

# “Freedom and Friendship to Ireland”: Ribbonism in Early Nineteenth-Century Liverpool\*

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**Summary:** The paper examines the role of “nationalist” secret societies among the rapidly growing Irish community in Britain in the 1830s and 1840s. The main port of entry, Liverpool occupied a pivotal role as the two main “Ribbon” societies developed secret networks to provide migrant members with political sanctuary and a range of “tramping” benefits. Through its welfare provision, offered irrespective of skill or trade, Ribbonism engendered a sense of identity wider than that of the familial and regional affiliations through which chain migration typically operated. A proactive influence among immigrant Irish Catholic workers, Ribbonism helped to construct a national or ethnic awareness, initiating the process by which ethnic-sectarian formations came to dominate popular politics in nineteenth-century Liverpool, the nation’s second city. This ethnic associational culture was at least as functional, popular and inclusive as the class-based movements and party structures privileged in conventional British historiography.

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By decoding the ritual, symbolism and violence of secret societies, historians have gained important insights into peasant and community resistance to modernization, centralization and change. Given their myriad forms, however, secret societies were not always the preserve of “primitive rebels”. In nineteenth-century Ireland, where secret societies were probably most endemic, traditionalist agrarian redresser movements operated alongside urban-based networks which combined labour protection and collective mutuality with forward-looking political and/or nationalist goals.<sup>1</sup> There was considerable, often confusing, overlap and fluidity in aims and functions, hence the difficulty in classifying and categorizing Ribbonism, a new type of secret society which emerged in Ireland around 1811. This paper brings a new dimension to the debate by looking beyond

\*Research for this paper was assisted by a grant from the University of Liverpool Research Development Fund. I would like to thank Sean Connolly of the University of Ulster for his help and advice.

<sup>1</sup> “Secret societies appear to have been more ‘normal’ in Ireland than elsewhere”, in T. Desmond Williams (ed.), *Secret Societies in Ireland* (Dublin, 1973), Preface, p. ix. See also, S. Clark and J. S. Donnelly, Jr, *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest 1780–1914* (Manchester, 1983); and more generally, E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (Manchester, 1959).

*International Review of Social History* 39 (1994), pp. 33–56

Ireland to examine Ribbonite activity among Irish migrants, concentrating on Liverpool, the main port of entry for the Irish in Britain.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, Ribbonism provided an important complement to the normal mechanisms of chain migration, serving as reception and assistance centre for migrant Irish Catholic workers. In sociological classification, chain migration replaced local and circular forms to become the dominant migration system in nineteenth-century Europe, facilitating long-distance movement from densely populated peripheral areas – particularly Ireland, Italy and the Polish provinces – to core industrial and commercial regions. Working through family networks, social connections and regional solidarities, chain migration involved social arrangements with people already at destination, who characteristically helped newcomers to find jobs and housing, thereby protecting them from disorientation, dislocation and anomie behaviour. This functional analysis, however, should not be pushed too far. Information was shared by kin, friends and acquaintances, but there was considerable discrepancy in the knowledge and assistance – the “personal information field” – available to individual migrants.<sup>3</sup> As the pace of Irish emigration increased dramatically from the 1820s, Ribbonism, with its extensive secret organizational structure, served both to fill the gaps in these informal networks and to provide cheap, flexible and mobile benefits for those unable to gain employment at the chosen destination. The secret network which provided “political” sanctuary for members in flight from the Irish authorities also offered “tramping” benefits to itinerant migrant workers. In the process, it engendered a sense of identity wider than the familial and regional affiliations through which chain migration typically operated for “moving Europeans”. Among Irish Catholics in Liverpool and Britain, Ribbonism helped to construct a national or ethnic awareness, a sense of Irishness.

By focusing on the role of secret societies in this important migration stream, my paper contests the “ethnic fade” discernible in recent studies of the Irish in Britain. These have stressed a socio-economic process of assimilation by which the migrants, different as they were, readily identified, affiliated and integrated with host members of their particular class.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> There are brief references to Ribbonism among Irish migrants in L. H. Lees, *Exiles of Erin: Irish Emigrants in Victorian London* (Manchester, 1979), p. 223; Rachel O’Higgins, “The Irish Influence in the Chartist Movement”, *Past and Present*, 20 (1961), p. 85; J. H. Treble, “The Attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards Trade Unionism in the North of England, 1833–1842”, *Northern History*, 5 (1970), pp. 93–113; and G. P. Connolly, “The Catholic Church and the First Manchester and Salford Trade Unions in the Age of the Industrial Revolution”, *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, 135 (1985), pp. 125–139.

<sup>3</sup> For a useful comparative and “systemic” perspective on migration, see Leslie Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe Since 1650* (Bloomington, 1992), in particular pp. 16–18, and 103–160.

<sup>4</sup> See the essays by David Fitzpatrick, Colin Pooley and Graham Davis in R. Swift and S. Gilley (eds), *The Irish in Britain 1815–1939* (London, 1989). See also Graham Davis, *The Irish in Britain 1815–1914* (Dublin, 1991).

By contrast, this paper suggests the importance of ethnic associational culture. In arguing the case, it carries the analysis back to the formative (but understudied) decades immediately before the Famine, and concentrates on Liverpool, where the 1841 census already recorded 49,639 Irish-born, some 17.3 per cent of the population. Although Liverpool established itself as the nation's second city at this time, it stands outside the main narratives of modern British history. This paper contends that Liverpool's ethnic-sectarian formations, of which Ribbonism was among the first and most important, were at least as functional, popular and inclusive as the class-based movements and party structures privileged in conventional historiography.<sup>5</sup>

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Within the taxonomy of Irish violence and unrest, Ribbonism has proved difficult to classify. Some historians, echoing the loose use of the label in the post-Famine years, insist on its economic purpose and generic character: Whiteboyism by another name, Ribbonism was the term applied to traditional and defensive agrarian protest, in which intimidation and violence sought to uphold a customary code (or moral economy) within the existing tenurial system.<sup>6</sup> Other historians, following the lead of the best-informed observers of the pre-Famine period, see a political (even republican) thrust which distinguished and distanced Ribbonism from traditional agrarian redresser movements, although in adjusting to local circumstances, Ribbonism was often responsive to rural grievances.<sup>7</sup> Viewed in this way, the Ribbonmen, with their sectarian blend of religion-based nationalism, secrecy and communal solidarity, occupy a pivotal role in the evolution of Irish nationalist politics: located midway between the Defenders of the 1790s and the militant organizations of the late nineteenth century, they maintained an organizational commitment within the Catholic community to national independence through rebellion and violence. However, direct links forward have yet to be traced: indeed, evidence from the last outbreak of Ribbonism in 1869 suggests an economic

<sup>5</sup> See my introduction, "The Peculiarities of Liverpool", in John Belchem (ed.), *Popular Politics, Riot and Labour: Essays in Liverpool History, 1790–1940* (Liverpool, 1992), pp. 1–20. Steven Fielding's study of *Class and Ethnicity: Irish Catholics in England, 1880–1939* (Buckingham, 1993), p. 5, dismisses Liverpool as a sectarian redoubt, "marginal to the cultural and political life of the nation".

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Lee, "The Ribbonmen", in Williams, *Secret Societies*, pp. 26–35.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Garvin, *The Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics* (Dublin, 1981), pp. 34–43, and "Defenders, Ribbonmen and Others: Underground Political Networks in Pre-Famine Ireland", *Past and Present*, 96 (1982), pp. 133–155; M. R. Beames, "The Ribbon Societies: Lower-Class Nationalism in Pre-Famine Ireland", *Past and Present*, 97 (1982), pp. 128–143; and S. J. Connolly, "Aftermath and Adjustment", in W. E. Vaughan (ed.), *A New History of Ireland, V: Ireland Under the Union* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 19–20. See also, George Cornwall Lewis, *On Local Disturbances in Ireland* (London, 1836), pp. 155–161 and 326.

explanation for events in the notorious “Ribbonland” of Co. Westmeath.<sup>8</sup> Ribbonism, Donal McCartney judiciously concludes, “occupied a limbo between the formidable United Irishmen and the Fenians without providing anything like a clear link between the two”.<sup>9</sup>

While a controversial presence in nationalist history, Ribbonism features prominently in early Irish labour history, reflecting its exceptional success in urban areas, especially in Dublin. In Leinster, Ribbon lodges functioned as labour leagues, offering benefit and protection not only to artisans (as a supplement to unions and guilds) but also to unskilled workers in transport and carrying trades, such as the Dublin coal porters, the “Billy Welters”.<sup>10</sup> Ribbonism, however, was not a class-based exercise in general unionism. As in the peasant societies, sectarianism provided the structural foundation for collective action. Leadership, as Tom Garvin notes, was often provided by the Catholic trading classes, shopkeepers, traders and publicans, who sought to deflect the forces of socio-economic conflict and unrest into nationalist channels.<sup>11</sup> Some contemporary observers were more cynical. In presenting evidence to the 1839 Select Committee of the House of Lords, Thomas Drummond, Under-Secretary at Dublin Castle, insisted that Ribbonism was no more than a confidence swindle operated by publicans, who pocketed the quarterly subscriptions as well as gaining custom, protection and prestige by serving as Ribbon masters.<sup>12</sup> Quasi-criminal elements were doubtless involved, seeking to transform Ribbonism from a protective association of collective mutuality into a protection racket – indeed, this was the charge brought by the breakaway Dublin-based lodges of the Irish Sons of Freedom against “Captain” Rice, the powerful leading figure in the Northern Union, the senior Ribbon network. However, Ribbonism marked the beginning of the process by which sectarian collective mutuality moved away from the underground (and underworld) towards the integrative associational culture of the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Significantly, the transformation was completed first in Irish migrant communities.

