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Elizabeth Malcolm

Investigating the “Machinery of Murder”: Irish Detectives and Agrarian Outrages, 1847–70

Policemen in nineteenth-century Ireland were expected to play a variety of roles, for their duties were far more numerous and varied than those usually assigned to the police today. Writing in 1881, a former sub-inspector with seventeen years’ service in the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), whose father had also been a member of the force, claimed that: “Everything in Ireland, from the muzzling of a dog to the suppression of a rebellion, is done by the Irish constabulary.”1 A policeman could be called upon to act at least six major parts: soldier,2 crime prevention officer, political intelligence agent, civil servant, prosecutor, and detective. Admittedly, not all policemen filled all these roles, but the Irish Constabulary was a multipurpose force, with military and civil responsibilities, as well as criminal and judicial ones. Before the 1870s, however, the role of detective was probably the least significant one in the policeman’s repertoire. This may seem strange to the modern observer, especially as there was an almost constant chorus of complaint voiced throughout the century in both Ireland and England at the supposedly high levels of Irish crime.3

Lamenting the failure of historians to concern themselves with the detective role of Irish policemen, K.T. Hoppen, as long ago as 1984, called for “urgent investigation,” while at the same time acknowledging that detectives had not been used extensively nor very successfully. He offered some tentative reasons for the apparent failure of detectives to combat Irish agrarian crime in particular:

1. H. A. Blake, “The Irish Police,” The Nineteenth Century, IX, 48 (February, 1881), 390. The research for this article was made possible by grants from the Economic and Social Research Council, the British Academy, and the Leverhulme Trust.
2. The Irish Constabulary, which became the Royal Irish Constabulary in 1867, was modeled on a light infantry regiment and some of its duties, such as keeping public order and suppressing popular unrest, required military skills. See Elizabeth Malcolm, “From Light Infantry to Constabulary: the Military Origins of the Irish Police, 1798–1859,” The Irish Sword, XXI, 84 (Winter, 1998), 163–75.

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The early police detectives of the 1840s . . . were not notably successful in penetrating agrarian secret societies. Known as "disposable men" because of public hostility towards "any approach to a system of espionage", their numbers gradually increased and by the 1860s their activities were producing some useful arrests and helping to counter the constant complaints that the constabulary's essentially military style of operation stood in the way of sophisticated detection techniques. It was, however, only when formal "secret" societies such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood . . . appeared on the scene, that spies, informers and detectives ever had much success.4

To test some of Hoppen's assertions, and especially to assess the work of the Irish Constabulary's detectives in investigating agrarian crime during the 1850s and 1860s, we need to establish why the Constabulary introduced detectives in the 1840s; to look at the regulations under which they operated; to identify who they were; and, finally, to examine in some detail actual cases investigated in order to understand the problems faced by the early detectives and how successful they were in overcoming these.

The first British detective force was established in London in 1842. The commissioners of the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) began to introduce a similar force, known as G Division, later in the same year and completed their arrangements in 1843.5 It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the Oxford English Dictionary dates the first use of the term "detective police" to the year 1843. The London and Dublin forces were very small and they at first attracted a good deal of criticism and opposition.6 In their early years both were largely engaged in the apprehension of thieves and the recovery of stolen property, for which tasks they quickly demonstrated considerable aptitude and thus eventually won public acceptance.7

5. Although there is a significant body of secondary literature dealing with the London Metropolitan Police's detective branch—which in 1878 became the Criminal Investigation Department (CID)—nothing like the same amount of attention has been paid to either English provincial or Irish detective forces. The Dublin force is described in Jim Herlihy, The Dublin Metropolitan Police: A Short History and Genealogical Guide (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), pp. 122–53. For another short account, see Nigel Cochrane, "The Policing of Dublin, 1830–46: a Study in Administration" (M.A. diss., National University of Ireland, 1984), pp. 82–86.
7. Return of Persons Convicted on Charges Made by Constables of the G Division from 24 October 1842 to 31 July 1845 (NAI, CSORP, 1845/P.17880).
The Irish Constabulary, which at this time largely policed rural areas—that is, the country outside Dublin, Belfast, and Londonderry—and did not establish its own detective force until 1847. But the Constabulary’s detectives operated under a different name and also a very different system of organization from their London and Dublin counterparts. These differences largely reflected the widespread contemporary belief that public hostility towards detectives was particularly intense in rural Ireland. The possibility of adding a detective branch to the Constabulary had apparently been considered when the force was restructured in 1836. But in a letter to the home secretary about policing matters in 1864, the Irish lord lieutenant explained that detectives had been “studiously excluded” in 1836, for fear that “any approach to the system of espionage would revolt the public” and might possibly even “endanger the existence of the [Constabulary] itself.”

Thus, while the term “detective police” may have entered the language in the 1840s, during the 1850s and 1860s Irish Constabulary detectives went by the name “disposable men.” They were “disposable,” not in the sense that they were expendable, but in the sense that they could be disposed, or assigned, to either detective or non-detective duties. In other words, unlike London or Dublin detectives, disposable men were only part-time detectives. The Irish Constabulary in this regard was more akin to English provincial police forces, which were also slow to establish permanent detective branches and initially employed ordinary constables on temporary detective duties.

