision. The magistrates could direct police operations, appoint ordinary constables and veto the appointment of salaried ‘stipendiary magistrates’ (originally conceived as a central nomination). The government equipped and paid the force but half the cost was recouped from county cess. Catholic political activists questioned the force’s impartiality, and further reforms saw it become the Irish Constabulary in 1836 with a single inspector-general and rigid rules against membership of political organizations. During the 1820s and 1830s government reforms of the
magistracy saw purges of ‘Orange’ figures, including Blacker himself in 1833. The successive protests therefore occurred against a backdrop of profound social, economic and political change.

III

The first outbreak happened on 6 May 1829 at Knock Bridge on the Newry Canal, when the potato barge was suddenly attacked by an armed mob ‘headed by a captain yclepted Tommy Downshire’. They boarded the vessel, beat up the boatmen, smashed the mast, ‘perforated’ the hull and fired on the fleeing crewmen. This occurred at 10 o’clock on the morning of Tandragee fair, when the roads were crowded. The attackers confidently forced people ‘to stop and witness their proceedings’, defiantly paraded afterwards, warning people that ‘Tommy Downshire will not allow any potatoes to leave the country in future’, and posted crude notices promising ‘destruction to anyone giving information’. The economic context is relatively straightforward. A glut of potatoes had reduced prices, which suited local weavers during a period of low wages, but they feared that exports to industrial England would drive them up again. The following analysis therefore concentrates on what this incident reveals about the protesters’ methods and resources, and how these were linked to the local political context.

Most local magistrates were conservative and ‘Orange’. Initially they ignored the riot, but the Lurgan magistrate, Charles Brownlow’s agent William John Hancock, launched a zealous investigation. Hancock’s radicalism made him anathema to loyalists who, despite his Quaker background, dubbed him ‘Papist Hancock’. Hancock took affidavits from a crewman who recognized one assailant. Although no changes resulted, Hancock focused on claims that the attackers used yeomanry muskets.

31 Newry Telegraph, 8 May 1829; Belfast Guardian and Constitutional Advocate, 12 May 1829; Patton to Gregory, 8 May 1829; Patton to D’Arcy, 8 May 1829: PRO, HO 100/226, fos. 331–3.
32 Newry Telegraph, 5 June 1829.
33 Hancock to Leveson-Gower, 17 May 1829: PRO, HO 100/227, fos. 55–9; Affidavit, 24 May 1829: HO 100/227, fos. 50–1.
Most of the local gentry strongly supported the Orange-connected yeomanry and favoured them over the new constabulary police force, which had taken over the yeomanry’s former peacekeeping role. Eagerly seizing any opportunity to disgrace Orange magistrates in the eyes of central government, Hancock highlighted the alleged yeomanry involvement to the county chief constable and insisted that the Dublin government be informed.

Suspecting Hancock’s motives, the police chief initiated his own enquiries, bringing twelve witnesses before magistrates at Tandragee — but to no avail due to ‘the influence of terror’. The initial reticence of the magistrates began to change as the publicity and the concomitant danger of government involvement dawned on them. Blacker circulated a personal address, enjoining people to inform, after which a meeting of magistrates, landowners and linen manufacturers on 20 May offered a £100 reward for information. Hancock also attended, but his supporters subsequently published letters in newspapers, accusing Orange magistrates of culpable inactivity, claiming that relatively few attended, that the reward terms were sufficiently loose to discourage apprehension, and that the attack was sectarian because the yeomanry were Orange Protestants and the potato exporter Catholic.34

Despite evidence that anyone involved in potato exporting was being attacked indiscriminately, Hancock continued his campaign to embarrass his opponents. He wrote to the viceroy demanding a full enquiry, and the Ulster police inspector-general, Major D’Arcy, was sent to investigate. However, after discussions with Hancock and Brownlow he found no positive proof of yeomanry involvement but recognized the wider political danger in stigmatizing the force. The government agreed; Peel endorsed D’Arcy’s report: ‘Hancock’s conduct does not do credit to his sense or impartiality’.35 Undeterred, Hancock insisted on yet another investigation. The magistrates and D’Arcy met in a house at Drumlin Hill, near the scene of the attack, and examined ‘vast numbers’. The magistrates were faced with complete silence regarding information; but, on withdrawing, received a

34 Patton to D’Arcy, 8 May 1829: PRO, HO 100/226, fo. 333; Patton to D’Arcy, 1 June 1829: HO 100/227, fos. 111–15; Newry Telegraph, 15 and 19 May 1829; 29 May 1829, ‘Outrage and Reward’; 5 June 1829.
35 Newry Telegraph, 29 May 1829; D’Arcy to Gregory, 28 May 1828: PRO, HO 100/227, fos. 48–50.
thunderous outburst from ‘an enormous crowd of men, women and boys’ yelling ‘in the most hideous way’.36 During the meeting, an anonymous letter was delivered, revealing that, far from having the Orange magistrates’ sanction, ‘Tommy Downshire’s Boys’ targeted their complaints at them in a shrewd protest strategy which pragmatically exploited gentry political divisions and deliberately recalled earlier ‘Oakboy’ protests still vivid in the district’s communal memory. The letter read:

My lords and gentlemen, your most humble subjects have taken the liberty of dictating to you of the penury [of] our country these five years back. In the year 1827 the poor willingly paid at the rate of from 5d to 7d per stone for potatoes, and but one year has elapsed in which time we had nearly shaken off the yoke of indigency, and as the giver of all goodness has favoured our island with a more plentiful supply of provision we are fully satisfied to part with all can be demanded off it, except the potato which is all we have to depend upon to supply our meal chest since we have sold our wheat, barley and oats to pay our rent, cess and tithes, and we your most humble subjects would wish that you would examine the markets to see if there is any prospect in trade for paying such a price for potatoes as foreigners would shortly oppress us with; yarn is from 4d to 7d a hank and when manufactured and sold there is scarcely the price of the yarn. Therefore gentlemen were you in a perilous situation on your estates we would venture our lives to set you at liberty. Therefore gentlemen, if you resign in helping Mr. Clarke we now, nor never intend to oppose the navigation trade, except taking from us our chief food which is the potato and will support the character of good soldiers to the crown and we wish to be in subjugation to all superior rulers, so my learned gentlemen, we hope that your superior information will be the means of promoting peace in our country as we can produce the assistance of County Down and County Armagh.37

By identifying the protesters as ‘good soldiers’ the letter confirms Hancock’s suspicions of yeomanry involvement, but its economic rationale discounts sectarian motivation. Beneath its deferential façade, however, thinly veiled threats to the ‘learned gentlemen’ show that the protesters believed the gentry could be forced to intervene on their behalf. There were precedents for such expectations. The eighteenth-century linen laws allowed magistrates to arbitrate in disputes between weaver and manufacturer, and the quid pro quo of Orangeism and the yeomanry further emphasized the two-way nature of relationships between elite and plebeian Protestants. Equally, though, if the gentry defaulted on customary expectations, the area’s protest tradition provided a template

36 D’Arcy to Gregory, 2 June 1829: PRO, HO 100/227, fos. 116–18.
37 Enclosure in D’Arcy to William Gregory, 2 June 1829: PRO, HO 100/227, fos. 111–12.
for action. The 1760s Oakboy protests were characterized by the mobilization of entire districts to march in broad daylight to a gentleman’s house where, by combining demonstrable moral force with threats of violence, they compelled landlords to intervene with other grand jurors to redress grievances.\(^{38}\)

These precedents showed that the gentry were amenable to pressure, and the associated social memory functioned as a resource to mobilize the populace and signal to the elite that the protest must be taken seriously. People understood the ‘messages’ conveyed by this methodology of controlled violence, fictitious names, implied threats and extensive popular support. Echoes of earlier protests also resounded in the press. Tommy Downshire’s Boys were explicitly compared with protesters of 1772 who ‘emanated from the same quarter, and \textit{in like manner, in open day}, attacked and sacked the mansion of Sir Richard Johnston at Gilford — murdered the Rev. Mr Morrell, a Presbyterian minister, and spread terror over the whole country’. The protesters sometimes used the name ‘Captain Flint’ as well (see Plate 1), which also drew on tradition because, in the 1770s, the ‘Hearts of Flint’ had operated in the same townlands that spawned Tommy Downshire.\(^{39}\) Contemporary issues also featured in the protesters’ armoury. Hancock’s campaign against the yeomanry gave ample opportunities to exploit gentry vulnerability. The ostentatious flashing of yeomanry muskets can only have been intended to alarm the Orange gentry and make intervention seem the lesser evil. In this context, it is understandable why the instinctive gentry response was denial. A letter from George Dickson to the \textit{Newry Telegraph} vehemently disavowed yeomanry involvement, but official yeomanry lists show Dickson as an officer in Blacker’s Seagoe Yeomanry.\(^{40}\) Therefore the methods adopted by Tommy Downshire’s Boys in 1829 both exploited the social memory of protest and utilized their ability to upset the area’s current law-abiding and loyal reputation using the yeomanry — the very means by which the gentry had once controlled it.