Ribbonism, then, was multi-functional and morally ambiguous: its secrecy and ritual served *inter alia* to promote republican revolution, organized crime, sectarian protection and collective mutuality. Much of this complexity was extended to Irish Liverpool. On the waterfront, Ribbonism functioned as a form of primitive trade unionism, as Irish dock-labourers sought to corner a niche of the labour market by threats and

<sup>8</sup> A. C. Murray, “Agrarian Violence and Nationalism in Nineteenth-century Ireland: The Myth of Ribbonism”, *Irish Economic and Social History*, 13 (1986), pp. 56–73.

<sup>9</sup> Donal McCartney, *The Dawning of Democracy: Ireland 1800–1870* (Dublin, 1987), pp. 82–89. See also the discussion of Ribbonism in Galen Broeker, *Rural Disorder and Police Reform in Ireland, 1812–36* (London, 1970), pp. 6–13.

<sup>10</sup> Emmet O’Connor, *A Labour History of Ireland 1824–1960* (Dublin, 1992), pp. 13–14.

<sup>11</sup> Garvin, *Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics*, pp. 41–42.

<sup>12</sup> Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords appointed to enquire into the state of Ireland in respect of crime, Parliamentary Papers, 1839 (486), xii, 13, 317.

violence against outsiders. Newly-arrived migrants unaware of the “goods”, the latest secret Ribbon grips and passwords, often found themselves at painful disadvantage within dock labour gangs.<sup>13</sup> Here, too, were a number of lucrative business opportunities for members of the “friendship”. Ribbonmen, it was reported in 1840, were “straining at a monopoly in the shipment of Irish emigrants. One man, from nothing, has realised a large fortune and has several Delegates on both sides in his employ as agents”.<sup>14</sup> Others sought financial gain at the movement’s expense, selling their services within the shady intelligence network. Having failed in trade, E. Rorke moved in with his Liverpool mistress to exploit his old mercantile contacts with Irish connections, eliciting information which he then sold to the authorities. His main informant, P. H. McGloin, a respectable young businessman, employed by wool merchants on a salary of £100 p.a., later claimed that until approached by Rorke, he had “taken very little part in the thing, because being in a respectable situation and having business to attend to, it was against his interest to spend his nights in attending meetings and ‘boozing’, which the Officers of the Society must do”. In the aftermath of the major round-up of Ribbon leaders in Ireland in 1839, McGloin learnt of Rorke’s disreputable morals and excessive middleman’s commission. Having gained assurance that he would not be called as a witness himself, McGloin negotiated a direct deal with the authorities in Dublin Castle: “He was formerly a Delegate, and might now take an office which would put him in possession of all their secrets. When he comes to Dublin he has to transact business (in trade) with a Delegate and would have many facilities of gaining extensive information.”<sup>15</sup>

McGloin’s reports provide a useful insight into the operation of the Northern Union in Liverpool in the late 1830s. They should be read in conjunction with the vast amount of Liverpool material in the papers (191 items, all in shorthand) seized at the house of Richard Jones, national secretary of the rival Irish Sons of Freedom, following his arrest in the round-up of October 1839.<sup>16</sup> Liverpool, indeed, features prominently in the information gathered for the major Ribbon trials of 1830: unfortunately, the same does not apply to the earlier round of arrests and trials in 1822, the first instance in which the authorities penetrated the upper echelons of the movement.

<sup>13</sup> John Denvir, *The Irish in Britain* (London, 1892), pp. 127–131. See also, *The Liverpool Irishman, or Annals of the Irish Colony in Liverpool* (n.p., 1909), p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Public Record Office, Kew: Colonial Office Papers (hereafter C.O.) 904/8, ff. 82–89.

<sup>15</sup> Matheson’s report to Drummond on his interview with McGloin in Dublin, C.O. 904/7, ff. 465–470.

<sup>16</sup> The transcription of these papers proved difficult and contentious, see C.O. 904/7, ff. 313–328; hence only a small selection was produced at the trial, see M. J. Martyn, *An Authentic Report of the Trial of Richard Jones [ . . . ] with an appendix, containing the letters and correspondence of the Secret Society read in evidence at trial* (Dublin, 1840). However, transcriptions of all items can be found in the papers of Messrs Kemmis, Crown Solicitors, in

In the absence of local source material, evidence for the early 1820s is restricted to transcripts of the trials and to confusing reports from informers summarized by Major Sirr, the Dublin police magistrate. However, it would seem that this was a period of major reorganization, as the Dublin leaders, having abandoned plans for simultaneous insurrection with the English radicals – a scheme premised on a revolutionary outcome of the Queen Caroline Affair – sought to consolidate links not only with Ulster but with their compatriots in Britain. In June 1821, at a meeting chaired by Michael Keenan, a coal-porter with a reputation for toughness, a certain Fullinsby was appointed as special envoy to England: “Keenan gave Fullinsby six tests and desired him to bring over the people of Liverpool and Manchester into Union with Dublin.”<sup>17</sup> An unhappy chapter of events ensued, typical of the confusion, suspicion and treachery which tended to prevail when secret societies extended from their base. Fullinsby was received in Liverpool by Campbell and Doogan: the former, a publican in Dickens Street, had close links with Ribbon activity in Ulster, travelling to Armagh every quarter, presumably to receive the “goods”; the latter, a Dublin-born boot and shoe maker, was master of the Ribbon lodge which met in Campbell’s pub, and apparently an expert in disguise. Having infiltrated a local Orange Order meeting, Doogan spotted one of the spies who had tailed Fullinsby across the Irish Sea. Suspicions soon fell on Fullinsby himself – there were rumours that he was a Protestant, his attendance at Mass notwithstanding, and that he wished to tell the Liverpool authorities “the whole secret”. Campbell made a special trip to Dublin to express his concern, but what happened thereafter is impossible to disentangle. Reorganization, however, was finally effected in February 1822 with the establishment of a national board, for which purpose Liverpool was considered an integral part of Ireland itself: listed as one of the nine committees “in the north”, it was entitled to send two delegates.<sup>18</sup> Shortly afterwards, Keenan and the other Dublin leaders were convicted for administering an unlawful oath, mainly on the evidence of the police informer Coffey.<sup>19</sup>

National Archives, Dublin: Frazer Mss 43, Transcript of the books written in short hand found on the person of Richard Jones on the 1st October 1839 (hereafter Jones transcript). A near complete copy is available at the Public Record Office, Kew: Home Office Papers (hereafter H.O.) 100/263.

<sup>17</sup> Trinity College, Dublin: Sirr Diaries, Mss N4/6, f. 88.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 118 and 126; and N4/7, ff. 36 and 106.

<sup>19</sup> *A Report of the Trial of Michael Keenan for administering an unlawful oath* (Dublin, 1822); *A Report of the Trial of Edward Browne and others for administering and of Laurence Woods for taking an unlawful oath* (Dublin, 1822). They were described by the Attorney General as “carmen, low artisans and others who, though not perhaps the dregs of society, are far below the order of persons competent to take a share in regulating the affairs of state”. See also, R. B. McDowell, *Public Opinion and Government Policy, 1801–1846* (London, 1952), pp. 63–65.