Colonel Duncan McGregor, inspector-general of the Irish Constabulary from 1838 to 1858, claimed in January, 1848, that he had favored the introduction of detectives from the time he took command of the force. Prior to 1847, however, detective investigations in rural Ireland appear to have been conducted by DMP inspectors, dressed in plain clothes and engaged on what were officially termed “special duties.” In 1840, for example, Inspector James Mullins of the DMP, who was an Englishman, posed as a Ribbonman from Manchester in

8. The Irish Constabulary took over the policing of Belfast in 1865 and of Londonderry in 1870, but Dublin maintained its own separate force until 1925.
9. Lord Carnarvon to Sir George Grey, 26 March 1864 (NLI, Larcom Papers, MS 7619/18). Hereafter cited as Larcom MS.
12. Notes by Colonel Duncan McGregor, 1 January 1848 (Larcom MS 7617/3); Memo by McGregor, 10 December 1847 (NAI, OPMA, 145/8).
order to secure the arrest of a group of Leitrim Ribbonmen.13 In 1845, Fermanagh magistrates praised the exertions of Inspector Benjamin Tydd of the DMP, who had been called in to investigate the attempted murder of one of their number. The magistrates’ letter to Tydd’s superiors declared that “his services would be more valuable . . . than the entire constabulary force of this county.”14 McGregor’s support for the introduction of disposable men may well have partly resulted from a dislike of DMP officers trespassing on his territory.

The actual initiative for the establishment of a Constabulary detective force came, not from McGregor however, but from Lord de Ros (1797–1874), who was the premier baron of England (a titled created in 1264) and an army general with a strong interest in Irish affairs.15 He discussed the subject with McGregor during the summer of 1846 and secured the lord lieutenant’s approval in December of that year. De Ros’s original plan was to have “a reserve of police expressly to pursue murders . . . always in readiness in Dublin . . . selected from the sharpest and more discreet constables,” who could be dispatched as “detective assistants” to wherever a murder had occurred or was threatened. Later he said he had envisaged a force of about one hundred men, under their own officers, intended to break what he termed the “machinery of murder.”16

McGregor grudgingly acknowledged that de Ros’s intervention had been crucial in getting the government to accept the idea of Constabulary detectives, but it is clear that he resented the interference and was not convinced of the

13. This incident gave rise to a scandal in 1844–45 when a sacked DMP sergeant, John Flint, claimed in a book that Mullins had taken a Ribbon oath in order to infiltrate the group and had provoked the men into illegal actions. William Carleton’s novel, Rody the Rover, or the Ribbonman, which was published in 1845, may well have drawn upon this incident for its plot. John Flint, The Dublin Police, and the Police System (Dublin: James McCormick, 1847); James Mullins to the DMP Commissioners, 11 November 1845 (NAI, CSORP, 1845/P.17880); Freeman’s Journal, 6 November 1845; The Nation, 8 November 1845.

14. William D’Arcy and H.W. Barton to the DMP Commissioners, 12 December 1845 (NAI, CSORP, 1845/P.17744). A recent examination of this case argues that the magistrates were anxious to exclude the Constabulary from the investigation and to introduce an outsider, over whom they could exercise greater control, because Barton had been shot by Protestant tenants—not Catholics as claimed—who were enraged at the sexual advances he was making to their wives. J. B. Cunningham, “The Investigation into the Attempted Assassination of folliot Warren Barton near Pettigo on 31 October 1845”, Clougher Record, XIII, 3 (1990), 125–45.

15. The title he inherited from his mother’s family; on his father’s side he was a Fitzgerald and a grandson of the first duke of Leinster. Despite his military rank, he had seen little active service. Appointed quartermaster-general during the Crimean War, he performed poorly, was invalided home, and ended his career in the ceremonial post of governor of the Tower of London. E.M. Spiers, The Army and Society, 1815–1914 (London and New York: Longman, 1980), p. 99.

16. McGregor to Lord Clarendon, 28 January 1848 (Larcom MS 7617/6); Lord de Ros, Suggestions for Improving the Patrol System in Ireland, 15 December 1847 (Larcom MS 7617/2); de Ros, Note upon the Irish Constabulary Force, February 1857 (Larcom MS 7617/8).
practicality of the particular scheme de Ros was proposing. Instead, he suggested that, rather than having the force based in Dublin “where they would live in idleness and lose their experience for want of practice,” four or five men, noted for their “respectability and ingenuity in tracing crime,” should be selected in each county for detective duty. On the “occurrence of any heinous outrage” they would “proceed in disguise to the scene of the crime, and endeavour by every legitimate means to discover the perpetrators.” When not employed on such duty, they would serve as ordinary constables in their respective districts. De Ros endorsed McGregor’s proposals and they formed the basis of the disposable force for the next twenty years.17

Unfortunately, the documents that survive relating to the introduction of disposable men are few and leave many questions unanswered. Nevertheless, they do offer some valuable insights. What is particularly striking is the tentativeness of McGregor’s approach. In 1848 he characterized the introduction of detectives as an “experiment . . . on a small scale.” He was, he went on, “anxious” that this experiment should go ahead, but “with much caution and under many limitations.” If it was not attended with the “monstrous evils which are supposed, by some, to be inherent in such a body,” then he would be ready to enlarge the force, extend its powers, and make it a “distinct branch of the constabulary establishment.”18 In fact, disposable men were to wait many years for an enlargement of their numbers and an increase in their powers. Anxiety, caution, and a fear of “monstrous evils” were to characterize the attitudes of successive inspectors-general, among others, to the employment of detectives in rural Ireland.