\(^{38}\) Magennis, ‘“Presbyterian Insurrection”?’; 169.

\(^{39}\) \textit{Newry Telegraph}, 15 May 1829 (quotation); Lady Moira to Townshend, 14 Mar. 1772: PRONI, Moira Papers, D4009/3/1; \textit{Belfast News-Letter}, 10 Dec. 1830. The ‘Hearts of Flint’ is a local variant of the Hearts of Steel, a violent agrarian protest movement active in Ulster between 1770 and 1772.

\(^{40}\) \textit{Newry Telegraph}, 12 and 15 May 1829; \textit{Return of the Names of the Officers of Each and Every Yeomanry Corps in Ireland}, P.P., 1843 (408), i, p. 4.
The juxtaposition of the plebeian Tommy with the aristocratic Downshire also had a functional role. Tommy was contemporary slang for a soldier’s portion of bread, so it may have contained implications of hardship while also evoking Oakboy memories. But the name could also convey bogus legitimacy: the third marquis of Downshire was county governor. By signing notices ‘Tommy Downshire’, the protesters mimicked official advertisements for public meetings, simultaneously impressing the ignorant and provoking the authorities. Downshire was known as a good landlord who had previously abandoned plans for heavy lease-renewal fines under tenant pressure, and was a liberal Protestant opposed to the Brunswick clubs supported by Blacker and others. The name was therefore a political firecracker to throw amongst the gentry, and an anonymous identity behind which the organizers could mobilize support.

The outcome of the 1829 protests was an uneasy stalemate. Potato exports continued during June, but under heavy police escort; thereafter the sources fall silent. However, the success in using ‘Tommy Downshire’ to mobilize large numbers meant that the name and the strategy would inevitably reappear. The next incident occurred in November 1830, during a malign congruence of a poor harvest, trade depression, high rents, estate consolidation and wage reductions. These renewed protests were more geographically extensive and showed greater co-ordination than in 1829. The 1830 protests will now be examined to reveal how the same resources were exploited but in an increasingly sophisticated manner, particularly as a radical new dynamic appeared: Protestants and Catholics were uniting under ‘Tommy Downshire’.

IV

Unlike the anti-export campaign, the 1830 protests did not begin with rioting, but adopted a graduated approach of organized meetings to pressurize their targets: in this instance, landlords and their agents. The initial meetings were intended to air grievances, compile lists of demands and call follow-up assemblies in order to give landlords time to respond, with the option of further meetings if responses were unsatisfactory. This tacit intimidation

41 OED, s.v. ‘Tommy’; Maguire, Downshire Estates in Ireland, 126–9.
was underpinned by flaunting the ability to invoke violence and cause problems; the scale and scope of the difficulties could be increased commensurate with landlord obduracy.

Notices were posted stating that Tommy Downshire ‘demanded’ attendance at a meeting on Saturday 20 November on Shane Hill, three miles from Gilford. The hill’s name comes from the Irish *an sían* meaning ‘the small fairy dwelling’. Such places, usually the highest local point, had strong supernatural associations and were, in Irish culture, traditionally important meeting places for the public arbitration of disputes. The area had an unsavoury reputation. Blacker said ‘the immediate vicinity of the

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1. Threatening notice, Dec. 1830. From National Archives of Ireland, Dublin, Chief Secretary’s Office Registered Papers, Outrage Papers (1830), B45. By permission of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.

hill has been noted for the lawless disposition of its inhabitants’ since the Oakboys. The Newry Examiner claimed Shane Hill was notorious ‘as the spot where the Hearts of Oak commenced their operation’. The Northern Whig agreed that ‘the terror and intimidation created by this unlawful body are not yet forgotten’. Therefore the choice of this location as the epicentre of protest was itself tactical: its reputation was appropriated to raise tension, sending powerful messages to magistrates and people.

Prior to the meeting, rising levels of excitement and anxiety were maintained by the enactment of traditional mobilization rituals. Hilltop bonfires, nocturnal drumming and the firing of shots were reported, recalling the methods used to beat the militia and yeomanry to arms and also those used by the Oakboys to ‘raise’ whole parishes. Similar rituals also preceded popular Orange battle commemorations. Yet the pre-meeting choreography also included the novel and, for the gentry, alarming phenomenon of plebeian Protestants and Catholics uniting. Crowd estimates on 20 November ranged wildly from six hundred to over four thousand, but all agreed they were weavers, labourers and small farmers. Reports spoke of ‘an alarming meeting of Orangemen, Catholics and other sects... in which they burnt the symbols of their respective parties, and raised a common and tri-coloured flag’. They complained of high rent, tithe and cess and, especially, of landlords evicting men ‘from the houses their fathers lived in’ to make £10 freeholders. Some criticism of low wages for weaving was evident, but the main concern centred on land issues, particularly on Alexander Robert Stewart’s Clare estate in County Down where the agent, Henry Hamilton, was re-letting land at exorbitant rates. Most protesters were Stewart’s tenants but included some Armagh men previously involved in the canal boat affair.

43 Blacker to Gregory, 21 Nov. 1830: NAI, Chief Secretary’s Office Registered Papers (hereafter CSORP), Outrage Papers (1830), D77; Newry Examiner, 8 Dec. 1830; Northern Whig, 13 Dec. 1830.
44 Magennis, ‘“Presbyterian Insurrection”?’, 178; Donnelly, ‘Hearts of Oak, Hearts of Steel’, 49; Northern Whig, 16 Dec. 1830.
45 Northern Whig, 25 Nov. 1830; Fitzgerald to Downshire, 27 Nov. 1830: PRONI, Downshire Papers, D671/C/12/445.
46 Belfast Guardian and Constitutional Advocate, 30 Nov. 1830; Griffin to D’Arcy, 19 and 21 Nov. 1830; Blacker to Gregory, 21 Nov. 1830: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (1830), D77; Dufferin to Gregory, 15 Dec. 1830: Third Report from the Select Committee on Orange Lodges, Associations or Societies in Ireland, PP., 1835 (476), xvi, appendix B, Papers Respecting the Army, Yeomanry, Militia and Police, 42.
Such meetings bordered on illegality and could not be ignored. Yet, as in 1829, the magistracy’s initial ambivalence suggests reluctance to be drawn in. Before the meeting Blacker alone tried to defuse the situation by removing a signal flag from the hill, but another soon appeared. He then warned Hamilton of the impending meeting, who immediately asked Chief Constable Griffin for police aid. However, when Griffin’s party arrived, Hamilton refused to accompany them because the magistrates had now decided not to attend, but to send police alone, and gave Griffin a warrant to arrest the ringleaders. Griffin’s superior, Major D’Arcy, told the government that ‘it appears strange . . . that the gentlemen did not attend’. Griffin believed that, even if Hamilton was not a magistrate, his responsibility as a landed representative was to meet aggrieved tenants — sending police could aggravate matters. Carefully balancing constitutional propriety against the danger from an angry crowd, Griffin prudently kept the police hidden, and advanced with one ‘steady constable’. He ignored the jeers of the crowd and mounted a rock on the summit to ask what they wanted. They said they were unable to pay Hamilton’s high rents and had met to select people capable of stating their distress. Griffin sympathized, and advised them to frame their complaints in a petition to Stewart, after which they dispersed.

Having avoided the meeting, Blacker optimistically hoped that the ‘bad spirit’ would evaporate in ‘wild talk and threats’, but he badly underestimated the protesters’ strategic ability. They retained the initiative by planning another Shane Hill meeting a fortnight later, on Saturday 4 December 1830. This gave time for their demands to be considered and created a ‘space’ to be filled with various tension-raising activities. A ‘decent looking stranger’ visited the cabins of the poor, noting their grievances in a book and dropping ‘very inflammatory’ hints. ‘Night walkers’ fired shots and, ‘headed by a person in a grotesque disguise’,

47 The law was ambiguous. The chief secretary, Stanley, clarified the position by stating that meetings for petitioning or recreation were legal, unless their demeanour threatened disorder: Northern Whig, 3 Jan. 1831.
48 Ibid., 25 Nov. 1830; Hamilton to Griffin, 17 Nov. 1830; Griffin to D’Arcy, 21 Nov. 1830; Blacker to Gregory, 21 Nov. 1830; D’Arcy to Gregory, 23 Nov. 1830: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (1830), D77; Magistrates’ notes, 29 Nov. 1830: PRONI, Whyte Papers, D2918/8/36–9; Belfast News-Letter, 23 Nov. 1830; Belfast Guardian and Constitutional Advocate, 30 Nov. 1830; Newry Telegraph, 26 Nov. 1830.
49 Blacker to Gregory, 1 Dec. 1830: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (1830), B45.
presumably ‘Tommy Downshire’ himself, threatened ‘all who neglected to appear on the hill’. On the night before the meeting the ritual choreography of excitement culminated in extensive musketry and drumming while a bonfire blazed all night on the summit.\(^{50}\)