The trials brought an end to the first peak of Ribbon activity and to the hope of organizational unity. Henceforward, Ribbonism was split into separate Leinster- and Ulster-based societies, both of whom contested for the allegiance of the Liverpool Irish. Both networks were hindered by the Catholic Church which strengthened its stand against oath-bound secret societies, after the trials (and Daniel O'Connell's subsequent evidence to the parliamentary select committee) had contrasted Ribbonite political conspiracy with Rockite agricultural disturbances in the south.<sup>20</sup> The Northern Union, or Sons of the Shamrock, duly concealed its operations behind the facade of clerically-approved benefit societies such as the Knights of St Patrick, and the St Patrick's Fraternal Society, an exclusively Catholic body "to promote Friendship, Unity and True Christian Charity, by raising and supporting a stock or Fund of money for aiding and assisting its members when out of employment, and for no other purpose whatsoever".<sup>21</sup> The various Hibernian benefit societies, which also offered sickness and death benefit, were originally the Liverpoolian extension of this dual-level practice, as here too the Catholic clergy – in accordance with a solemn Interdict of February 1831 – refused the sacraments to any known member of an organization bound by secret oath.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the Irish Sons of Freedom eschewed such deception, operating in secret without any facade. However, many of its members were attracted to other forms of associational culture, most notably the collective mutuality of affiliated friendly societies like the OddFellows.

Founded in 1834, the Liverpool Hibernian Benevolent Burial Society provided the model for the expansion of Catholic collective mutuality throughout the Irish diaspora. Official histories of the Ancient Order of Hibernians acknowledge its pioneer status, praising its "divine precepts" of charity and devotion, together with its public declaration of allegiance to the monarch, constitution and Catholic church.<sup>23</sup> As new societies were formed, the Hibernians underlined their clerical and constitutional loyalty by public disavowal of any connection with "any illegal or excommunicated society in Ireland": "The sole object of the Hibernian Society in England is to assist its Members in sickness and distress, and bury them when dead [ . . . ] no society in Ireland or elsewhere, has or shall have so long as such society shall be proscribed by the pastors of the church, any voice or influence in the government of our society, or the management

<sup>20</sup> Select Committee on the state of Ireland, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1825 (129), pp. 71–72.

<sup>21</sup> James J. Bergin, *History of the Ancient Order of Hibernians* (Dublin, 1910), pp. 29–31.

<sup>22</sup> For details of the Bishop's Interdict in the Northern District of England, see Connolly, "Catholic Church and Manchester and Salford Trade Unions", pp. 132–133.

<sup>23</sup> T. F. McGrath, *History of the Ancient Order of Hibernians* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1898), pp. 51–55; Wayne G. Broehl, Jr, *The Molly Maguires* (Cambridge, Mass, 1964), pp. 32–33. Papers produced by the society were found on a man arrested at a fair in Co. Louth, see Select Committee of the House of Lords [ . . . ] 1839 (486), xi, 4610–4613.

of its finances.”<sup>24</sup> Such public proclamations notwithstanding, Hibernian societies acted as convenient cover, preserving the link, McGloin revealed, between English lodges and the Northern Union:

A form of declaration has been adopted for the members at Liverpool, which begins by disclaiming all connexion with any societies in Ireland using secret signs and passwords; but this, like the article in the old declaration or oath of the Societies here, promising allegiance to the King or Queen, is only intended as a *blind*. The promise of allegiance was always “turned down” and not read, when a member was admitted – and the present disclaimer is to be treated in the same way.<sup>25</sup>

This subterfuge, however, was but the first step to full admission to the secret lodges, each consisting of a “parish” master, two committee men, a treasurer and thirty-six members:

Much precaution is used in the introduction of members, none but Roman Catholics being admissible; and a *report list*, with the name, age and residence, the parish and county where each candidate comes from, must be read out in each *body*, and afterwards in the General Committee of the Town [. . .] each must be passed in two or more bodies and afterwards approved by the General Committee.<sup>26</sup>

There were at least thirty active branches (some well in excess of thirty-six strong) by the mid-1830s, despite persistent efforts by the clergy, mainly through rigorous interrogation of confessionists, to eradicate oath-bound societies. “The clergy here this several years past”, the Liverpool president of the rival Irish Sons of Freedom later reported to Dublin, “were violently opposed against Irishmen on this side of the Channel holding a communication with Ireland. These Hibernians or Widgeons had recourse to every open artifice to deceive the clergy but God help them they were deceiving themselves when they would go to confession.” Under threat of denial of the sacraments, some Northern Unionists withdrew altogether; others alternated in attendance, according to conscience and need, between church and lodge; and certain sections of the leadership contemplated a range of exculpatory options, even severance of the offending link with Ireland. There was much internal dissension (and increased friction between the rival networks) when the Hibernians gave serious consideration to “dropping Ireland [. . .] of complying with the Bishops declaration and setting up shop for themselves confining their system, *as they say*, to England alone”.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Handbill, St Patrick’s Hibernian Benevolent Society, C.O. 904/7, f. 149.

<sup>25</sup> C.O. 904/7, ff. 465–470. No oaths were required for the National Brotherhood, the cover later used by the Fenians in Liverpool, see W. J. Lowe, “Lancashire Fenianism, 1864–71”, *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 126 (1977), pp. 162–163.

<sup>26</sup> Extracts from communications from the informant A.B., C.O. 904/8, ff. 309–310.

<sup>27</sup> Jones transcript, no. 42: Wilson, Liverpool, 4 May 1838. Ribbonism was the main target, but clerical proscription applied to all forms of oath-bound societies: “I should not feel myself justified in admitting to the sacraments any member of the trades’ union, or of any society

Clerical pressure notwithstanding, there was no unilateral restriction of operations to the Irish in Britain. While it functioned as a form of affiliated friendly society for migrant workers, supplementing the informal mechanisms of chain migration by a tramping network of relief and assistance, irrespective of skill or trade, the Northern Union retained its essential economic and political links with Ireland, the centre of operations. Basic cover was provided at modest cost, normally 1s for admission and a quarterly payment of either 3d or 6d. Sickness and death benefits were left to the discretion of the local branch or lodge: tramp relief, however, was distributed out of the "box" (held at local headquarters – in Liverpool, the Grapes Inn, Grayson Street) through the highest local officer, the "county delegate", and charged quarterly upon each branch. Elected by the branch officers at the quarterly meeting of the general committee, the "delegate" was entrusted to attend the quarterly General Board of Erin or "market" in Ireland to receive the "goods", the latest signs and passwords, the correct version of which had to appear on the card or certificate presented by tramps seeking relief. The delegate's expenses in attending the General Board had the first call on funds, followed by relief and assistance for arrested or fugitive members in Ireland, leaving the remainder for benefit payments. On occasion, there was misunderstanding of this order of priority, although such matters were generally dealt with internally by the "select", a gathering of the parish masters, sitting above the general committee to assist and advise the county delegate and act, if required, as arbitration tribunal.<sup>28</sup> There was considerable embarrassment in 1842 when Patrick O'Neill brought an action before the Liverpool magistrates against John McArdle, president of the Second Hibernians. Having joined the Provident Friendly Society, a society accorded legal recognition and approval by Tidd Pratt, the Registrar of Friendly Societies, O'Neill had fallen ill – and apparently into arrears – when the society was subsumed into the Second Hibernians, which then denied him sickness benefit. Under cross-examination, Patrick Doyle, president of the Provident Friendly Society, admitted that he had spent £6 of the funds of the society on a trip to Ireland to help raise bail for someone charged with Ribbonism.<sup>29</sup>

By operating in secret without such cover, the Irish Sons of Freedom avoided, or so its leaders believed, the duplicity, deception and financial corruption inherent in the dual-layer Northern Union. Smaller in scale, the Liverpool branch of the Irish Sons of Freedom operated from headquarters in George Carrick's Hibernian Tavern in Newton Hill Street,

administering secret oaths", evidence of Rev. Thomas Fisher, Liverpool, Royal Commission on the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland: Appendix G, The State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers, 1836 (40), xxxiv, p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> Extracts from communications of the informant A.B., C.O. 904/8, ff. 309–317. Statement of John O'Brien, 3 November 1841, H.O. 45/184.