In terms of the origins of the disposable force, there remains the question of why it was established in the late 1840s. De Ros, in his correspondence, referred specifically to a need to combat rural homicides. Yet, historians of crime during the Famine have drawn attention to a shift in the late 1840s away from crimes against the person and the peace to crimes against property.19 In the five years 1841–45, 23 percent of serious crimes were against the person, 41 percent against the peace, and 36 percent against property. But in the five years 1846–50, the same proportions were 11 percent, 20 percent and 69 percent.20 In other

17 Notes by McGregor, 1 January 1848 (Larcom MS 7617/2), de Ros to McGregor, 23 January 1848 (Larcom MS 7617/4).
18 Notes by McGregor, 1 January 1848 (Larcom MS 7617/3).
20 Return of Outrages Reported to the Constabulary Office in Ireland during the Year 1860, with Summaries for Preceding Years (NAI, CSORP, 1861/7273) These figures refer to “specially reported” or serious offences, not to the more narrowly-defined “agrarian outrages”. For a helpful discussion of Irish crime statistics, which were based on “uncertain criteria, uncertainly applied,” see Hoppen, Elections, Politics and Society in Ireland, pp 362–64.
words, during the Famine, the proportion of serious crimes against property nearly doubled. In discussing such figures, Stanley Palmer aptly remarked that: “Rural distress of unprecedented severity was turning Ireland into a nation of common thieves.”

Why, then, should de Ros believe in 1846 that a specialist homicide squad was most needed? This apparent anomaly is explained by the fact that the aggregated figures mask important contrary trends. With regard to homicide, there was in fact a 45 percent increase in the three years 1844–47, as compared to the three years 1840–43. The disposable force was established at a time when the authorities were alarmed by a major jump in the homicide rate. Moreover, the shift during the Famine toward crimes against property was to prove only temporary. In the five years 1855–59, crimes against the person composed 35 percent of serious crime, against the peace 21 percent, and against property 44 percent. Thus, by the late 1850s, crimes against the person constituted a more substantial problem than they had before the Famine.

Before assessing the work of the Irish Constabulary’s detectives during the 1850s and 1860s by examining specific cases, it is necessary to establish how they operated and exactly who they were. The former task is comparatively easy, but the latter is much more difficult.

The second edition of the Constabulary’s rules and regulations, published in 1860, specified that not more than six experienced constables should be “allotted to the service of a disposable police” in each county. The bases for the selection of such men were to be “respectability, intelligence, and tact in the detection of crime.” The need for intelligence is understandable, but the emphasis on respectability and tact highlights the difficult and sensitive nature of much detective work. Disposable men had to be trustworthy, as most of their activities were conducted independently, without close supervision. They had to be capable of winning the confidence of their social superiors, as they often needed the cooperation of Constabulary officers, magistrates, landlords, and clergy.

When on detective duties, disposable men were required to wear plain clothes. The 1860 regulations also specified that they were not to have their hair

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22. *Return of Outrages Reported to the Royal Irish Constabulary Office, from 1st January 1844 to 31st December 1880*, p. 26 [C 2756], H.C. 1881, lxxvii, 912.
cut short in the usual police fashion, nor were they to wear moustaches as many policemen then did. The Irish Constabulary largely recruited its men from the small-farming and rural-laboring classes. One might suppose, therefore, that such men could have passed easily in rural Ireland without attracting attention. But this was clearly not the case; the inability of disposable men to switch convincingly in their external demeanor from being policemen back to being countrymen was to prove a major obstacle to their success.

Their critics alleged, for instance, that they walked in a distinctive way due to the influence of the army drill that formed a large part of the Irish Constabulary’s paramilitary training. In 1871, a grand juror told a committee investigating Ribbonism in Westmeath: “A man comes down with his hair cut short behind, and his very walk is recognised at the end of a mile upon the road.” Indeed, even the RIC’s inspector-general admitted before the same committee that detectives were more effective in towns, for, in rural Ireland, “whenever a stranger goes into the country, the children of eight or ten years will say: ‘Bedad, that’s a paler [peeler].’”

Under Constabulary regulations, disposable men were required to report their presence to the sub-inspector of the district in which they were operating. But Constabulary officers appear on the whole to have regarded cooperation with constables in detective work as beneath their dignity. A court official in Westmeath, critical of the military character of the police, said of the officers that “they assume all the airs and importance of officers of the line ... they do not consider themselves as detective or preventative officers.” Sub-inspector Henry Blake argued before an inquiry into the RIC in 1873 that the force’s officers should be gentlemen and recruited separately from the rank-and-file, as were army officers. If promoted constables came to dominate the officer ranks, Blake feared “the detective energies and detective ideas” of such men would exclude prevention and “you would have the force officered and guided by a lower form of intelligence.” Blake’s views were typical of those of many gentleman officers, and indeed of many landlords and politicians, who were deeply uneasy at the prospect of rank-and-file policemen being given extensive investigative powers and allowed to exercise them in disguise and with little control from their superiors.

25. Ibid., p. 74/630.
26. Blake left the Constabulary in 1876 to become an RM and in 1884 embarked upon a new career as a colonial governor. Report of the Commissioners Appointed . . . to Enquire into . . . the Royal Irish Constabulary, p. 97 [C 831], H.C. 1873, xxxii, 227.
27. See, for example, G. G. Green, In the Royal Irish Constabulary (London: James Blackwood, n.d.), p. 24.
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The Constabulary’s 1860 regulations instructed constables to “afford every possible information and assistance” to detectives, but—as the latter were ordered not to acquaint the former with their presence—it is not at all clear how such cooperation was to be achieved. There were, in fact, instances of disposable men being arrested by local constables who regarded them as suspicious characters.28 Like many officers, constables, too, appear to have resented detective intervention. In an unpublished memoir describing police service in the 1880s, a sergeant wrote that “ordinary police . . . regarded these detectives . . . as more likely to bring trouble upon them, than help” for they encouraged the popular belief that policemen acted as spies.29

Magistrates, both stipendiary and voluntary, also often exhibited a marked aversion to detectives. Some complained that they were not made aware of a detective investigating a case in their area; others maintained that they could easily recognize a disposable man by his appearance and bearing even when not officially informed of his presence. Either way, many magistrates resented detectives, considering that detectives usurped the traditional investigative role of their office.30

Lists of members of the disposable force were apparently kept in the inspector-general’s office in Dublin Castle, but none of these lists have survived. The main source of Constabulary personnel information today is the force’s general register, which covers the period 1816 to 1822. This lists the career details of some 85,000 men.31 Unfortunately, detective service was not recorded in register entries and so it is impossible to study the membership of the disposable force in any systematic manner. What is possible is the identification of a small number of men who served as detectives in the early years.