The success of this pressurizing strategy is evident from the magistrates’ reactions. Before the first Shane Hill meeting and with Lord Grey’s new administration threatening more central encroachment, they were willing to let government-appointed chief constables blunder into local difficulties. Yet afterwards, the loyalist *Belfast News-Letter*, concerned lest the agitation spread, recommended that ‘the friends of order immediately exert themselves for its peaceful suppression’ to preserve the area’s loyal reputation.\(^{51}\) As the second meeting loomed, Blacker and other magistrates also came under pressure to act from landowners and larger farmers. But the new law and order dispensation meant ‘Orange’ magistrates had to use the police — in effect, participating in the new centrally imposed system they instinctively opposed. Blacker asked the government for police to guard barns, requested reinforcements for Gilford and a new police station at Drumlin Hill, ‘an important pass [between Armagh and Down] where there are a number of devils ripe and ready for mischief’. The police chief, D’Arcy, agreed to patrols and reinforcements, but refused the new station, citing manpower shortages. As in 1829, tension with the police command was again palpable and attention focused on the loss of the yeomanry’s policing role since the establishment of the county constabulary. Blacker’s letter ended with a telling postscript: ‘one thing will keep us right — pay a little more attention to the yeomanry’.\(^{52}\)

The crowd at the second meeting was larger: between three and four thousand, again comprising ‘Catholics and Protestants indiscriminately’. They reportedly came from Stewart’s Clare property and the Montiaghs, the predominantly Catholic part of Brownlow’s estate. Blacker said his ‘own people’ were present,

\(^{50}\) Blacker to Gregory, 1 and 4 Dec. 1830: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (1830), B45.

\(^{51}\) *Belfast News-Letter*, 23 Nov. 1830.

\(^{52}\) Whyte to Gregory, 29 Nov. 1830: PRONI, Whyte Papers, D2918/8/36–9; Blacker to Gregory, 21 Nov. 1830; D’Arcy to Gregory, 2 Dec. 1830: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (1830), D77; Blacker to Gregory, 1 Dec. 1830: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (1830), B45.
though claimed they attended from a desire not to see him insulted. However, there was now a marked change in the magistrates’ response. Despite having requested more police in the interim between meetings, no police attended at Shane Hill on 4 December; instead Blacker appeared in person, riding up the hill to reason with the crowd. He stressed the meeting’s illegality, advised those from Clare to name a committee to petition Stewart and offered help to frame it. Privately Blacker agreed that the Clare rents were excessive and, as the agent Hamilton was obdurate, advised Stewart himself to visit his estate before matters deteriorated. Blacker was heard respectfully, but his constitutional approach was shunned. The crowd stormed off to Hamilton’s house where they tore up a shrub garden, and then toured the houses of other landlords, agents and manufacturers demanding rent reductions or wage increases and, after ‘alarming threats’, gave two weeks to comply. Clergymen were ‘menaced with severe retaliation’ if they raised tithes, and shopkeepers were forced to distribute food and liquor. Blacker’s conciliatory approach had failed and the worried inhabitants of Gilford had no option but to ask Hancock to order police from Lurgan to quell the disturbances. However, ‘Tommy Downshire’s Boys’ kept one step ahead of the authorities and dispersed before the police arrived.

From the protesters’ perspective, no further action was necessary: the message to the key local magistrate was unambiguous. Without positive redress for their grievances, Blacker’s personal influence and his Orange and yeomanry connections counted for nothing, a point made still more unpalatable by the fact that the protesters stemmed the violence when his political enemy, Hancock, arrived with the constabulary. Thus, with a third Shane Hill meeting scheduled for 18 December, the protest organizers ensured that the intervening period opened in an atmosphere heavy with menace.

The ability to control or threaten violence was one component in the tactic of exponentially raising pressure while demands were under consideration. Another aspect was widening the

53 Belfast News-Letter, 10 Dec. 1830; Blacker to Gregory, 4 Dec. 1830: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (1830), B45.  
54 Blacker to Gregory, 4 Dec. 1830: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (1830), B45; Third Report from the Select Committee on Orange Lodges, Associations or Societies in Ireland, 208; Belfast News-Letter, 7 Dec. 1830; Newry Telegraph, 7 Dec. 1830; Newry Examiner, 8 Dec. 1830; Freeman’s Jl, 7 Dec. 1830; Northern Whig, 13 Dec. 1830.
protest. Hancock arrested several men in Lurgan for possession of Tommy Downshire notices, including a ringleader, William McMullan, a member of Hancock’s own Lurgan yeomanry. McMullan led a mob opposing the notices’ removal by the police, yelling ‘we have plenty of arms and ammunition and can use them as well as you!’ Reports reached the newspapers that ‘the boys of Shane Hill’ would visit the estates of the marquises of Hertford and Downshire in Antrim and Down. More Tommy Downshire notices called for meetings on the De Salis estate at Brackagh and at nearby Tandragee in County Armagh. Similar notices at Magheralin near Lurgan denounced an Orange parson, Dolling, and called meetings to ‘pull down’ his tithes. Placards advertised meetings at Tandragee and the Maze racecourse near Moira. Landlords received threatening letters demanding regulation of rents; one, Mr Overend, was warned: ‘we are informed that you are going to put your friends out — if you do — mark the consequence — if you want to keep yourself and your property safe you will not meddle them [sic]. We have paid Mr. Hamilton a visit . . . we mean to pay you and others likewise a visit in Portadown’.56

A further element in the pressurizing strategy concerned the increasingly political appearance of the protests. The 1829 affair revealed gentry vulnerability over their local political divisions. The 1830 protesters similarly used these fractures to their advantage; but, significantly, they also exploited the wider political situation. These protests occurred against a contemporary backdrop of widespread upheaval including the French and Belgian revolutions, ‘Captain Swing’, the Wellington ministry’s fall, the Irish ‘tithe war’, O’Connell’s ‘Union lodges’ of Orangemen and Catholics, and plans to ‘agitate’ the Ulster weavers.57

These national and international events were widely reported in the local press, alongside Tommy Downshire’s sensational

55 Affidavit of Armstrong, 11 Dec. 1830; Hancock to Gregory, 16 Dec. 1830; Hancock to Power, 31 Dec. 1830: Third Report from the Select Committee on Orange Lodges, Associations or Societies in Ireland, appendix B, 43–4, 49.
57 R. M. Sibbett, Orangeism in Ireland and throughout the Empire, 2 vols. (Belfast, 1915), ii, 84–5; Belfast News-Letter, 31 Dec. 1830; 7 and 11 Jan. 1831; Northern Whig, 1 Nov. 1830.
combination of orange and green symbols and his adoption of O’Connellite ‘half rent and no tithe’ slogans. There was a local repeal interest: a radical landowner, George Ensor of Ardress, advocated non-denominational rural meetings in favour of repeal as did a local paper, the *Newry Examiner*. By publicizing the protests extensively, they invited political interpretations and the interest of opportunist political groups. Yet, the apparent political context was a ruse. O’Connell’s correspondence contains no mention of Tommy Downshire and even the repeal press merely recorded the meetings without any overt claims.  

Paradoxically the only paper to claim that the Shane Hill meetings were linked to repeal was the ultra-Protestant *Dublin Evening Mail*. It claimed that Ulster loyalists were deserting the Protestant cause because they were disgruntled by emancipation and disgusted by the new government’s dismissal of partisan office holders. Unless ‘speedy means be taken to restore that confidence to the Protestant mind . . . the Orangemen will join the Roman Catholics in seeking . . . a repeal of the union’. Northern loyalist newspapers printed furious denials. The *Belfast Guardian* insisted that the trouble was ‘local and personal’, involving ‘neither party nor politics’. The *News-Letter* disliked Whig policy, but being ‘intimately acquainted’ with the causes of the ‘extraordinary coalition on Shane Hill’, insisted it had nothing ‘to do with repeal . . . or with any other political object’. This was true, and the claim may well have been political opportunism, but the fact that the protesters divided the national conservative press shows just how successful their exploitation of political tension was. Back in mid-Ulster, those at the receiving end of this tactic were decidedly more nervous. Blacker doubted that Tommy Downshire’s crowds were interested in repeal, boasting that ‘nine out of ten of our dense population . . . know no more of the matter [repeal] than they do of the Siege of Troy’. Like many conservatives, however, Blacker feared that sinister outside influences manipulated popular disorder. ‘You have no idea’, he told his friend, the Dublin government under-secretary William

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Gregory, ‘of the way the outrages there [in England] helped to stimulate them here’ and explained how ‘the badness of the weaving trade’ was enough ‘for revolutionary spirits to avail themselves of in exciting disaffection’. With this sort of interpretation being aired, and as the third Shane Hill meeting neared and tension soared, the authorities had to adopt a stronger and more unified response.