<sup>29</sup> *Liverpool Mercury*, 29 April 1842.

where much of the administration was left to the local “president”, equivalent in rank and role to the county delegate, but elected by all members. Within a few months of his election in 1838, William Wilson, a painter and decorator, complained of the disproportionate burdens of office, for which he received no expenses. On top of his onerous responsibilities for tramp relief, he had to “attend the general meeting, take reports, read letters, in effect do the whole work of the society [. . .] Every Sunday night either 3 or 4 of our bodies meet, they require my attendance every Monday night. I have to attend at Mr Carrick see the money forthcoming, receipt the Stewards books, see the sick money paid”.<sup>30</sup> Wilson’s complaints were given a sympathetic hearing in Dublin where the central lodge, administered by Andrew Dardis, national president, and Richard Jones, national secretary, was nearly £20 in debt.<sup>31</sup> However, the Leinster network prided itself on its financial probity. Members paid 6d quarterly into the county fund, used to send the president to the quarterly board, to relieve tramps, to fee counsel for members of the friendship in jail, and to assist friends “injured by opponents”. “We or any other party”, Jones wrote from Dublin, “have no call on the money so collected [. . .] no person out of your own County has any call on it.”<sup>32</sup>

Wilson’s brief tenure of office, chronicled in detail in Jones’s shorthand books, was full of controversy, complicated by personalities and a complex struggle for power which began earlier when Thomas Jones, a recent arrival from Co. Kildare, was ousted from the Liverpool presidency in 1837 on discovery that he had joined the OddFellows.<sup>33</sup> His replacement, Kennedy, ruled against such dual membership, but was voted out of office soon afterwards for reasons which remain unclear. Kennedy, however, retained the confidence and ear of the Dublin leadership to whom he continually traduced Wilson, his duly-elected successor. Ratification of Wilson’s position, indeed, was delayed until thorough investigation of his background – including detailed questioning of his old Dublin landlady about his attendance record at Mass – and a special “mission” to Liverpool by Dardis and Jones in which they attempted to run an alternative candidate.<sup>34</sup> Thereafter, they established a relationship of mutual respect, symbolized by signing their correspondence with the current password, “Freedom and Friendship to Ireland”. In this new spirit, Wilson offered financial assistance towards central printing and travel costs, notably the delegation sent to Belfast to initiate merger discussions with the Northern Union.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Jones transcript, no. 80: Wilson, 22 August 1838.

<sup>31</sup> Jones transcript, no. 49: Dardis and Jones, 28 May 1838. Dardis was a publican; Jones a haymaker’s clerk in Smithfield market, Dublin.

<sup>32</sup> Jones transcript, no. 96: Jones, 19 October 1838.

<sup>33</sup> Jones transcript, no. 12: Thomas Jones, 24 March 1838.

<sup>34</sup> Jones transcript, nos 1–6, 14, 20 and 38.

<sup>35</sup> Jones transcript, nos 48, Wilson, 25 May, and 49, Dardis and Jones, 28 May 1838. Tramps had to produce printed cards or certificates bearing the initial letters of the password. Others

Wilson, however, lost local support as members queried the cost of his ambitious plans to institute a united framework of Ribbonite self-sufficiency, free from clerical interference or friendly society competition.

During the course of discussion with Patrick Cunningham and other members of the rival Northern Union, representatives of the Catholic clergy from Liverpool and industrial Lancashire displayed a willingness to relax the 1831 blanket proscription on secret societies by extending a measure of tolerance, not approval, to friendly societies such as the Odd-Fellows.<sup>36</sup> The Irish Sons of Freedom were encouraged further in this direction when they were invited to talks by a local Liverpool priest, the Rev. Wilcocks, as a gesture of gratitude for the society's £5 St Patrick's day donation to the parish school building fund. Wilson fell from favour when he refused to participate in these discussions, during which Wilcocks raised no objection to membership of the non-denominational OddFellows. At the next election, Wilson was unseated by Michael Hanlon, an enthusiastic advocate of dual membership. On taking office, Hanlon wrote to Dublin, advising Jones to abandon discussions with the Northern Union and to give immediate approval to a dual membership policy in Liverpool, where the OddFellows had acquired virtual control of the labour market in local yards and foundries.<sup>37</sup> His behaviour antagonized the local leaders of the Northern Union within whose sectarian perspective the non-denominational, apolitical OddFellows were "no better than Orangemen". "The other, the Leinster faction", McGloin reported at the time of Jones's trial, "have applied to form themselves into a branch of the Independent Order of OddFellows which as a society with passwords and signs, neither sanctioned nor meddled with by the Law Authorities, they hope under its cloak to continue and meet as usual on their old affairs. Hence has arisen another feud between the two factions."<sup>38</sup>

Liverpool was the pivotal point for both networks as they extended their cover among migrant workers. The local president of the Irish Sons of Freedom held "the Prerogative of England", responsible not only for passing "the goods" across the Irish Sea but for the adjudication of disputes over eligibility, subscriptions, arrears and benefits within English lodges.<sup>39</sup> Similarly in the Northern Union, the Liverpool county delegate served as national delegate for England at the Board of Erin, responsible for delivering the goods to lodges – "on receipt of their proportions of the usual expenses" – throughout Lancashire, Cheshire, Yorkshire and the

used after FAFTI, include GUAI, General Union among Irishmen, and FNDO, Fear Not Danger Over, adopted by a cruel irony on 30 September 1838, the day before Jones's arrest.

<sup>36</sup> Connolly, "Catholic Church and Manchester and Salford Trade Unions", pp. 134–136.

<sup>37</sup> Jones transcript, nos 140–142, 144–145, 157, 173 and 186.

<sup>38</sup> Special Committee meeting, 30 June 1840, C.O. 904/8, ff. 225–228.

<sup>39</sup> Jones transcript, no. 20: Dardis and Jones to Wilson, 31 March 1838. Wilson spent much time on problems at Manchester, concerning Nowlan, a penitent defaulter, and on the eligibility of army pensioners.

Potteries, “in all places towards the North of England where any number of the lower class of Irish are found”.<sup>40</sup> Radiating from Liverpool, the two networks provided cover and benefits for migrant workers in “unskilled” and mobile sectors of the labour market, often excluded from organized forms of working-class collective mutuality. In artisan networks, tramping was a means of control in the interests of local closed shop: in Ribbon networks, tramping facilitated mobility in pursuit of whatever work was available, while offering “political” sanctuary for members in flight from the Irish authorities.<sup>41</sup> Railway navvies appreciated the advantages of membership, and were increasingly prominent in both networks. Hanlon passed the Leinster “goods” to Preston, Manchester, Stalybridge, Rotherham and Cheshire, where “there are many of our friends in the Cheshire railroad that is now making, and they are adding daily to our number”.<sup>42</sup> “The persons employed on the different lines of Railway are principally Irish and are to a great extent Members of the Ribbon Society”, Terence Dogherty, the Wigan-based informer and lifelong member of the Northern Union reported in 1848, “and in case of any outbreak in Ireland would have to join their bretheren there or break their declarations.”<sup>43</sup> Building labourers were another group in similar need of cheap, flexible and mobile benefits. Of the fourteen main figures in the Preston “Hibernicans”, the cover for the local lodge of the Northern Union, eleven were labourers in the building industry, including James Woods, the chair and secretary, and his two deputies, Pat Clancy and Pat Gill, a cellar-dweller at Canal Bridge. There was a distinct Ulster complexion: of the six labourers whose origins are recorded, three came from Co. Fermanagh, two from Co. Cavan and one from Co. Leitrim in neighbouring Connacht. The remaining main figures were John Daly, a sailor and shopkeeper of Friargate; Anthony Heany, a chair-bottomer, one of three Preston Ribbonmen who went on tramp to Sheffield where each received two shillings on production of their cards; and John Kelly, a stonemason, who was

<sup>40</sup> Extracts from communications of the informant A.B., C.O. 904/8, ff. 309–317. The Newcastle lodge, however, received quarterly instructions through the Glasgow-based national delegate for Scotland.

<sup>41</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, “The Tramping Artisan”, in his *Labouring Men* (London, 1968), p. 38. I have found no evidence of Ribbon benefits covering migrant Irish women. However, some oaths included a form of “exclusive dealing”: “I also declare and promise, that in towns and counties I will give preference of my dealings to my Catholic bretheren”, see Lieut-Gen. Blacker, Third Report of the Select Committee on Orange Lodges, Parliamentary Papers, 1835 (476), xvi, pp. 9111–9134.

<sup>42</sup> Jones transcript, no. 157: Hanlon, 17 July 1839. J. H. Treble, “Irish Navvies in the North of England, 1830–1850”, *Transport History*, 6 (1973), p. 243 mistakenly refers to Ribbonism as “essentially an agrarian secret society [. . .] with little or no relevance to the English social scene”.