Lists of men rewarded and punished were produced quarterly by the inspector-general’s office for internal use. Some of these lists survive and during the 1850s and 1860s disposable men appearing on them were identified by the letter “D” placed in brackets after their names.32 This group can be supplemented by names found in correspondence concerning major agrarian outrages in the chief secretary’s registered papers, as occasionally the names of disposable men sent to investigate are given. Using both the Constabulary’s records and the chief secretary’s letters, it is possible to identify thirty-eight disposable

28. Carlisle to Grey, 26 March 1864 (Larcom MS 7619/18).
31. General Report of the RIC, 1816–1922 (PRO(L), HO 184/1–48). The DMP register, which is held in the Garda Síochána Museum in Dublin Castle, does record service in G Division and so a systematic study of Dublin detectives should be possible.
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men. Obviously, assuming that four to six men were appointed for each county between 1847 and 1870, this can only be a fraction of the total number who served. Nor does this number have any pretensions to being a representative sample, having been collected haphazardly rather than randomly. Nevertheless, given the inadequacies of the sources, this group is all that can be found and, despite its obvious shortcomings, it does yield valuable insights into the composition and experiences of Ireland’s first national detective force.

Perhaps the simplest way of presenting a statistical analysis of this sample of disposable men is to create a composite portrait of a typical Irish Constabulary detective of the period 1847–70. By comparing this portrait with information on constables appointed between 1837 and 1860, it should be possible to establish in what ways disposable men differed from their non-detective colleagues.33

A disposable man, typical of the sample, would have joined the Constabulary in 1838 at the age of twenty-one years. He would have been five feet, eight inches tall and would have come from a small-farming or rural-laboring background. He may well have worked for several years as a laborer on his father’s farm before applying to become a policeman. He would have been literate, but probably had not ventured much beyond his birthplace. He was most likely to have been born in Leinster, for that province provided 40 percent of the detectives in the sample.

He might have been either a Catholic or a Protestant. In terms of religious affiliation, disposable men were significantly different from the rank-and-file of the Constabulary. In 1871, only 30 percent of constables were Protestants, but 45 percent of the sample of detectives belonged to one of the Protestant churches. This partly reflects the fact that many detectives were head constables, for in 1871, 49 percent of head constables were Protestants. While the overwhelming majority of constables were Catholics at this time, Protestants were much more numerous in the higher ranks. For instance, during the 1850s and 1860s, nearly 80 percent of officers were Protestants.34 Problems could arise when Protestant detectives were sent to investigate crimes in the overwhelmingly Catholic south and west of Ireland. As well as having to disguise their military bearing, detectives sometimes faced the additional task of passing themselves off as Catholics. We know that they could not hide their military training

33. The information on constables appointed between 1837 and 1860 is drawn from a database of more than 7,000 officers and men, representing a 10 percent random sample of those who joined the Constabulary between 1837 and 1922. For an analysis of this database, see W. J. Lowe and E. L. Malcolm, “The Domestication of the Royal Irish Constabulary, 1836–1912,” Irish Economic and Social History, XIX (1992), 27–48.

34. Report of the Commissioners Appointed . . . to Enquire into . . . the Royal Irish Constabulary, p. 152/282.
and, although evidence is lacking, it is a fair assumption that in many instances their pretended Catholicism was equally unconvincing.

A typical disposable man from this sample would have married about eleven years after his appointment, when he was in his early thirties. He would have served nine years as a sub-constable before being promoted constable, and a further eleven years before reaching the rank of head constable, second class, around the age of forty. Most detectives did not progress beyond this rank, but nearly one quarter, after twenty-six years’ service, reached head constable, first class—the highest non-officer rank in the Constabulary. Three of the men in the sample achieved the then-rare distinction of being promoted into the officer corps as a sub-inspector, third class.

The sample’s typical disposable man would have served in three counties during the course of his career. He would have received five commendations and two fines or reprimands. With regard to punishments, detectives appear to have infringed the regulations as frequently as non-detectives. As regards rewards, however, disposable men received significantly more than other policemen. This is probably partly a reflection of the fact that they tended to serve longer than their colleagues; in addition, detective duties gave them more opportunities to win commendations.

One of the most striking features of disposable men is the length of their careers. Fully 82 percent of the sample served thirty years or more in the Constabulary; only one man served less than twenty years. This contrasts markedly with non-detective constables. During the 1850s and 1860s, only about 10 percent of them served more than twenty years. More precisely, the typical detective in the sample would have served thirty-two years in all, retiring in 1870 aged fifty-three, on a pension of £50 to £60 pounds per annum.

But by no means all detectives retired on pensions in their early fifties; some came to rather more dramatic ends. Nearly 18 percent of the sample died while still in the force. Two of these men succumbed to respiratory disorders. Pneumonia, bronchitis, and asthma took a heavy toll on the Constabulary generally, as men were obliged to be out in all weathers, sometimes for long periods, without proper food or a change of clothes. This was likely to be even more true of men on detective duties. One disposable man died of a liver disease, while another left the Constabulary diagnosed as insane. Unfortunately, the surviving records are not detailed enough to allow any exploration of breakdowns possibly brought on by work stresses, but — given the nature of detective duties in rural Ireland at midcentury — it would be surprising if some men did not crack under the strain.