The Down high sheriff, Nicholas Charles Whyte, called for all magistrates from affected areas to meet at Banbridge on 14 December 1830, and asked the Down governor, Lord Dufferin, to attend. Opinions were solicited beforehand about the possibility of using the yeomanry to suppress riots. Many, including Dufferin, said that their corps would act if necessary, but Hancock blocked this, claiming that his Lurgan yeomen ‘might not be inclined to act against the Shane Hill rioters’. The yeomanry issue was subsequently not mentioned at Banbridge, where the government ordered D’Arcy to attend. Strong resolutions were passed offering a £200 reward for information and cautioning that issuing threatening notices, attending illegal meetings and injuring property were capital offences. If the warning was ignored, the magistrates stressed that overwhelming civil and military force would be used. Blacker, however, still preferred the interventionist and conciliatory approach. Despite the fact that his name was included with the subscribers to the resolutions, he did not attend, explaining to Whyte that Stewart’s ‘manly conduct’ in consulting his tenants removed the ‘pretext’ for more meetings, but he conceded that further protest activity would require strong action.

In the event, coercion proved unnecessary. On 18 December, the day nominated for the third meeting, troops were moved from Dundalk and Armagh and stationed at key points. Whyte,

60 Blacker to Gregory, 21 Nov. 1830: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (1830), D77; Blacker to Gregory, 4 Dec. 1830: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (1830), B45; Third Report from the Select Committee on Orange Lodges, Associations or Societies in Ireland, 243–4.
62 Dufferin to Whyte, 6 Dec. 1830; Gregory to Whyte, 13 Dec. 1830; Blacker to Whyte, 13 Dec. 1830: PRONI, Whyte Papers, D2918/8/42–4, 46; Dufferin to Gregory, 6 Dec. 1830: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (1830), D78; Dufferin to Gregory, 15 Dec. 1830: Third Report from the Select Committee on Orange Lodges, Associations or Societies in Ireland, appendix B, 42; Newry Telegraph, 17 Dec. 1830.
Hancock and other ‘respectable inhabitants’ went to Shane Hill but, finding no ‘Tommy Downshireites’, returned to Gilford. Dufferin congratulated Whyte on restoring the peace, but, in reality, the protesters had got what they wanted and no meeting was necessary; encouraged by Blacker, Stewart had now personally visited his tenants and pledged that the land would be revalued.63 Thus the magistrates’ meeting, for all its dire warnings, was actually a victory for the protesters because it made the unthinkable — landlords using police and troops against their own tenants — possible. Realization of the long-term damage such a scenario could cause to relationships shocked many into the position Blacker now occupied, reluctantly seeing conciliation as the lesser evil.

The protesters’ reaction to the magistrates’ 14 December resolutions reveals how they exploited them. On the one hand, sufficient violence was maintained to show that they were not intimidated. Gangs extorted money from householders to finance the protests and ‘many hundreds, perhaps thousands’ of notices containing the magistrates’ resolutions were ripped down as soon as the police posted them, ‘while those of Tommy Downshire have been allowed to remain up for several days’. Yet, on the other hand, ‘Tommy Downshire’ began showing an irenic public face in letters to the press. Loyalist newspapers received a letter significantly dated 14 December, and signed by ‘a distressed member of the Shane Hill Meeting or T.D.’ This rebuked magistrates for treating the protest as insurrectionary and, with a glance at Blacker, questioned why, when they complained of universally acknowledged distress, ‘you tell us we have not adopted the best mode to engender commiseration . . . but . . . load us with harsh appellations’. The letter also created the impression of a supportive consensus against recalcitrant landowners, claiming ‘we have public opinion with us’. Tommy’s manufacturer was ‘a humane and charitable man’, ‘painfully necessitated’ to reduce the weavers’ wages. Despite the earlier Lurgan riot, ‘the Policeman, whose pieces of armour you [the magistrates] suggest should be drawn against us . . . has a heart that feels, as he was drawn in to oppose a people hitherto peaceable, now moved by distress’. The larger farmers, previously threatened to make them demand protection,

were now rebuked for soliciting such aid while raising ‘no call to pity’. Instead, they were encouraged to shun the magistrates’ demand to ‘be separate’, and join with the poor. Noting that Stewart and others had promised much but done nothing, the letter demanded that landlords and clergy now meet their tenants to discuss the current impossibility of paying rents and tithes ‘payable when war gave an extravagant value to trade and produce’. Then, despite the O’Connellite appearance of the meetings, ‘T.D.’ disavowed any political or party motive. However, while landlords considered his demands, ‘in the mean time I entreat my friends to keep the peace: give over firing . . . Let there be no night gatherings or rakings [wrecking houses]’.64 The salient point is that ‘Tommy Downshire’ had invited, indeed striven to create, the panic which engendered the resolutions but now played the peace card.

Cumulatively this protest strategy brought irresistible pressure on the elite to intervene at estate, parish and townland level and redress the grievances. Even as the magistrates prepared for their Banbridge meeting, mediation rather than coercion was beginning: many planned meetings were aborted or prevented. On 11 December the Reverend Carpendale persuaded a hundred people at Brackagh to disperse, guaranteeing to support a petition on their behalf to Count de Salis. The Tandragee magistrates, Carter and Loftie, worked tirelessly to ‘counteract’ a meeting scheduled to take place on a hill in the town’s hinterland. The planned Maze racecourse meeting came to nothing. Blacker and Loftie intervened at Killycomaine, advising three hundred protesters to appoint a committee to represent their grievances, with the result that those who once received threatening letters, now got ‘deafening acclamation’ on announcing rent reductions.65

Underlying the reconciliatory bonhomie, however, the reality was that the protesters’ tactical sophistication had comprehensively outmanoeuvred their opponents. Blacker knew this better than most and, as the momentum slowed, he aimed to reclaim

64 Newry Telegraph, 21 Dec. 1830 (my emphasis); 24 Dec. 1830; Belfast Guardian and Constitutional Advocate, 21 Dec. 1830; Dufferin to Gregory, 15 Dec. 1830: Third Report from the Select Committee on Orange Lodges, Associations or Societies in Ireland, appendix B, 42.

that which had been so adroitly used against him — the district’s loyal reputation and the allegiance of its plebeian loyalists. He needed proof of the malign political forces he was convinced had hijacked the protest. To this end, in January 1831, an ex-soldier called William Wilson was arrested. He made ‘important disclosures’ about Tommy Downshire’s men and O’Connell’s ‘Union Societies’, and swore he was brought to Shane Hill ‘for the purposes of training and exercising certain persons, by night, in the use of arms’. However, this crude attempt at restoring the sectarian status quo backfired. The newspapers printed declarations from ‘respectable individuals’ at Shane Hill goading Blacker that they ‘wish no herald of Aristocracy to proclaim to the government that we are partners in insurrection’. His political opponents had a field day. The Newry Examiners dubbed it ‘a Paddy McKew affair’ (that is, a spoof). Hancock’s supporters, in a reference to yeomanry involvement in the riots of 1829 and 1830, sneered that ‘the proceedings of Tommy Downshire and his men require not the aid and assistance of any “trading itinerant” to instruct them in the use of arms!’

Deceived by the protesters’ political will-o’-the-wisp, Blacker was determined to follow it to the shaky ground of a governmental investigation. Wilson was sent to Dublin Castle for questioning, but there the matter was discreetly dropped.

Meanwhile face-to-face mediation continued during January, with the outcome usually in the protesters’ favour. In a typical incident, the tithe problem at Magheralin was addressed. Here, as we have seen, the incumbent, Dolling, had previously refused to reduce his tithe. Now, however, the Reverend Holt Waring intervened at a meeting convened by notices signed by ‘Tomy Downshire’ and endorsed ‘Blood or Freedom’ and ‘Half rent and no tithe’. After talk of secret oaths to refuse paying tithe altogether, Waring persuaded the crowd to let him write to Dolling strongly suggesting reduction, while they nominated representatives to deliver the letter.

Late 1830, therefore, saw ‘Tommy Downshire’s Boys’ develop and extend their protest strategy. There was a stronger organizational element evident in the ability to mobilize large numbers of

\[\text{Newry Telegraph, 4 and 11 Jan. 1831 (quotation); Belfast News-Letter, 7 Jan. 1831; Newry Examiners, 12 Jan. 1831.}\]

\[\text{Northern Whig, 10 Jan. 1831; Belfast News-Letter, 18 Jan. 1831.}\]
people and direct them to strategically chosen locations. Organizational sophistication was also apparent in the scheduling and pre-planning of meetings, the emergence of embryonic negotiating committees at meetings and the generation of propaganda in the press. Unquestionably the rank and file of the crowds gathered on Shane Hill came from an ‘economic’ constituency — weavers and small farmers — rather than a ‘sectarian’ one. As Blacker admitted, they were drawn from ‘the lowest grades of both religions’. However, at an organizational level, there were some of a higher status, but from the same weaving constituency. From the few identifiable leaders, the organizers were apparently Protestant and relatively affluent. William McMullan, a ring-leader arrested by Hancock, was a member of the Lurgan yeomanry and therefore a Protestant, since the members of the corps were all Orangemen and no Catholics could belong to the Orange Institution. While McMullan may have utilized the Orange lodges’ ancillary friendly-society function to pay his own bail of £50 and negotiate two £25 sureties from friends, nonetheless, yeomen were not generally the poorest of the poor. If, as seems likely, Protestants led the protests, then the Oakboy connection went further than harnessing community memories of earlier protest to include organizational parallels, since research suggests that the Oakboys, like Tommy Downshire’s Boys, comprised all denominations but were led by Protestants, especially Presbyterians.68

The overall effect that the protest organizers intended was the isolation of those who resisted their demands. They skilfully exploited the resources at their disposal in order to physically mobilize the poor, and they used propaganda to secure the emotional support of larger farmers, sympathetic landlords and clergy, textile manufacturers and the police. This strategy allowed them to combine moral pressure and the threat of physical violence or the disruption of the district’s reputation for loyalty, gained due to its quiescence during the insurrectionary 1790s. At that time, local figures like Blacker and Waring had responded with a pragmatic partiality by taking a leading role in the originally plebeian Orange movement and had channelled its aggression into loyal.