<sup>43</sup> Information of Terence Dogherty, 14 June 1848, H.O. 45/2416. Fearful of the navvies’ reputation, the authorities decided not to raid the local Ribbon pub on the following Saturday, the next scheduled meeting of the lodge, since it was races-day and pay-day for railway labourers.

accorded expenses to travel to Liverpool to receive the "renewals".<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, detailed information is not available on the social composition of Liverpool Ribbonism other than at delegate level. However, it was Irish labourers, apparently trained in the secret ways and means of Ribbonism, who came to the fore in the major building strike of 1833:

The late turn-out of mechanics and labourers has been almost entirely organized by Irish: they are all bound together by secret oaths, which were probably suggested by the Irish; and, although the Irish were the poorest mechanics, they took the lead in this turn-out. The English submitted in the most singular manner to be led by the nose.<sup>45</sup>

As the pivot of both networks, Liverpool bore a disproportionate financial as well as administrative burden, to the point where tramp relief payments had briefly to be suspended in actuarial crisis in the late 1830s. As the main port of entry, Liverpool was the first place of refuge for Irishmen on the run, including bankrupts, criminals and disreputable members of the "friendship" such as Robert McDonnell.<sup>46</sup> After being discovered selling the "goods" for his own profit, McDonnell, a brogue maker, had turned to embezzlement and other crime before fleeing to Liverpool in the early 1820s, where he tried to defraud a local tontine by faking his death. Counterfeiting and other crimes followed (including "dilapidating and gutting the house he occupied in Liverpool") until he discovered his true vocation as a Protestant preacher in Sheffield.<sup>47</sup> While criminals were left to their own resources, bona fide members in flight from the authorities had the first call on funds. Admittedly, such cases were generally recognized as a national charge: there were regular collections in England, Terence Dogherty reported, "to aid persons in Ireland to get them out of the Country or to employ Counsel in case they may require such assistance at their trials".<sup>48</sup> Once their credentials had been checked and approved in Liverpool, some fugitives went on tramp. "The different Lodges in England", Dublin Castle reported, "are so many safe harbours for culprits who have committed murder or other serious crimes in this country, where they are not only protected, but are certain of obtaining employment in the neighbourhoods of such Lodges."<sup>49</sup> As the authorities became more vigilant, escape routes were changed to avoid the main ports. James Quinn, a lodging-house keeper in Ilkeston, offered funds to Pat Hayes to help his father escape, guaranteeing his safety provided he used small

<sup>44</sup> Examinations as to Ribbonism at Preston in Lancashire, H.O. 100/263, ff. 340–356.

<sup>45</sup> State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain [. . .] 1836 (40), xxxiv, p. 28, evidence of S. Holme; see also p. 23, evidence of Rev. Robinson.

<sup>46</sup> A freelance informer kept a close watch for fugitive criminals and bankrupts, see National Archives, Dublin: Outrage Papers, Co. Cavan, 1839, 23994C, enclosing a letter from "A Friend", Gt Homer Street, Liverpool.

<sup>47</sup> Statement of John Kelly, C.O. 904/7, ff. 77–92.

<sup>48</sup> Information of Terence Dogherty, 14 June 1848, H.O. 45/2416.

<sup>49</sup> Inspector-General Brownrigg's report, enclosed in Larcom, 19 March 1863, H.O. 45/7522.

coastal ports in Wicklow and Wales and kept away from Liverpool: on arrival in Derbyshire, he would find well-paid employment, the company of many fellow-countrymen and immunity from detection, as individual identity was concealed beneath furnace and coal slack dust.<sup>50</sup>

While the cost of relieving fugitives may have been spread throughout the movement, Liverpool bore the expense of aiding distressed members – economic migrants rather than political refugees – passing through the port. As numbers increased inexorably, there were rumours within the Irish Sons of Freedom that “the Men of Liverpool were on the point of charging the Country a certain sum for the *Renewals* and that they did not assist *tramps*”.<sup>51</sup> The Northern Union experienced similar difficulties, compounded by the withdrawal of “respectable tradesmen” and funds in the wake of arrests in Ireland in 1839. The number of branches, McGloin reported, fell from thirty to twenty; funeral processions became less lavish; and the relief fund, previously assessed on the branches quarterly, “got into disuse in toto”, ending the standard arrangement by which tramps holding “regular certificates” were given a bed for the night and a payment of 1s 6d. As “respectable tradesmen” quit the general committee, the Liverpool lodges of the Northern Union were left in the hands of “labourers, warehousemen, and lumbers and varied only by an occasional publican”, without the necessary funds to serve as reception and assistance centres for migrant members.<sup>52</sup>

In the Leinster network, Wilson did what he could for tramps out of his own meagre pocket: “I have nothing to depend upon but my hand. I have to support a helpless and motherless family and when a distressed friend comes my heart relents.” One of his main initiatives during his term as president, an attempt to introduce a properly-funded and administered system of tramp relief, left him so disillusioned that he decided to tender his resignation:

Any good rules I propose I cannot get them carried into effect to meet the wants of distressed tramps. I proposed that each member should pay 1d per month that it be lodged in the hands of Mr Carrick and according as any distressed friend would come and apply to me for assistance for me to give a note to Carrick for the price of his bed and supper. Carrick to keep all these dockets and get credit for nothing at the quarterly settlement but what he could provide a docket for [. . .] all we could get to pay was 22 men [. . .] all my labour was in vain in introducing good discipline among them, they are all generals and no privates.<sup>53</sup>

Except at such times of actuarial crisis, however, the payment of relief at Liverpool seems to have been a matter of routine for members with

<sup>50</sup> Appendix A, H.O. 45/7522.

<sup>51</sup> Jones transcript, no. 49: Dardis and Jones to Wilson, 28 May 1838.

<sup>52</sup> C.O. 904/8, ff. 82–89.

<sup>53</sup> Jones transcript, no. 80: Wilson, 22 August 1838. His wife died soon after he was elected president, see no. 38: Wilson, 2 May 1838.

regular certificates or “cards”, facilitating much two-way movement across the Irish Sea. Assessment of the socio-economic status of these pre-Famine migrants is particularly problematic: many artisans and textile workers, victims of the delayed economic consequences of the Act of Union and the deindustrialization of peripheral areas, came to Britain in search of similar employment, but were obliged to take whatever work was available. Denis Gilgun, an important witness at the trials in Ireland, moved back and forth between Co. Cavan and Preston in the late 1830s, aided by relief obtained from Brady’s pub in Chistenhall Street, Liverpool: however, he was unable to continue in his trade as shoemaker in Preston, taking work as a builders’ labourer. On his final return journey, Gilgun surrendered his “card”, issued by fellow labourer James Woods, “headsman and Secretary” of the Preston Hibernicans, in return for relief and a new card signed in his presence by Brady, “which I gave on my return to Ireland to my County Master McDonald, and continued a Ribbonman as before”.<sup>54</sup> Terence Dogherty appears more fortunate: having left Co. Cavan for Lancashire in the early 1820s, he was able to continue his trade as weaver, and his membership of the Northern Union, first in Manchester, then at Bolton, and finally in Wigan. When he eventually left Wigan in the trade depression of 1848 to return to Co. Cavan, however, he forgot to obtain a certificate from Terence McGlynn, the local delegate, and was thus refused admission to the lodge at Killesandra. He travelled back to Wigan for the necessary documentation, for which he was charged an excessive readmission fee of three shillings (one reason, perhaps, why he suddenly turned informer?), stopping off on return at John Carroll’s pub in Crosbie Street, Liverpool to obtain one shilling in relief, on production of the valued certificate, from James Mullen, the Lancashire county delegate.<sup>55</sup>

Given its nodal location, Liverpool figured prominently in the unity discussions of 1838, providing a “neutral” venue away from regional rivalry, and offering a ready-made communications network: “as all persons going on tramp to England would have to call in Liverpool, they would be able to send word to all parts of Ireland”.<sup>56</sup> After the preliminary discussions in Belfast in April, Wilson was instructed to report on “the determination of the friends belonging to the Hibernians in Liverpool”:

If they act for the welfare of their native land they will join with these persons whose wish it is to see their native land free. The motto of every honest Irishman should be unite and free your native land.<sup>57</sup>

Wilson was an enthusiastic supporter of any arrangement which would “cement all Roman Catholics in one bond of Brotherly love. Nothing

<sup>54</sup> Statement of Denis Gilgun, 15 December 1840, H.O. 100/263, ff. 346–350. Gilgun had once run a Ribbon pub in Enniskillen.

<sup>55</sup> Statement of Terence Dogherty, 6 July 1848, H.O. 45/2416.

<sup>56</sup> Jones transcript, no. 75: Jones, 6 August 1838.