In general, then, disposable men were recruited from among long-serving head constables, who were recognized as the backbone of the Constabulary. It
was such men, who, having proved their qualities after twenty years’ police service, were considered to have the necessary respectability, intelligence, and tact to undertake the difficult and dangerous job of investigating serious crime in rural Ireland.

When examining agrarian outrages, particularly homicides, between 1847 and 1870 what is perhaps most striking is how infrequently disposable men were employed. Investigations were generally conducted by resident magistrates (RMs), working sometimes with local magistrates, and assisted by the Constabulary sub-inspector in whose district the crime had occurred.

In the early 1860s, when there was growing alarm at the levels of agrarian crime and much criticism of the inappropriate military character of the Constabulary, Sir Henry Brownrigg, inspector-general from 1858 to 1865 took the unusual step of publishing in booklet form a report defending his force. In it, he extolled the virtues of disposable men, describing them as “always ready to mount the frieze, to assume the short pipe, to converse (many of them) in the Irish language... yet... strictly cautioned against anything like a system of espionage.” The use of the word “espionage” indicates the continuing fear of detectives being regarded as spies and agents provocateur. But even Brownrigg’s suggestion that detectives could pass as countrymen if they wore a frieze coat, smoked a clay pipe, and spoke Irish is not convincing. More than ten years earlier, in 1852, when giving evidence before a select committee investigating outrages, Brownrigg, then the deputy inspector-general, was much less sanguine about the success of undercover detectives. He told the committee that disposable men had been sent in recent times to parts of Armagh, Monaghan, Down, and Louth, where there had been an upsurge in crimes connected with Ribbonism. They had collected information, on the basis of which some prosecutions had been launched. But Brownrigg conceded that such duty was “extremely difficult as well as... very hazardous,” for all the men had eventually been recognized as detectives and some had been threatened. Convinced that Ribbonism was promoted by publicans “to put money into their pockets,” Brownrigg argued that restrictive licensing laws would be more effective in stamping it out than the dispatch of detectives.

Pubs and also railway stations were, in fact, important locations for detective work. Disposable men often spent long periods of time in pubs watching the comings and goings and listening to the conversations. This was because, as Brownrigg suggested, publicans were suspected of being involved in much

35. H. J. Brownrigg, Examination of Some Recent Allegations Concerning the Constabulary Force of Ireland, in a Report to His Excellency the Lord Lieutenant (Dublin: Alexander Thom, 1864), p. 21
agrarian crime, their houses being used, with or without their knowledge, for Ribbon meetings. One knowledgeable observer commented in 1862 that the success of Father Mathew's teetotal crusade in the 1840s had constituted a significant obstacle to detective investigation as disposable men obtained most of their information in pubs or from drunken men. That liver disease was an occupational hazard for Irish detectives is, thus, hardly surprising. With the rapid expansion of the Irish railway network in the 1850s and 1860s, railway stations also became important information-gathering centres. In some instances detectives were even employed as porters by railway companies so that they could more easily monitor the movements of people and goods. Companies did not always cooperate, however, with the Constabulary, fearing a loss of business if it was known that their stations were detective haunts. 

That disposable men were not used extensively to investigate rural homicides during the 1850s and 1860s is understandable. It was difficult for them to operate without being recognized and they aroused a good deal of popular hostility. Even within the Constabulary itself, from the inspector-general down through the officer ranks to lowly sub-constables, they faced skepticism and sometimes outright opposition. Yet, the question remains: when they were employed, how effective did they prove to be?

County Westmeath was considered at midcentury one of the most disturbed counties in Ireland; "arguably the most notorious ribbon county before the famine and the centre of ribbonism in Ireland in the post-famine decades," as one historian has characterized it. In 1871, a select committee was appointed specifically to investigate Ribbonism in Westmeath. Two murders that took place in this county during the late 1850s illustrate well the problems associated with the use of disposable men in rural Ireland.

In February, 1858, while returning home with his wife and son from the market in Kilbeggan, Edward Kelly, a prosperous tenant farmer, was shot dead by two men. Kelly had rented some conacre land from which the previous tenants had been evicted and, as a consequence, his life had been threatened. He ignored the threats. Immediately after the murder, the local RM, John Cronin, wrote to Under-Secretary Thomas Larcom in Dublin Castle explaining that, though he

38. For details of the growth of the railway network, see Thom's Directory (Dublin: Alexander Thom, 1868), p. 807.
39. For the refusal of a company to employ an undercover detective in Meath in 1874-75, see Sub-Inspector Henry McCormack to inspector-general, 16 November 1874; William Byrne, RM, to under-secretary, 27 January and 13 February 1875 (NAI, CSORP, 1875/319).
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had been “unable to obtain any clue as to the assassins,” he suspected who were the “concoctors” of the murder, and he requested that extra police be dispatched to the Kilbeggan area under the 1847 Crime and Outrage Act (11 & 12 Vict., c.2). According to the punitive terms of this act, these constables had to be paid for by the townlands in which they were stationed. Cronin argued that the imposition of such an onerous tax on the community was “the only way to extract information regarding the murderers.”41