68 Blackstock, *Ascendancy Army*, 136–9; Hancock to Gregory, 16 Dec. 1830: *Third Report from the Select Committee on Orange Lodges, Associations or Societies in Ireland*, appendix B, 43; Magennis, ‘“Presbyterian Insurrection”?’, 174.
associations and the yeomanry. But this was now being turned against them, because both Orangemen and yeomen were actors in the protests. Blacker complained that ‘in 1796 [when the yeomanry began] they were very loyal and became high Orange — and . . . under the surveillance of . . . myself and other influential men, continued so’, but now they were ‘falling into bad hands’.69

The shared hardship that sealed Tommy Downshire’s denominational union militated against any partisan intervention, but still allowed the protesters to make the district’s recent good reputation a hostage to their demands. If the reputation of the Oakboys was the stick, restoration of the loyal reputation was the carrot.

The utility of this combination of old and new as a resource derived more power from how the protests appeared to observers than from their actual reality. Success depended on being able to convey the impression of a situation that was just about to cross the threshold from economic to political, from local to regional or from peaceful to violent. The protests were pitched at a correctly calculated point of balance. Therein lay the tactical sophistication in the studied political ambiguity and deliberately choreographed dramaturgy of meetings and pre-meeting rituals. But the threat was suggestive rather than actual, a growing danger rather than an established fact — something teetering on the verge of happening, requiring action to avert. By making problems apparently multiply, ‘Tommy Downshire’s Boys’ both ensured elite intervention and allowed the protesters to negotiate compromises from a position of strength.

After the main protests settled, the Tommy Downshire name was applied to various agrarian crimes in Down, Armagh and adjacent counties between 1831 and 1835. These included the robbery of pubs, intimidation of evicting landlords, reactions against ‘moral agents’ closing drinking ‘shebeens’, and violence against outsiders ignoring local customs.70 Although such spontaneous agrarian crime was light years removed from the 1830 protests in leadership and organization, the appropriation of the

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70 Newry Telegraph, 11 Jan. 1831; 19 May 1835; Belfast News-Letter, 3 Apr. 1832; Northern Whig, 10 Feb. 1834; Earle to Stoven, 14 May 1835: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (County Armagh, 1835), 2/15/5; Charlotte Elizabeth, Letters from Ireland, 1837 (London, 1838), 308–11.
name reflects the deep impression the organized campaign left on
the popular mind. With such successful precedents, it is not sur-
prising that it reappeared when subsequent economic crises
sparked new pulses of protest.

V

In July 1842, depression in the linen trade created such hardship
that Gilford relief committee provided weekly meal handouts for
two thousand people. Even though the harvest was good, con-
tinuing low wages engendered renewed protest. In September the
new resident magistrate at Banbridge, Hill Rowan, heard ‘ru-
mours of great discontent among the linen weavers . . . that illegal
associations were being formed, with purposes of violence’. An
informant had given Rowan the ominous news that ‘a large meet-
ing . . . of the distressed weavers, under the patronage of Tommy
Downshire’ was planned for Saturday 17 September to be held
on Shane Hill.71 Although the nomenclature and topography
were consistent with 1830, the causes and contexts differed sig-
ificantly. The earlier protests were basically agrarian; linen
weavers were involved but their complaints were primarily land-
centred.72 However, the 1842 crowds protested as weavers, and
complained about their capitalist employers. Moreover, this was
more than protest — it was a dispute. Both sides felt aggrieved:
the weavers complained of low wages; while manufacturers dis-
liked the uneven workmanship and late return on yarn given out
for weaving. Despite the category shift from agrarian to ‘indus-
trial’, the landed classes were still actors, though in a revealingly
different way. As Rowan would play a key role, it is necessary to
describe his personal and professional background.

The creation of resident magistrates accompanied the reforms
of the Whig under-secretary, Thomas Drummond. As O’Connell
wished, the 1836 Irish Constabulary Act began undermining the
Protestant ascendancy’s local power-base. It brought the magis-
tracy and police under more centralized control, made them more
professional and impartial, and further developed the office of

71 Crozier to Eliot, 22 July 1842; Lucas to Peel, 31 July 1842: Brit. Lib., Add. MS
40480, fos. 91–6; Rowan to Downshire, 20 Sept. 1842: PRONI, Downshire Papers,
D671/C/3/16/1.

72 The tithe issue was resolved in 1838 by legislation commuting tithes to a rent
charge.
stipendiary magistrate. When the latter position was created in 1822, these state-paid professionals were only provided if requested by local magistrates, but the 1836 legislation gave central government their appointment and control. These new resident officials were the antithesis of amateur magistrates like Blacker or Hancock, local men who had often had reputations for political partisanship and ignorance of the law. Typically the new men had experience in the military, police, law or civil administration. Being permanent residents and debarred from holding other posts, they took on many of the local magistrates’ duties and reported directly to the chief secretary. Politically, they were often liberal and sometimes Catholic.73

Rowan’s experience included service as Assessor of Taxes, governor of Dublin’s general penitentiary and stipendiary magistrate in the southern counties during the 1830s tithe war. In 1829 Peel had appointed Hill’s brother, Sir Charles Rowan, as one of the first London Metropolitan Police commissioners, and it is tempting to see Hill Rowan as epitomizing the new breed of official: detached, professional and efficient, symbolizing central encroachment on the localities.74 Yet the reality was very different. Rowan, an Anglican, was from an Antrim gentry family whose fortunes were in decline due to an ancestor’s improvidence. A nephew described him as a ‘religious as well as a clever man’ known for tactfully dealing with people.75 In straitened circumstances, Rowan saw government service as a career promising pensioned security. However, in 1841 another potentially lucrative opportunity presented itself. Lord Downshire proposed that Rowan abandon his official duties and become general agent for his extensive estates. The existing agent, Reilly, was too old, but the real reason for the offer was Rowan’s reputation and experience. Flattered but cautious, he hesitated, explaining how he

74 Palmer, Police and Protest in England and Ireland, 295, 694; ‘Sir Charles Rowan’, Oxford DNB; An Account of the Number of Stipendiary Magistrates in Ireland, P.P., 1833 (191), xxxii; Samuel Lewis, Topographical Dictionary of Ireland, 2 vols. (London 1837), i, subscribers’ list; Dublin Gazette, 18 Sept. 1838; Rowan’s testimonial, n.d.: PRONI, Downshire Papers, D671/C/3/5. 
75 Memoir of Revd Robert Willson Rowan: PRONI, Rowan of Mount Davys Papers, D1909/22.
hoped ‘on relinquishing pretensions to further promotions [as a magistrate]’, that ‘if supported by my friends’ he might retire on his present salary. Otherwise, ‘no amount of temporary income, withdrawable at pleasure, would compensate . . . for the abandonment of permanent employment’. In May 1842 Rowan visited Downshire in London to solicit his influence with the government to sanction his retirement, but the matter was not settled and his posting to Down seems a compromise whereby he would maintain his official position but move to Downshire’s northern property. The pension imbroglio continued into 1844, by which time Rowan was being eased into agency duties, though still nominally resident magistrate.76 The crucial point is that the 1842 protests occurred just after Rowan accepted the agency in principle and was being ‘tested’ on the ground.