<sup>57</sup> Jones transcript, no. 33: Jones, 24 April 1838.

would be more gratifying to me as to be in unity with men who address the same God, believe in the same Creed, kneel at the same Altar, and their Cause our Cause". However, his efforts to institute the alliance in Liverpool were hindered by misinformation – he discovered that Patrick Cunningham, named at Belfast as the delegate of the Hibernians, had in fact withdrawn from office and "felt more easy in his mind than when he communicated with Ireland, that he was now within the bounds of his Church and would continue so"<sup>58</sup> – and by the hostility of some of the current officers who remained loyal to "Captain" Rice, President of the Board of Erin for the three kingdoms, specifically excluded from the Belfast discussions (along with his close associate, "Captain" McGomley) on allegations of financial misdealing and speculation.

Wilson was one of four Liverpool representatives at the joint general board in Dublin on 1 July – attended by delegates from Antrim, Armagh, Down, Monaghan, Longford, Louth, Roscommon, Wicklow, Meath, Kildare and Dublin – which formally instituted the merger as the United Irish Sons of Freedom and Sons of the Shamrock and adopted "a new form of Certificate to prevent persons that are opposed to us from being pawned upon us".<sup>59</sup> The others were Thomas McConvill(e), local president of the Hibernians, described as "the most violent advocate for the continuance of secret correspondence with Ireland"; Patrick Cavanagh (or Kavanagh), secretary of the Liverpool Hibernian Benevolent Burial Society, and general secretary of the Northern Union in Liverpool; and Thomas Burns, a pig jobber at the slaughter yard in Batchelor Street, president of the First Hibernian Friendly Society.<sup>60</sup> "You may rest satisfied that England is with us to a man", Richard Jones reported in an optimistic circular letter, calling upon every delegate "to convince the persons in your part of the Country of the folly of any longer adhering to Rice and his bloody faction." To seal the union, the next joint board was to be held in Liverpool on 30 September: "The Chief reason for having the meeting at Liverpool was that it would strike at the Root of the evil and as the persons there were from the different Counties in Ireland that they would be able to send Information from it to their friends of the folly of any longer being kept separated by any man or men."<sup>61</sup>

Wilson returned from Dublin determined to ensure the success of the Liverpool board. Within a week, he obtained agreement for a unified structure within Liverpool itself, including a system of fines to curb those who placed regional loyalties and rivalries above national interest:

Third, that any Officer or members belonging to either parties casting disrespectful allusions to on each others County or province or opposing each other will be

<sup>58</sup> Jones transcript, no. 38: Wilson, 2 May 1838.

<sup>59</sup> Jones transcript, no. 66: Jones, 2 July 1838.

<sup>60</sup> Delegates in Liverpool since 1830, C.O. 904/8, ff. 79–80.

<sup>61</sup> Jones transcript, no. 67: Jones, 3 July 1838.

tried by a mixed Committee – will be vested with power to levy the following fines for disrespectful allusions 5s, striking 5s, 10s if done unfairly.<sup>62</sup>

Wilson's efforts, and those of Jones in Dublin, were severely hampered in August, however, when Rice's supporters arranged a separate board at Dundalk. Among the three delegates from England was George Hamill, publican of the Grapes Inn, Liverpool headquarters of the Northern Union, and allegedly a former "Servant man to Rice".<sup>63</sup> Angered by the double-dealing of Reilly and the pro-Rice faction in Ireland – there were rumours that Rice had supplied the police with information about the Dublin 1 July board – Jones wrote to Wilson, insisting that matters be set straight in Liverpool:

Dear Friend, you will please shew this to our friends Messrs Gonville (sic) and Kavenagh (sic) and send us word what the men of England are determined to do, we send them our advice which is as follows – that if they do not join with those persons who have the welfare of their Country at heart, that they in Justice to the land that gave them birth should withdraw from the society for ever, and why? Because they have sent their President and Secretary to make a union and empowered them with authority to do so.<sup>64</sup>

Although Cavanagh still appeared to favour the union, Hamill proved unrepentant and obstructive on return from Dundalk.<sup>65</sup> When the joint board finally assembled at Carrick's pub in Liverpool, Wilson, it seems, was the only local representative present.

One or two Irish delegates were unable to attend on account of the harvest ("it being the hurry time of business"),<sup>66</sup> but there were representatives from "every County in the North", including two notable former opponents, James Brady of Co. Cavan and Michael O'Neal of Ballinamuck, Co. Longford. Besides Wilson, there was one other English delegate, Peter Fitzsimmons of Newcastle, another who had recently changed allegiance. Jones issued an upbeat circular report: "We had representatives from every county in Ulster at our last meeting and our cause is progressing in the other Counties in England [. . .] all the north of England is with us. The opponents to Freedom are on their last legs." In a stock-taking exercise, he reported that tramp relief, henceforth to be restricted to the young, would be administered by three presidents in England: Wilson at Liverpool, Fitzsimmons at Newcastle, and Thomas Donoghue in Manchester. In Ireland, the united network covered every county in the north and midlands, but had yet to extend to Clare, Kerry, Limerick, Cork, Waterford, Kilkenny, Wexford, Galway, Sligo and Mayo.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Jones transcript, no. 73: Wilson, 31 July 1838.

<sup>63</sup> Jones transcript, nos 191: Wilson, 15 August, and 78: Wilson, 20 August 1838.

<sup>64</sup> Jones transcript, no. 77: Jones, 19 August 1838.

<sup>65</sup> Jones transcript, no. 84: Wilson, 18 September 1838.

<sup>66</sup> Jones transcript, nos 88 and 89: letters of apology from Lennon and Roche.

<sup>67</sup> Jones transcript, nos 91, 96 and 97: Jones, 7 and 19 October 1838.

Further progress was halted by a number of factors: the duplicitous behaviour of the “wretches” Cavanagh and McConvill(e), who sought to involve the clergy;<sup>68</sup> Wilson’s unexpected dismissal from office, although his earlier offer of resignation had been refused;<sup>69</sup> and the staunch anti-merger stance of his successor, Hanlon, who advised Jones to terminate talks with the deceitful “Northerners”: “They will never adhere to any argument [. . .] they want to outgeneral you.”<sup>70</sup> The presence of informers, despatched from Ireland, added to mutual hostility and suspicion.<sup>71</sup> Then came news of Jones’s arrest and the seizure of his papers, describing “the history of the Ribbon Society for the last two years”.<sup>72</sup> “All the usual proceedings are now suspended”, McGloin reported, “and intended to be so until after the Spring Assizes. No new members are admitted – no passwords circulated (as I understand), and no meetings held, except of the leaders whose proceedings are kept secret from the members at large”.<sup>73</sup>

“Tho’ Ribbonism has received a great blow”, McGloin concluded a few months later, “it would be absurd to imagine it is extinguished”. During two days of “drinking and squabbling” at the English national board at the Sefton Arms in St Helens in July 1840, all thirteen delegates, representing Bolton, Sheffield, Newcastle, Chester and other northern towns, reported a substantial decline in numbers. In Liverpool, regular members of the Northern Union were down to 320 from a total of 1,350 three years previously. Thomas Burns was appointed national delegate, but this caused displeasure among those who now wished to bypass Liverpool: “Another division then occurred caused by a letter recd. from Michael Magrath, Delegate at Whitehaven, on the part of delegates in Cumberland, Durham, etc denying that they were under the jurisdiction of the Liverpool district and would form another board for themselves to communicate with Ireland.”<sup>74</sup>

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“General Union among Irishmen”, one of the quarterly passwords, proved impossible to effect, but Ribbonism contributed much to the construction of a sectarian *national* identity among the Liverpool Irish. Irish migrants

<sup>68</sup> Jones transcript, no. 100: Jones, 26 October 1838.

<sup>69</sup> Jones transcript, nos 84 and 141: Wilson, 18 September 1838 and 26 June 1839.

<sup>70</sup> Jones transcript, no. 173: Hanlon, 2 August 1839.

<sup>71</sup> Jones transcript, no. 182: Jones, 9 September 1839.

<sup>72</sup> Jones was the first to be tried under new legislation in Ireland, 2 and 3 Victoria cap. 74, declaring illegal associations which communicated by secret signs and passwords.

<sup>73</sup> Report of interview of McGloin, 27 December 1839, C.O. 904/7, ff. 465–470. McGloin referred to the presence of a third network in Liverpool, which was “seated in Connaught and has its head in Sligo”, but I have found no other mention of it. At this stage a member of the Irish Constabulary Force was sent to Liverpool, see H.O. 43/58, f. 393.