Nicholas Kelly, who replaced Cronin as RM in March, 1858, expressed optimism on his appointment that the culprits would soon be found. But, when no progress had been made by April, the attorney-general suggested that “some active detective officer” should be sent to Kilbeggan to look for clues. Kelly strongly opposed this move, claiming that his own “personal enquiry” was making progress and pleading in justification of his apparent lack of success that “there is a very general sympathy with the murderers.” By August he was telling Larcom that he knew who the murderers were, but had been unable thus far to obtain sufficient evidence to allow an arrest. In August, 1858, and again in March, 1859, the inhabitants of the townlands subjected to the police tax petitioned for the withdrawal of the extra men. Kelly urged that they be retained, “so long as the murderers of Edward Kelly . . . remain undetected.”42

In November, 1858, Edward Kelly’s land, including the disputed conacre, was rented by Thomas Jessop, who was offered police protection. Jessop agreed that several constables could use a house on his land as a barrack, rent free. But he subsequently had an argument with Nicholas Kelly, the RM, about the house and asked for the police to be withdrawn. In April, 1859, on his way home from Kilbeggan, Jessop was shot in the back. Despite his serious wound, he chased the gunman some distance along the road. Failing to catch him, he then proceeded to walk the quarter of a mile to his house. There he died a week later. During that time, however, he was able to give the RM a detailed account of the attack and a good description of his assailant.43

The murderer had evaded Jessop by climbing over a stone wall at the side of the road and escaping across a field. In doing so, however, he had left clear footprints beside the wall, and these were found by the police to match a pair of shoes belonging to James Gorry. Kelly informed Dublin Castle that Gorry was the brother of an employee of a Kilbeggan publican, Patrick Ryan. It was members of the Ryan family who had been evicted from the disputed conacre. Kelly

41. John Cronin, RM, to under-secretary, 7 and 10 February 1858 (NAI, CSORP, 1864/19795).
42. Nicholas Kelly, RM, to under-secretary, 30 March 1858; Memo by Attorney-General Hayes, 6 April 1858; Kelly to chief secretary, 20 April 1858; Kelly to Larcom, 10 August 1858 and 23 March 1859, ibid.
43. Statement by Thomas Jessop before Kelly, 4 May 1859; Kelly to Larcom, 1 May 1859, ibid.
claimed that Pat Ryan was “universally believed to have been the instigator of the assassinations of Edward Kelly and Thomas Jessop.” But believing in Pat Ryan’s guilt was one thing; finding sufficient evidence to prove it was another.

The evidence of Gorry’s shoes at first seemed promising, but Gorry’s employer, a local farmer, firmly maintained that Gorry was threshing in his barn at the time of the shooting. Kelly told Larcom that he was employing “confidential persons” in order to collect evidence against both James Gorry and Pat Ryan. In other words, he had informers working for him. Gorry’s alibi, however, proved unshakeable. As for Ryan, when a threatening letter was sent in June 1859 to Jessop’s father-in-law, ordering him to remove his daughter from the disputed land or he would “get a physic that thee won’t suddenly digest,” Kelly was convinced that it had been written by Pat Ryan. He surreptitiously secured examples of Ryan’s handwriting for the purposes of comparison, but the results were inconclusive.44

Finally, in June, 1859, nearly eighteen months after Kelly’s murder and two months after Jessop’s, Inspector-General Brownrigg dispatched a disposable man, Constable Thomas Talbot, to Kilbeggan. Talbot posed as a peddler, calling himself “John Kelly.” He visited Tyrrellspass, Moate, Tullamore, and Horse-leap, presumably to establish his credentials as an itinerant trader, before taking lodgings in Kilbeggan. From a pub there he wrote to Brownrigg: “Ribbonism is so strong here . . . that I have to proceed very cautious[ly].” He was, he explained, seeking to “gain the confidence” of Ribbonmen as he was convinced that Ribbonism was at the “root” of the Kelly and Jessop murders. He believed that both had been “concocted” in Kilbeggan. Moreover, there was a danger of another murder, as he had heard threats uttered against a man named Michael Ryan, who was grazing his animals on Jessop’s former holding. Talbot recommended that Ryan be given police protection. Detective work in Kilbeggan was clearly difficult, however, for Talbot complained that he could not even “get a place to write in, as every movement here is so well watched.”45 His difficulties must have been insurmountable, as he did not solve the Kelly-Jessop murders.

In September, 1859, RM Kelly informed Dublin Castle that Jessop’s murderer had escaped to the United States. He said that he had received this news from an informer whom he had to meet at night in an isolated spot, “such is the feeling of fear and intimidation on the part of the people about giving information.”46

44. Information of Acting Constable James McDonagh before Kelly, 6 May 1859; Kelly to Larcom, 8 May, 2 and 4 June 1859, ibid.
45. Constable Thomas Talbot to inspector-general, 13 June 1859, ibid.
46. Kelly to Larcom, 13 September 1859, ibid.
A.C. Murray, in an article about Westmeath, published in 1986 and subtitled the “myth of ribbonism,” argued that the idea of an extensive underground secret society in the county fermenting murder for political ends was an “illusion,” created by magistrates and police to cover up “their almost complete failure to apprehend agrarian criminals, most notably murderers.” In Murray’s view, the Westmeath murderers were not nationalists, but “rural gangsters,” enforcing a “customary agrarian code” of justice.47

That magistrates and police, and also detectives, were ineffectual and, in many cases, incompetent is unarguable. Obtaining information from the public was extremely difficult. Fear and intimidation doubtless played a part in preventing cooperation with the authorities, but there was also a good deal of sympathy for those who opposed eviction, even by violent means. On the other hand, divisions among magistrates, police, and detectives made difficult investigations infinitely more difficult. We have already seen that the Kilbeggan RM, Nicholas Kelly, opposed the use of a detective shortly after the first murder. Kelly’s relations with the Constabulary appear to have been a problem in general. In September, 1859, the county inspector for Westmeath, H.B. Hill, who was based in Mullingar, wrote to the inspector-general requesting an inquiry into relations between Kelly and the local sub-inspector, James Healy, as “it is impossible that the onerous and important duties of the Kilbeggan district can be carried out in the proper spirit of justice, so long as matters remain as they are between the resident magistrate and Mr Healy.”