When Rowan heard of the planned Shane Hill meeting, he assembled the local magistrates and assured them that it could be kept within the law. A member of the weavers’ association had shown him their rules and promised that they would desist from assembling, if Rowan considered this illegal, which he did not. Yet the ominous and familiar shadow cast by the pre-meeting activities gave the opposite impression. On the eve of the meeting, he ordered guards to be posted outside linen manufacturers’ houses and patrols on Shane Hill. One patrol found a bonfire on the summit and seventy or eighty men armed with bludgeons. Its commander asked what they were about, and was told that they met ‘for the purpose of taking measures to prevent weavers from working under a certain rate of wages’, and that ‘it was better to die than starve’. He advised them to disperse, which they did. Later, another patrol met men who jeered and ran off, after firing a shot. One policeman with local knowledge warned Rowan that crowds and bonfires at Shane Hill were ‘calculated to cause terror and dread’ in law-abiding people. Rowan attended the Saturday meeting with thirty-five police, the largest force available. Estimating the crowd at five hundred, he left his force concealed and went alone amongst them to find that they had chosen a committee and were passing resolutions about reduced wages. He intervened and was apparently received with ‘the

76 Rowan to Downshire, 18 Sept. 1841; 14 Oct. 1841 (quotation); 20 Dec. 1843; Downshire to Rowan, 23 Dec. 1843: PRONI, Downshire Papers, D671/C/3/5; D671/C/3/6/1; D671/C/3/33/1; D671/C/3/34.
greatest respect and deference’. Rowan then persuaded them to delete militant resolutions which would ‘frustrate the lawful and peaceable attainment of their objects’. They denied disorderly intent and dispersed, acknowledging his sympathy.77

With Lord Downshire as county lieutenant, Rowan had much to lose if he failed to maintain law and order, but more to gain if he defused any threats. From the protesters’ viewpoint, however, this need to impress his prospective employer made him valuably vulnerable. Rowan’s approach also had a political element. Since 1834 Downshire had gravitated towards Toryism and had little love for the ‘radical monopolising linen drapers on the river Bann’.78 Rowan’s readiness to take the weavers’ side was noticeable. ‘Considering the moment critical’, he advised the main manufacturers that ‘if compatible with their interests’ they should ‘make some compromise, however small’, and asked them to meet him in Banbridge’s Downshire Arms to receive ‘suggestions for their mature deliberation’. Rowan reported this to Lord Downshire, unaware that he was effectively acting as Tommy Downshire’s surrogate by making demands and setting deadlines.79

His intervention resulted in a meeting at Bleary schoolhouse which passed revised resolutions entitled ‘The Operative Weavers’ Appeal to the Manufacturers etc’. These embodied Rowan’s objections to the original Shane Hill resolutions. Stressing the weavers’ law-abiding intent, the appeal also stated that low wages could not sustain the ‘thousands of half-starved, half-employed . . . and half-paid operatives’. The trade depression was acknowledged, but two manufacturers who paid better rates were named and their rates printed with the rhetorical question: ‘How can they pay higher wages and give better yarns than many others in the country?’ The resolutions were signed by the eight-man committee, without mention of Tommy Downshire, distributed as notices and published in the Newry Telegraph with a flattering codicil praising Rowan for ‘exerting the force of

77 Rowan to Downshire, 20 Sept. 1842: PRONI, Downshire Papers, D671/C/3/16/1; Affidavits of Plummer and Hill, 17 Sept. 1842, enclosed in Rowan to Eliot, 18 Sept. 1842: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (County Down, 1842), 8/18293.
79 Rowan to Downshire, 20 Sept. 1842: PRONI, Downshire Papers, D671/C/3/16/1.
argument instead of that of powder or steel’. Rowan noticed no local gentry present at the first Shane Hill meeting, except Blacker who arrived as it dispersed, claiming that he had attended in order to offer assistance. Since Rowan had privately briefed the local magistrates beforehand, the likelihood is that most of the landed gentry were content to sit back and see middle-class radicals have their wings clipped.

Rowan felt he was gaining ground: Bleary was near Shane Hill, but it was emphatically not Shane Hill. This conveyed very different symbolic messages: an indoor gathering signified contemporary respectability, not the turbulent past associated with hill-top musters. However, soon afterwards an open-air meeting of three hundred people took place at Drumnavaddy. Rowan consoled himself with the fact that it dispersed peacefully when the crowd heard of the earlier agreement. Still optimistic, he told Downshire how the weavers had ‘faithfully... fulfilled their agreement’ and produced a ‘reasonable appeal to the better feelings of their employers’. But when he met the manufacturers, he found ‘a great deal of talk’, though ‘no superabundance of liberality’. He eventually secured an agreed statement which expressed sympathy, regretted that trade ruled out immediate wage increases but promised ‘as much work as possible to good weavers’. This was to be printed and circulated, but the manufacturer entrusted with this task deliberately stalled. Sensing a setback, the weavers predictably reverted to ‘Tommy Downshire’. Thereafter they managed the dispute by adopting tactics calculated to build and strategically apply pressure. As in 1830, the tempo and scope of the meetings increased incrementally. On 29 September, three days after Rowan’s unsatisfactory meeting with the manufacturers, hundreds of printed notices appeared on the borders of Down, Armagh and Antrim. These warned ‘all Gentlemen, Farmers, Tradesmen, Labourers, and others interested’ to attend a meeting near Moira on Friday 7 October, but ‘Fail not at your peril... or I will be under the necessity of going for you... T. Downshire’ (see Plate 2). On 3 October similar notices requested weavers to attend a ‘great meeting’ at Shane Hill on

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81 Rowan to Downshire, 27 Sept, 1842: PRONI, Downshire Papers, D671/C/3/14/1, 15/1.
2. Tommy Downshire notice, 29 Sept. 1842. From NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (County Down, 1842), 8/19007. By permission of the Director of the National Archives of Ireland.
Saturday 8 October to hear ‘each manufacturer’s reply to their late appeal . . . for an increase of wages’. Tommy Downshire was not mentioned, but reversion to Shane Hill conveyed the same message (see Plates 3 and 4).82

The location of the first of these meetings was also calculated to annoy the authorities. Initially Rowan assumed that, as Moira was in Down, it would be under his jurisdiction; but, belatedly, he realized that the place was cleverly chosen, being some distance outside the town and lying just over the border in County Antrim. Suspecting that the meeting was a diversion, he doubted the appropriateness of a large police force. However, having to take any threatened disorder seriously, he decided that if force were sent, it should be in the greatest strength possible, necessitating hurried co-ordination with his Antrim counterpart. This choice of location empowered the protesters in two ways. First, it allowed them to seize the strategic initiative by making the police, usually based in urban stations, come out to them in the country. Secondly, as police duty was chargeable to county taxpayers and the meeting’s impact straddled two counties, the organizers exploited the potential financial implications of their protest which would embarrass the respective county elites by stirring up more discontent. As the Moira meeting approached, unease spread; one gentry figure, Francis Dubordieu, recalling 1830 began to consider intervention, but baulked without government sanction, ‘well knowing the venom of this country which would misrepresent the purest actions’.83 Therefore, as the weavers awaited the manufacturers’ response, events were positioned to make Rowan either pressurize the employers to meet the weavers’ demands or bear responsibility for the consequences.

Facing an apparently worsening situation and fearing that ‘the meetings . . . have not yet seen their termination’, Rowan arranged for 130 police from Antrim and Down to be available at Moira. Again he kept them in reserve and went personally with one magistrate and a constable to find about six hundred people. Only two men addressed the crowd. The first, an elderly and

83 Rowan to Eliot, 4 Oct. 1842; Getty to Eliot, 4 Oct. 1842: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (County Down, 1842), 8/19007; Dubordieu to Eliot, 3 Oct. 1842: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (County Down, 1842), 8/18925.
religious person, quoted scripture and advised them to submit
their grievances to Providence. This went down badly; but a
younger man was cheered wildly for an impassioned diatribe
against heartless manufacturers, especially the smaller ones
who ‘knew the very lowest farthing that a web could be woven
for’. Weavers, he continued, were arbitrarily fined for any defect
in the web, and, if they complained, were dismissed and told to ‘go
and live upon haws’. The fiery orator then blamed machinery,
claiming that ‘steam was another great cause of their deprivation,
and should be put an end to’. He moved a resolution that ‘no man
would be allowed to work . . . under a reasonable standard wage’.
At this, Rowan intervened, telling the excited crowd that they
were being manipulated. Calm returned. Rowan said they
listened with ‘astonishing avidity’, making the first ranks sit, so
all could hear. Comparing the protest to recent English Chartist
disturbances, he warned them not to be duped into breaking the
law with similar ‘deplorable results’. ‘Tommy Downshire’, he
asserted, ‘is either a person who had some object in view, which
would not relieve their distress, or is a malicious wag’. He chal-
lenged Tommy to state his case. When nobody appeared, Rowan
offered himself as go-between. Many seemed satisfied, but a
crowd surrounded him, demanding that he address them too.
He ‘pleaded exhaustion’ and complained that he was being
made a ‘prisoner’ but, with all the mischievous menace of
moral force, they retorted that it only showed how much they
‘loved’ him; they then dispersed, leaving Rowan apprehensive
that the coming meeting would be ‘of a more angry character’.