<sup>74</sup> Reports dated 26 July and 2 and 30 September 1839, C.O. 904/8, ff. 225–228.

were notorious for their intense regional and local loyalties, for importing their factional feuds, but such “private battles” soon gave way to “sectarian violence” in Liverpool, registering a wider sense of national identity.<sup>75</sup> Ribbonism was the proactive force in this sectarian implantation, able to extend its constituency among other Catholic migrants, while Orangeism, yet to be appropriated by the local Tory establishment, lacked resonance beyond the limited ranks of immigrant Ulster Protestants.<sup>76</sup> In organizational terms, Ribbonism remained a minority movement, strongest among migrants from Ulster and adjoining counties, but its sectarian mentality helped to construct a wider sense of national identity and affiliation in which Catholic and Irish became synonymous. Having imported their fierce sectarian loyalty – “these silly people retaining here”, Head Constable Whitty reported, “the absurd enmities which disgraced and degraded them at home”<sup>77</sup> – the Ribbonmen from the north were to rally their fellow-countrymen and co-religionists against the hereditary enemy, the Orangemen. “The Catholic labourers from the South of Ireland”, Whitty later observed, “seldom belong to Ribbon Lodges, but they share freely in the Catholic hatred of Orangeism, and as they are the more numerous, and not the least reckless body, they are here, in times of disturbance the most difficult to manage.”<sup>78</sup> Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, the Irish Catholics, by force of numbers and/or reputation, were able to prevent the Orange Order taking to the streets on 12 July.<sup>79</sup>

This sectarian national awareness was fostered first in the pub, later by the parish. Dublin Castle asked the Liverpool police to keep a close watch on Jack Langan, a former Irish champion boxer, who ran the most famous “Irish” pub, strategically positioned opposite Clarence Dock, the disembarkation point for Irish passenger traffic – it was immediately recognizable by the effigy of St Patrick, shamrock in hand, high on its walls. Langan enjoyed considerable fame and fortune in Liverpool – his estate was valued at over £20,000 on his death in 1846 – appearing on the platform when his hero, Daniel O’Connell, visited the town. After close surveillance, the police concluded that the former pugilist was “too wealthy and too prudent” to engage in secret Ribbon activity.<sup>80</sup> Lacking such celebrity, other

<sup>75</sup> See the useful distinctions drawn by Anne Bryson in her study of “Riotous Liverpool, 1815–1860”, in Belchem, *Popular Politics, Riot and Labour*, pp. 98–134.

<sup>76</sup> On the origins of Orangeism in Liverpool, see Frank Neal, *Sectarian Violence: The Liverpool Experience 1819–1914* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 17–32.

<sup>77</sup> State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain [. . .] 1836 (40), xxxiv, p. 21.

<sup>78</sup> Whitty’s report, enclosed in Rushton, 2 April 1842, C.O. 904/9.

<sup>79</sup> The worst violence occurred in 1835, as detailed in P. M’Connell’s evidence in Third Report of the Select Committee on Orange Lodges, Parliamentary Papers, 1835 (476), xvi, pp. 6620–6622: “a very determined outrage committed by the Roman Catholics at Liverpool, crying out, “Ten pounds the head of an Orangeman”; disturbing the peace of the whole town; knocked down the authorities, injuring several of the police, and displaying a degree of barbarous ferocity hardly ever equalled in this country”.

<sup>80</sup> Liverpool Police Office, 27 May 1839, C.O. 904/7, f. 192. *Liverpool Mercury*, 19 June 1846. John Denvir, *The Life Story of an Old Rebel* (Dublin, 1910), pp. 3–4 and 52.

Irish publicans undertook Ribbonite office, concealing the secret operations behind their promotion of legally-approved convivial and bibulous forms of associational culture. Hugh McNulty, a Grayson Street publican and one of the founders of the Hibernian Benevolent Society, was “by far the best-known man in Ireland”, regularly representing Liverpool at the Board of Erin until his death in the mid-1830s. His various responsibilities were assumed by George Hamill, who married his widow, took over the pub, and attended the Board three or four times (including the pro-Rice assembly at Dundalk) before his own death a couple of years later. Undaunted, the twice-widowed Mrs Hamill proved a jealous guardian of the Ribbon tradition, one of several female licensees who provided important services for a male-based, pub-centred culture of secrecy.<sup>81</sup> Under cover of the legally-approved Provident Friendly Society, the Grapes Inn remained the most important Ribbonite venue in Liverpool – “the general Box is kept at the Widow Hamills, Grayson Street which is therefore Head Quarters”. Some publicans, however, proved reluctant to commit themselves beyond the provision of premises. John McArdle, an Ulster Catholic by birth, hosted a number of societies at his Crosbie Street pub – including the Second Hibernian Friendly Society, the Third Hibernian Mechanical Society, and one of the earliest lodges of the Ancient Order of Hibernians – some of which, as the action brought against him in 1842 revealed, were undoubtedly a cover for Ribbon activities. According to informers, however, McArdle was “a decent and honourable man who always opposed the continuation of Secret Communication with Ireland”. Having the misfortune to be appointed Liverpool delegate at the time of the arrests and trials of 1840, he chose not to fulfil his duties.<sup>82</sup> In 1842, by which time the movement was well past its peak, Whitty calculated that there were still thirteen Ribbon pubs in Liverpool, although most were “used only as houses of resort, for ordinary rather than special communication”.<sup>83</sup> At some Irish pubs, however, the old faction-fighting culture still prevailed, as at the alehouse in Sawney Pope Street, venue of the Molly Maguires. In this Liverpoolian manifestation, the Mollies were sworn to give mutual help, an insult to one “being taken as an insult to all, for which is sought satisfaction”.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Widow McNamara provided similar services at her jerry shop in Union Street, Preston, see Gilgun’s statement, 5 December 1840, H.O. 100/263, ff. 346–350. Women also provided the premises for clerically-approved societies, such as the St Anthony’s Society at Ellen Wood’s, Cockspur Street, and the Roman Catholic Teetotal Association at Mrs Mountain’s, Flood Street, Liverpool.

<sup>82</sup> Delegates in Liverpool since 1830, C.O. 904/8, ff. 79–80. McArdle’s public readings from the *Nation* became a regular Sunday night attraction at Crosbie Street, see Denvir, *Life Story*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>83</sup> Whitty’s report, 2 April 1842, C.O. 904/9, ff. 210–215.

<sup>84</sup> *Liverpool Journal*, 17 April 1858, quoted in Anne Bryson, “Riot and its Control in Liverpool, 1815–1860” (unpublished M.Phil., Open University, 1989). The Molly Maguires

Pubs and publicans were essential to the operation of Liverpool Ribbonism, but there was a teetotal nationalist alternative. While passing through Liverpool to advocate total abstinence, James McKenna admitted that “the repeal of the Union is the grand object of his mission”. A schoolmaster and founder of several Ribbon lodges in Ireland, McKenna insisted that if the people “kept themselves sober, we would not be now under the British yoke [ . . . ] there is no way of freeing ourselves from that odious Impost but by uniting the Catholic Population of the two countrys (sic) together as one body, to do away with Drunkenness”.<sup>85</sup> The secretary of the Roman Catholic Total Abstinence Association was John Doyle, but it is not clear whether this was the same person as the stout and pugnacious tailor, Johnny Doyle of Lumber Street, a committee member of the Liverpool Hibernian Benevolent Burial Society, and Cunningham’s replacement as Liverpool delegate to the General Board – a number of other Doyles (Peter, Patrick, Terry and Kenny) were prominent office-holders in the Northern Union.<sup>86</sup> In 1848, delegates from the Irish Confederation, the most militant wing of “Young Ireland”, were received at James Lennon’s Temperance Hotel in Houghton Street, regarded by Balfe, a high-placed informer, as the centre of insurrectionary planning. The extension of Confederate Clubs throughout Liverpool was coordinated by another tailor, James Laffin, using James Ord’s temperance coffee-house, venue of the Roman Catholic Total Abstinence Benevolent Society, as his operational base.<sup>87</sup>

Liverpool remained notoriously resistant to Chartist implantation, but it occupies the largest single file in the Home Office Disturbance Papers for 1848 when its Irish population, calculated at 90,000 to 100,000, posed a serious physical threat. Having abandoned residual O’Connellite restraint, middle-class Irish leaders – shipping agents, doctors and tradesmen – revived the Ribbonite culture of secrecy to penetrate deep into the immigrant community, establishing a network of clubs in sympathetic

are best known for their violent and intimidatory industrial tactics in the anthracite coal region of northern Pennsylvania.

<sup>85</sup> Kemmis and Carmichael, 29 September 1838, C.O. 904/7, f. 100. For the remarkable impact of Father Mathew’s visit to Liverpool in 1843 (during which the young Denvir took the pledge three times), see Denvir, *Life Story*, pp. 12–17, and Thomas Burke, *Catholic History of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1910), pp. 73–74.