The two men had clashed bitterly and publicly at petty sessions in Kilbeggan and their feud partly arose out of differences over the conduct of the Kelly-Jessop murder investigation. Healy was convinced that a man named James Mulhall had shot Jessop and he dispatched detectives to King’s County in search of Mulhall and tried to pressure friends of Mulhall’s into supplying information. Kelly did issue a warrant for Mulhall’s arrest, but at the same time he was furious with Healy for acting without consulting him, for he regarded himself as in charge of the case. In the same month that Hill complained to Brownrigg, Healy wrote to him announcing that Mulhall had escaped to America, and that his fare had been paid by Pat Ryan.48 Healy, who joined the Constabulary as a sub-constable in 1832, had himself served as a detective in England in 1848 before being promoted into the officer ranks. Thus, he probably considered himself more capable than Kelly. But arguing with a magistrate in public was an of-

48. Kelly reported to Larcom the escape of the assassin at the same time and, although he did not name him, presumably he was referring to Mulhall. Kelly, and Healy appear then to have agreed as to the suspect, but differed over how to apprehend him and particularly who should apprehend him.
fence under Constabulary regulations. Healy was “seriously admonished” and transferred to Tipperary for “disrespectful conduct towards a magistrate.”

Clashes between sub-inspectors and RMSS were not uncommon, as their respective duties were not clearly differentiated, but, as in this case, such clashes could jeopardize an investigation. In addition, public spats between inspectors and magistrates were hardly calculated to encourage a reluctant population to give information to the authorities.

In September, 1859, Kelly recommended the withdrawal of the twenty-three extra policemen imposed on the Kilbeggan area. Trying to salvage something positive from two unsolved murders, he told Larcom he was “quite sure that the example made here . . . will be productive of much good hereafter.” This was clearly wishful thinking, however, for while there had been two homicides in Westmeath in 1858, in 1859 there were six. John Willcocks, the RM at Tullamore, just across the border from Kilbeggan, in King’s County, had much less confidence than Kelly in paramilitary policemen, for he told Larcom in December, 1859, that most of the murders committed in the area were carried out on the orders of one or two people: “There are no armed parties seen traversing the country, or attacks made upon houses at nights, therefore it is more a detective than a physical force that is required.”

Kelly was replaced as Kilbeggan RM early in 1860 by E.B. Warburton, who appears to have agreed with Willcocks’s views, for he quickly brought in a disposable man to undertake further inquiries into the Jessop murder. This was Head Constable John Carolan, one of the most experienced of all the Constabulary’s detectives. In his first report to Brownrigg in May, 1860, Carolan said he believed a man named Claffy, a relative by marriage of Pat Ryan’s, may have played a role in the conspiracy to murder Jessop. Claffy had talked to Jessop in Kilbeggan on the day of the shooting and delayed his return home. Possibly this was in order to give the assassin time to get into position. Yet Carolan admitted that he could not “say whether this information is true or false.” No action was taken against Claffy and Carolan’s investigation proved fruitless. But in July, 1864, he was back in Kilbeggan, again investigating the case, this time at the instigation of William Morris Reade, Warburton’s successor as RM. Carolan re-

49. County Inspector H.B. Hill to inspector-general, 19 September 1859; Sub-Inspector James Healy to inspector-general, 15 September 1859; Kelly to Larcom, 10 September 1859 (NAI, CSORP, 184/1795); General Register of the RIC (PRO(L), HO 184/45, p.164); inspector-general to chief secretary, 15 April 1848 (NAI, CSORP, 1848/L.431).

50. For an earlier clash that had serious repercussions, see Elizabeth Malcolm, “The Reign of Terror in Carlow: the Politics of Policing Ireland in the Late 1830s,” Irish Historical Studies, XXXII, 125 (May, 2000), 59–74.

51. Kelly to Larcom, 13 September 1859; John Willcocks, RM, to Larcom, 12 December 1859 (NAI, CSORP, 1864/1795).
ported that he had been given the name of a man who it was claimed was present at Jessop’s shooting. As in 1860, however, there was insufficient evidence to justify a prosecution.52 Those who murdered Kelly and Jessop and those who planned the killings were never apprehended. This was far from an unusual outcome. There were forty homicides in Westmeath between January, 1848, and March, 1871, but during those twenty-three years only four persons were convicted of murder in the county.53

The Kelly-Jessop case exemplifies many aspects of agrarian homicide during the immediate post-Famine period. The murders arose out of disputes over land holding. There is no evidence that a political conspiracy in the form of Ribbonism was involved, although frustrated magistrates and police were convinced that they were grappling with a sinister underground organization. The victims were tenant farmers, who had been threatened before their murders and probably knew who was behind the threats. Yet both refused police protection. The authorities quickly identified the suspected instigator of the killings, but it took longer to discover who had actually carried them out. There were eyewitnesses to both murders, but they were either unable or unwilling to name the killers. The authorities suspected that some of the killers might have been brought in from outside the locality and afterward paid to go to America. Extra police were introduced into the area and the inhabitants forced to pay for them, mainly as a means of trying to extract information. Informers certainly did come forward, but their evidence was insufficient to sustain a prosecution. Generally, the authorities received little help from the public, perhaps because of intimidation, but also probably because there was hostility to those who took over land from which the previous tenants had been evicted. Some attempts were made at forensic investigation, especially the examination of footprints, bloodstains, weapons, and handwriting, but the techniques of the time were so primitive that little useful evidence was gained. The investigation was also not helped by the fact that magistrates and police officers quarreled over their respective roles.