A massive gathering was intended at Shane Hill on 8 October
with contingents being marshalled from outside the immediate
area. Although notices for the main meeting did not mention
Tommy Downshire, those for feeder meetings bore Tommy’s
unmistakable imprimatur. Crude handwritten papers at Poyntz
Pass on the Down–Armagh border warned all ‘wavers’ to gather
on the ‘winemillhill of pointspass to gow to the shanehill for to
maintain the cause’, and that those who ‘will not gow . . . will
suffer’. Rowan directed every available policeman towards the
hill but again kept the two hundred constables hidden, and
advanced with one magistrate, Richard Hayes, brother of a

84 Belfast News-Letter, 11 Oct. 1842; Northern Whig, 8 Oct. 1842; Rowan to
major manufacturer and bleacher and one of the few mercantile men on the county bench. They found at least five thousand at the meeting, which was opened by the weavers’ committee chairman, John Mathews, who read 110 replies to the ‘Appeal’ to raise wages to the level paid by John Brown of Donaghcloney. To Rowan’s relief, these were deemed satisfactory: some manufacturers had already increased rates and others pledged to follow. Mathews said that the committee would return to the manufacturers to negotiate a standard rate, which would be printed and publicized to prevent deceit and allow weavers to decide who to work for. This, he said, was an achievement and, if the fining system were modified, their goals would be achieved. Well pleased, the crowd
insisted that Rowan take the platform. He praised their achievements, promised that the magistrates would arbitrate over disputed fines and persuaded them to include a codicil, which he had previously drafted, when the rates were printed. This disavowed ‘evil-minded persons’ who posted notices, rendered dangerous from the objectives ‘they pretend to aim at’, and, particularly, from ‘the obnoxious and anonymous signature of Tommy Downshire’. Then Rowan recommended that they disperse having got what they wanted, but signified regret that ‘they had met on Shanehill; for, justly or not, it had gained... a very bad name’. He reckoned that the weavers behaved with ‘perfect

85 Notice, 26 Sept. 1842; Rowan to Downshire, 27 Sept. 1842: PRONI, Downshire Papers, D671/C/3/13/2; D671/C/3/15/1; Notice, 3 Oct. 1842, enclosed in Getty to Eliot, 4 Oct. 1842: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (County Down, 1842), 8/19007.
propriety’, that their deference was almost embarrassing ‘as they wished to put their whole case into my hands’. However, beneath the promising appearance, unresolved tensions eddied ominously.

Rowan took the protesters’ deference at face value but failed to see it as tactical. Success ultimately depended on the manufacturers complying with their workers’ demands and co-operating with each other, both unlikely scenarios in a capitalizing, competitive environment. Moreover, although one token manufacturing magistrate accompanied Rowan, many employers clearly remained hostile. Even as Rowan addressed the weavers, in his pocket were the printed resolutions promised at his meeting with manufacturers on 26 September, but only given to him that morning with the loaded injunction to use them or not as he thought fit (see Plate 4). The content was potentially explosive. From the fifteen who had met him (from twenty-one invitations) only ten had signed the resolutions. Rowan prudently concealed these resolutions, which he later sent to Lord Downshire with the marginal note ‘poor comfort’.

These problems manifested themselves in the dispute’s subsequent denouement. Straws in the wind were evident even on the day of the Shane Hill meeting, when the Northern Whig printed an extraordinary letter from a Banbridge damask weaver. This purported to address the ‘working-class movements’, especially the ‘thousands of naked and starving victims . . . congregated by a blast of “Tommy’s Horn”’. The writer noted how threatening letters to manufacturers prevented them giving out work to people like himself. He admitted abuses had crept into the manufacturing system, but such ‘folly’ would not reform them. Instead, the writer tendered his ‘humble services to Tommy’, if moral force replaced threats. The main criticism was directed at landed ‘monopolists’ who, due to the Corn Laws, ‘destroy our trade, impoverish our lovely country . . . foster divisions amongst the people . . . to rob them and . . . protect particular interests’. After some radical rhetoric asserting ‘that the people are the true source of all legitimate power’, he suggested that ‘should Tommy

87 Rowan to Downshire, 15 Oct. 1842: PRONI, Downshire Papers, D671/C/3/21/1.
join me in seeking any just and legal remedy’, he would have ‘the aid of Banbridge Free Trade and Anti-Corn Law Association’ and recommended ‘that Tommy and his Men enrol as members’. This political posturing echoed the 1830 tactics, and again there was a plausible context. In 1841 local radicals had electioneered using the Corn Laws issue, and Lord Downshire supported protection, having as recently as April 1842 voted against amendment of the laws in the House of Lords.88

Similarly, O’Connell’s renewed campaign for repeal of the Union was hinted at in the protests. The repeal campaign was gathering momentum in the economic crisis, and the liberal Protestant Tom Steele was currently touring Ulster to gather support. O’Connellite newspapers claimed that the Armagh and Down weaving districts proved that ‘there are more repealers in Ulster than the foes of Ireland suspect’, while their conservative counterparts represented Steele as a revolutionary firebrand. Placards provocatively dated 8 October (the date of the large Shane Hill meeting) appeared using a ‘political’ language directed at the landed interest. They advertised meetings to discuss ‘equal justice between landlord and tenant, and so by combination of action and moral power we will put a terror to tyrants, by order, Tommy Downshire, God Save the Queen’. Others warned ‘that I, Tommy Downshire will visit all parts in county Down, Antrim and Armagh for to make an amendment in wages and ... lowering rents’.89

Giving protest a political appearance was not the only strategy used. The new law and order dispensation was also ripe for exploitation, especially in its imperfectly forged chain of authority. Resident magistrates could deploy police detachments, but the order to use them in the first place came from the Dublin government, based on information from magistrates, both amateur and professional, and from police commanders. In theory the resident magistrate was a conduit of the government’s orders to use police and an arbiter in their deployment — a heavy responsibility with the cost chargeable to the county. In practice,
however, the convoluted structure could break down. Reacting to a Tommy Downshire notice and without Rowan’s knowledge, the County Down police inspector ordered fifty-two constables and two sub-inspectors to rush to a supposed meeting location between Banbridge and Shane Hill, where they found nothing but a jeering crowd on a neighbouring hill. Rowan was furious that he had not been notified, and that the inspector had acted without any magistrate attending and had fallen victim to a hoax.90 The organizers calculated that, if the authorities were kept reacting to unpredictable but threatening situations, the landed elite or their acolytes would maintain pressure on the manufacturers. Indeed, as these worrying developments continued, Rowan was tentatively soliciting Lord Downshire’s direct intervention.

Noting his patron’s ‘great weight’, and claiming that ‘the late movement, now only required to be kept down’, Rowan suggested that this could be accomplished if Lord Downshire published an address. This should indicate that, though an absentee, he sympathized with the weavers, applauded their moderation but feared that they risked seduction by ‘designing persons’. It should also give assurances that manufacturers would improve rates when trade permitted.91 Rowan had the Newry Telegraph alerted to the impending address. It printed an account applauding the weavers for not impugning their traditional loyalty, despite the ‘agents of mischief’, and stressed that destitute weavers had received alternative employment on Downshire’s estates. However, the report also contained injunctions to manufacturers, particularly those in the ‘coarse’ end of the trade, to increase their wages. The day after the report appeared, the weavers’ committee told Rowan that most of the 140 manufacturers had agreed to increase wages to a satisfactory level and were about to print the list of rates they had promised at the meeting of 8 October.92 However, the process stalled again: the list did not appear until 30 October, when Rowan described the rates as ‘amended’. It only named forty-one manufacturers, plus ten who refused to provide

figures. The *Newry Telegraph* noted its publication but admitted that, for coarse linens, there still remained a ‘considerable difference in the amount paid . . . for weaving the same description of cloth’, although the weavers appeared ‘tolerably’ satisfied because the prices were supposedly permanent.93 The reaction of some weavers’ leaders suggested that they were far from satisfied.

Notices now appeared of a still more lurid political complexion, strongly hinting at repeal and advertising a meeting of weavers of Armagh, Antrim and Down on Shane Hill for Saturday 5 November 1842 where knowledgeable persons would explain ‘why Ireland, once a *Prosperous Nation*, is now an *impoverished Province*, without Trade or Commerce, and deprived of even the rights of a *Conquered Nation*!!!’ This time Rowan did not intervene, but instructed the police to record details. One constable reported that John Mathews, flanked by several ‘decent looking men’, harangued a crowd of eighty ‘of the lower orders’. He told them that he believed that the manufacturers had given all they could afford, that there was nothing for it now but to drive down rents. He reminded them that the 1830 meetings had forced landlords to comply, and vowed that they would ‘again oblige them to reduce their rents’. He proposed fortnightly meetings on Shane Hill and other previously used locations. Affecting more repeal rhetoric, he claimed that ‘Ireland was an impoverished nation’ for which ‘they might thank the British government’. The ‘damask weaver’s letter’ had accused the gentry of trying to ‘foster divisions amongst the people’, and this was now echoed by Mathews, who said that conditions would never improve until ‘a Union of Irishmen of all creeds and sects’ petitioned parliament for a change. The *Newry Telegraph* printed Lord Downshire’s address and reported the meeting, calling Mathews, once described as the leading committee man, ‘a low common weaver’ haranguing a ‘rabble’ in a ‘jargon he supposed to be English’.94

The sudden shift in focus from wages to rents requires explanation. The police observer noted that the crowd’s appearance


94 Notice, n.d. [c.3 Nov. 1842]: PRONI, Downshire Papers, D671/C/3/30/2; Affidavit of McCutcheon, 6 Nov. 1842, enclosed in Rowan to Lucas, 6 Nov. 1842: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (County Down, 1842), 8/20761; *Newry Telegraph*, 8 Nov. 1842.
made it unlikely that they were landholders. As the aim of a standard wage had not been achieved and Lord Downshire’s intervention would probably seal a compromise, it seems that Mathews wanted to shake Rowan into further action. Some took the bait. One policeman noted the ‘striking coincidence’ of a Tommy Downshire notice — ‘this evidently Chartist document’ — paralleling the renewed repeal agitation.95 Rowan wanted to arrest Mathews, then bail him on condition he called no more meetings. Legal opinion advised against creating a martyr, but there was no need. With most weavers satisfied, the political posturing was revealed as a desperate measure. By securing Downshire’s blessing on a settlement, Rowan had split the weavers’ combination, with moderates now disavowing the Shane Hill renegades.96 Aristocratic intervention altered the balance of power; the third marquis of Downshire had trumped Tommy Downshire and forced Mathews to show his hand, revealing the alarm-creation as a bluff.