The use made of disposable men in this case is also fairly typical. It was Dublin Castle that took the initiative and, despite the opposition of the local RM, dispatched a detective in disguise to conduct further inquiries. But this was done months and then years after the crimes; it is hardly surprising that the detective investigation yielded little. Yet the two detectives assigned to this case were among the most experienced and successful in the country.

Carolan was a Catholic from County Meath, who served thirty-seven years in the Constabulary and received a remarkable twenty-nine commendations.

52. Head Constable John Carolan to inspector-general, 4 May 1860; Carolan to inspector-general, 18 July 1864, W. M. Reade, RM, to under-secretary, 18 July, 30 September and 12 October 1864, ibid
53. Report from the Select Committee on Westmeath, p.155/711.
But his very success seems eventually to have begun to work against him. An RM who used him in King's County during the early 1860s later said that it had quickly become “absolutely necessary that he should be withdrawn, because [the local people] knew him.” He died while still on duty in 1865 at the age of fifty-seven from pneumonia contracted during the course of his work. Long-serving disposable men like Carolan thus ran the double risk of becoming too well known and too old for the physical rigors of the job.

The other disposable man employed in the Kelly-JJessop case, Thomas Talbot, although much younger than Carolan, also met a premature end as a direct result of his work. Talbot was a Protestant who had been born in Westmeath, and his career lends support to Hoppen’s contention that disposable men were more successful in investigating organized urban political groups than in penetrating the tight-knit world of agrarian assassins. In 1865, Talbot infiltrated the Dublin Fenians and was able to provide the authorities with much valuable information, including details of the rising planned for March, 1867. Leon Ó Broin has written that, after the Fenian defeat, no one was “more exquisitely hated” than Talbot, for, aside from inducing men to take the Fenian oath and then betraying them, it was widely believed that he had partaken of “the most sacred rites of the Catholic church of which he was not a member.” He retired early from the RIC, his pension topped up with a generous annuity, but in 1871 he was murdered. His murderers were never caught, but it was assumed that they were Fenians and acted out of revenge.

The disposable force was reorganized in 1869–70, after renewed complaints about its failure to combat agrarian outrages, and in 1872 even the name “disposable men” disappeared from the RIC’s regulations to be replaced by “detectives.” These reforms were carried out during the term of Inspector-General Sir John Stewart Wood (1865–76), who was more willing than his predecessor Brownrigg

54. General Register of the RIC (PRO(L), HO 184/1, p. 43); Report from the Select Committee on Westmeath, pp. 127–28, 683–84. In the evidence given by the RM before this committee the detective is called “Caerleon,” but this is presumably a spelling error by the English minute taker for the details given accord with what we know of Carolan’s career.

55. In addition to Talbot, other disposable men who gathered important evidence against Fenians included head constables Thomas Welby (in Manchester), Joseph Murphy (in Liverpool), Pat Harvey (in Glasgow) and, in Ireland, William Jacques and Constable Michael Shea. For their police careers, see General Register of the RIC (PRO(L), HO 184/3, pp. 58, 100; 184/6, p. 45; 184/4, p. 157; 184/8, p. 72).


to admit the shortcomings of the detective branch. Wood aimed to instruct all policemen more thoroughly in the techniques of detective investigation and, to this end, he issued a general circular on the subject and instituted detective training for all officer cadets at the RIC depot in Phoenix Park. At the same time he appointed a detective-director, based at the depot and reporting to him directly, to superintend more closely the employment of detectives and to lead important investigations himself. On the one hand, Wood had accepted the need for full-time detectives, while, on the other, he was convinced that all policemen should consider detection as a fundamental part of their duties.

The disposable force had been established during the Famine to investigate and solve agrarian homicides, or, in the overblown rhetoric of one of its instigators, to break the "machinery of murder" in rural Ireland. Ironically, however, it was the very lack of a "machinery" that made the task of disposable men so difficult. Police and magistrates were convinced that most of these murders were committed by members of a well-organized political conspiracy, which they termed "Ribbionism." The truth was that, in fact, most were the result of local disputes and feuds, having little if anything to do with politics. Moreover, all concerned—whether perpetrators, victims, or the community at large—resisted police intervention, either out of fear, a distrust of authority, or a belief in traditional forms of justice. Even many local police and magistrates resented disposable men imposed from outside, as this reflected badly on their ability to manage their own districts. Undercover detective investigation was extremely difficult in close-knit communities where strangers were immediately noticed—and distrusted. We know little about these early Irish detectives, but some of their reports do survive among the voluminous correspondence of Dublin Castle. They show men sitting for long periods in pubs or lying in wet fields observing community life—and clearly being observed in turn. In many instances, instead of apprehending murderers, disposable men simply ended up contracting lung and liver diseases. Hoppen's claim that detectives were more effective in urban areas and in investigating organized political groups seems incontestable.

58. This circular appears to have been ignored by some officers and men, as at least one officer was reprimanded and transferred for his failure to instruct his men in their new detective duties. Stephan Ball (ed.), *A Policeman's Ireland: Recollections of Samuel Waters, RIC* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), p. 30.

59. The first detective-director, Sub-Inspector Rodolphus Harvey, served from 1869 to 1872, when he was appointed an RM. He was replaced by Sub-Inspector James E. French, who had received a number of commendations for his detective work over the previous five years. The office disappeared in 1884 when French was dismissed and subsequently imprisoned for his involvement in a homosexual group of Dublin Castle officials. General Register of the RIC (PRO(L), HO 184/45, pp. 203, 247).