VI

Taken as a whole, in their apparent trajectory from food riot to industrial strike, the Tommy Downshire protests seem to fit a modernizing Marxist model exemplifying the formation, through struggle, of class awareness. Yet the consistency of contemporary evidence between 1829 and 1842 of the resilience and instrumentality of local protest traditions stretching back well into the eighteenth century suggests otherwise. The harnessing of such traditions reveals them as more resistant to sectarian polarization in the modernizing and politicizing 1790s and their aftermath in the early nineteenth century than was previously thought. Yet the appropriation of the traditional mobilization rituals of both Oakboys and Orangemen was paralleled by distinctly modern protest methods like the organizational sophistication of committees and using the newspaper press for propaganda. At the same time as bonfires blazed on Shane Hill, threatening letters arrived by penny post and notices calling meetings were professionally

95 Jenkins to Downshire, 18 Oct. 1842; Affidavit, 5 Nov. 1842: PRONI, Downshire Papers, D671/C/3/24; D671/C/30/1.
96 Rowan to Lucas, 6 Nov. 1842: NAI, CSORP, Outrage Papers (County Down, 1842), 8/20761; Rowan to Downshire, 9 Nov. 1842: PRONI, Downshire Papers, D671/C/3/29/1.
printed. However, despite signs of modernity, the overall objectives in all three outbreaks were conservative. Although those mobilized by ‘Tommy’s horn’ in 1842 were certainly the impoverished mass of handloom weavers, the few shadowy leaders we know of — John Mathews and the highly literate anti-Corn Law ‘damask weaver’ — fit the 1830 pattern of being higher in the weaving hierarchy than their followers. Yet, though reacting against the disorientating effects of market forces and capitalization in both agriculture and industry, their language of protest reveals little sense of class division.

The first notices in 1830 dubbed grasping landlords and greedy clergymen ‘parties in oppression’, emphasized ‘Liberty’ and often concluded with ‘God Save the King’. Such terms were strongly reminiscent of the popular constitutionalism of the Oakboys, whose 1763 address to George III demanded liberty for the ‘poor, industrious inhabitants’ from landed ‘oppressors of the poor . . . tyrants, worse than the Egyptian task masters that were over the Israelites’. Even in 1842, when the protest’s industrial causes made class divisions possible, the language of tyranny, slavery and liberty used by orators and letter writers was still more reminiscent of eighteenth-century constitutionalism than of class conflict.97 Historians of French labour protest have noticed how the Revolution impacted on rhetoric, with the vocabulary of natural rights giving way to a language invoking trade solidarity and corporate identity.98 The absence of class rhetoric in the highly capitalized mid-Ulster weaving districts suggests that more traditional configurations of social and political relationships still had purchase and reflected shared communal assumptions that crossed class boundaries. The 1840 handloom weavers’ report reveals that, despite occasional grumbling, there were generally good relations between local operatives and manufacturers. One major manufacturer, David Lindsay, amongst the most recalcitrant in 1842, told the commissioners: ‘The demand for labour must regulate its price’. Yet Lindsay began as a small linen buyer,


and must have been personally known to all weavers. Although the organizers purported to spread the combination, the fact was that the grievances, as a linen bleacher told the 1845 Devon Commission, were localized and personal. The protests suggest that market forces, either in land or labour, had not yet eroded an older value system that conflated the economic and the personal. The protesters’ anger, whether against potato exporters in 1829, Hamilton in 1830 or Lindsay in 1842, drew power from the fact that all were conceived to have infringed customary norms.

The protests were therefore both shaped and limited by the area’s particular economic, social and political structure and traditions. British historians of labour protest see local industrial homogeneity, and its background of shared work experience and expectations of relationships between employer and operative, as the essence of community. In Ireland, religion is often assumed to be the bedrock of community. Yet the non-sectarian nature of the Tommy Downshire protests when allied with social memories of cross-sectarian activism suggest that a community based on economic experience, similar to those in English textile districts, existed in this part of Ireland. This is not to say that sectarianism was absent — the infamous ‘wrecking of Maghery’ in 1830 stands as a stark reminder — rather, it suggests that alternative constructs of community could shape collective action, coexist with, and occasionally supplant, religious or political identities. As Blacker discovered, the weavers’ combination could not be divided on sectarian lines if they resisted it. This symbiotic relationship with local structures recalls the protest as a form of local community politics found by John Bohstedt in England and Wales. But localism does not divest Tommy Downshire of broader significance for our knowledge of early nineteenth-century Ireland: the protest’s institutional co-ordinates of Orangeism, the yeomanry and the constabulary police all had wider relevance.

99 Reports from Assistant Hand-Loom Weavers’ Commissioners, Pt III, pp. 637–9; Northern Whig, 8 Oct. 1842; Evidence Taken before Her Majesty’s Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of the Law and Practice in Respect to the Occupation of Land in Ireland [Devon Commission], Pt I, P.P., 1845 (606), xix, pp. 464–7.
100 A sectarian riot which occurred when Armagh Orangemen, having attended a Tommy Downshire meeting to discuss co-operation with Tyrone Catholics, clashed with other Catholics on their return.
Any society capable of accommodating non-sectarian configurations of protest was more resilient to elite manipulation than the ‘divide and rule’ model implicit in a ‘sectarian moral economy’. Moreover, the appropriation of Orange mobilization rituals, the use of yeomanry weapons and the bartering of the district’s law-abiding reputation reveal that institutional loyalism actually empowered the protesters by giving them an ace card guaranteed to jolt the Orange-dominated local magistracy into addressing their grievances. Tommy Downshire shows conclusively that, rather than law-abiding loyalism and common Protestantism helping the gentry past the political dangers of the 1830s and 1840s, seizing control of these factors helped the weavers of all religious denominations adjust to a changed world. Since it is hard to imagine a district where gentry like Blacker were more embroiled with plebeian Orangeism, the wider significance is that generalized Whiggish assumptions about the rise of Unionism must be questioned closely, and local contexts and traditions rigorously scrutinized.

If the protests themselves are revealing about community dynamics, the responses are no less illuminating about the practical implications of policing reforms. The reluctance of the conservative magistrates to cooperate with the constabulary in 1830, when Armagh had 26 Catholic policemen out of 101 officers and men, and Down returned no figures for Catholics, is more suggestive of enduring ideological objections to centrally derived force than O’Connell’s accusations of sectarian partiality. In operational terms, the responses of police commanders acting without local magisterial direction indicate that they adapted intelligently to the various situations. It is notable that, following the 1830 Lurgan riot over the removal of Tommy Downshire notices, this was not attempted again. The coincidence of magistrates’ and protesters’ notices had the divisive potential to highlight contending notions of legitimacy. By learning from their mistake, and sensitively ignoring the letter of the law, the police reduced the likelihood of violent confrontations. This was apparent in the consistency between Griffin’s tactics in 1830 and Rowan’s of 1842: both men invariably kept their main police contingents out of sight of protesting crowds. Although the collective experience of the southern tithe war was also probably

102 A Return of the Constabulary Police in Ireland, P.P., 1833 (379), xxxii, pp. 32–3.
influential, the tactic was nonetheless ideally suited to the limited manpower resources available in Ulster. Ironically the protesters mistook such professionalism for partiality and considered the police as potential allies. Both the police force’s physical disposition and its administrative structures helped shape the protests. As the above figures indicate, the numbers available were small and inevitably stationed in towns and villages. Holding meetings deep in the countryside was deliberate: even though this area contained substantial towns, notably not one protest meeting occurred in an urban setting. From the protesters’ perspective this allowed them to draw the authorities towards them and ensure their cause was noticed, if not by the panic this created, then by the financial cost they could inflict upon the county.

Thus Tommy Downshire’s Boys were a well-organized local combination with an essentially protean nature adaptable to various economic threats to the community. Despite being capable of sophisticated manipulation of opinion and of assuming modern associational structures, essentially the Boys were, and remained, a product of the eighteenth century, preserved and vitalized by the social memory of protest. During the Famine in 1847, after a large protest meeting on Shane Hill about the Lurgan Poor Law Union’s swingeing poor rate, ‘Tommy Downshire’ notices warned: ‘Oppression calls me once more amongst you . . . let no one dare to tear this notice down’.  

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103 Banner of Ulster, 15 Oct. 1847.