<sup>86</sup> See the printed rules and regulations of the association in C.O. 904/7, ff. 160–162. On the Doyles, see C.O. 904/8, ff. 79–80. Another tailor, Mark Brannon, served as Liverpool delegate until his expulsion in 1832. A sample of the 1851 census has shown that 57.5 per cent of workers in this sweated trade were Irish, see I. C. Taylor, “‘Black Spot on the Mersey’: A Study of Environment and Society in 18th and 19th Century Liverpool” (unpublished Ph.D., University of Liverpool, 1976), p. 7.

<sup>87</sup> John Belchem, “Liverpool in the Year of Revolution: The Political and Associational Culture of the Irish Immigrant Community in 1848”, in Belchem, *Popular Politics, Riot and Labour*, p. 77.

pubs, temperance hotels and private houses. In Irish Liverpool, indeed, middle-class nationalist leaders (most of whom were Ulster-born Catholics) enjoyed greater success than their counterparts in Ireland itself in enlisting their less fortunate fellow-countrymen in the Confederate cause. A massive military presence was required to guarantee the peace: even so, the anxious mayor and magistrates petitioned for the suspension of habeas corpus in Ireland to be extended to include Liverpool.<sup>88</sup>

The events of 1848, the year of European revolution, were exceptional, and should not obscure important long-term changes in the pattern of ethnic associational culture. These are perhaps most conveniently observed by studying the changing composition of St Patrick's Day processions, always an occasion of proud display. In the 1830s, the Hibernian Societies, exclusively Catholic but in the hands of the laity, dominated the proceedings: by the 1840s, various other associations, mostly under clerical control, joined the procession. Dowling, the deputy Head Constable, provided a detailed breakdown of the participants in 1842, when severe trade depression rather restricted the numbers: "they are too poor to take their scarfs and other finery with which to bedeck themselves out of pledge; for it is the common habit of these men to pawn those articles together with their only decent suit of clothes from the 18th of March in one year until the 16th of the next". Hibernian Societies were still to the fore: taken together, there were 400 marchers from the First and Second Hibernian Friendly Societies, the Third Hibernian Mechanical Society, the Fourth Philanthropy Hibernian Society and the Sixth Hibernian Industrious Society. Another separate society, the Hibernian Benevolent Society of St Patrick was represented by a contingent of 150. The Irish Sons of Freedom mustered a similar number, although Dowling calculated the total number of Ribbonmen as no more than 50, on the basis of those "wearing shamrocks on the left breast with the stalk upwards" – it was the custom for Ribbonmen to wear their shamrocks in distinctive manner on 17 March, as instructed by their boards. Then there were groups under varying degrees of clerical patronage and control: 150 marchers from the Roman Catholic Total Abstinence Benevolent Society; 100 representing the Roman Catholic Teetotal Association (Cork Branch); two parish-based associations, 60 from St Anthony's Society, and 70 from St Anne's Society; and finally, 100 marchers from the Grand United Order of the Catholic Bretheren of the Blackburn Unity in the Liverpool District.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68–97. In Ireland, Ribbonmen were remarkably deferential, awaiting the call to arms from "people of consequence": Ribbonism was "a popular movement almost consciously in search of its insurrectionary elite", Beames, "Ribbon Societies", pp. 137–138. For a reassessment of Chartism in Liverpool, see Kevin Moore, "'This Whig and Tory Ridden Town': Popular Politics In Liverpool in the Chartist Era", in Belchem, *Popular Politics, Riot and Labour*, pp. 38–67.

<sup>89</sup> Dowling, 18 March 1842, C.O. 904/9, ff. 203–206. For this period, St Patrick's Day should not be regarded as the Catholic equivalent of 12 July. While drunken disorder was frequent,

From its Blackburn base, as J. H. Treble has shown, the United Catholic Bretheren “sought to supersede all those secret societies which had hitherto ensnared innocent Catholics”. To match Ribbonism, however, it needed to construct a national framework, to offer not merely sickness and death benefits but also tramping relief. The necessary growth beyond the regional base, however, was impeded by the episcopate, who gave their blessing instead to local “guilds” on the Bradford model, benefit societies strictly under the control of the local clergy and integrated into the spiritual life of the parish.<sup>90</sup> Having duly reminded his audience that members of secret societies could not be admitted to the sacraments, Bishop Sharples, speaking at the first anniversary of the Liverpool Holy Guild of Mercy in 1846, opined that Catholic guilds had more to offer than affiliated friendly societies like the OddFellows:

They aimed, he said, at providing for the mere physical wants of the members; but the guilds were preferable to any of them, as the members were bound together by the ties of religion, which united them the more firmly in the bonds of Christian charity, – whilst, at the same time, their physical necessities were provided for on a basis perfectly secure.<sup>91</sup>

By this time, however, most northern guilds had already collapsed, victims of the cyclical depression of the early 1840s. Thereafter, Treble contends, Catholic workers turned back to trade unionism towards which the clergy duly abandoned much of its former hostility.<sup>92</sup> In Liverpool, however, a different pattern prevailed. Catholic social welfare continued to expand, struggling to keep pace with the Famine influx, a burden of destitution compounded, as the Catholic Benefit Society noted, by “the arrival from Ireland of many persons who intended to emigrate, but who were stricken down by sickness and want, and were thus compelled to remain”.<sup>93</sup> Having failed to eradicate Ribbonism by proscription, the Catholic church developed a rival, parish-based framework of associational culture, offering cradle to grave sustenance and support for Irish immigrants, male and female. Liverpool’s north end soon emerged as a distinctively Irish – and Catholic – community in which new churches with Irish

sectarian riot was almost unknown. However, from 1853 all such processions were banned within Liverpool boundaries, see Bryson, “Riotous Liverpool”, pp. 118–120. Preachers such as Father Cahill sought to give the Catholic church credit for this “sacrifice” intended to “soothe political rancour” and increase “social virtue and domestic happiness”, see D. Fitzpatrick, “‘A Peculiar Tramping People’: the Irish in Britain, 1801–70”, in Vaughan, *Ireland Under the Union*, p. 654.

<sup>90</sup> Treble, “Attitude of Roman Catholic Church”, pp. 104–111.

<sup>91</sup> *Liverpool Mercury*, 25 September 1846. At this stage, the boys’ branch numbered 120, the girls’ 150, and the men’s about 120.

<sup>92</sup> Treble, “Attitude of Roman Catholic Church”, pp. 111–113.

<sup>93</sup> Liverpool Record Office, 361 CAT: Liverpool Catholic Benefit Society Minute Book, 1850–58, press cutting from *Liverpool Mercury*, 23 December 1851. Established in 1810, it guarded against “imposition” by its “fundamental rule”: “no relief can be granted but at

priests became the centre of associational life, encouraging the tendency to residential propinquity.<sup>94</sup> In these dockland parishes, the benefits reached down to casual labourers and their families, bad risks excluded from new model forms of work-based collective mutuality. While the Liverpool Liberal elite preserved its distance from the crude conviviality of working-class culture, Catholic priests and Irish nationalist politicians displayed a willingness to compromise with the street and the pub: regular intervention in such matters as fighting and drinking carried no expectation of permanent moral reform.<sup>95</sup>

Ribbonism began the symbiotic process by which national and religious identity became interwoven in Irish Liverpool, establishing the sectarian foundations for an effective “pillarized” form (to adopt a useful term from Dutch social history) of welfare politics. Fenianism marked a further stage as the “social significance” of its associational culture quickly outweighed its nationalist military or political importance.<sup>96</sup> As perfected by the Harford brothers and T. P. O’Connor, the Irish national political machine, mobilized through the Catholic parish infrastructure, catered for second-generation (i.e. Liverpool-born) Irish, for whom the fate of Ireland was of less account than the immediate housing and employment needs of local Catholics.<sup>97</sup> Operating through personal contacts and priestly patronage, it served as an effective counterweight to the dominant Tory-Democratic electoral machine. Its long-term viability, however, depended upon the continued estrangement of the Liverpool Irish from other (class-based) political formations.<sup>98</sup>

the recommendation of the Clergymen, to whom the situation of the object is perfectly known”.

<sup>94</sup> J. D. Papworth, “The Irish in Liverpool 1835–71: Segregation and Dispersal” (unpublished Ph.D., University of Liverpool, 1982), ch. 5.

<sup>95</sup> John Belchem, “The Irish in Britain, United States and Australia: Some Comparative Reflections on Labour History”, in John Belchem and Patrick Buckland (eds), *The Irish in British Labour History* (Liverpool, 1993), pp. 19–20.

<sup>96</sup> Lowe, “Lancashire Fenianism”, p. 171.

<sup>97</sup> Bernard O’Connell, “Irish Nationalism in Liverpool, 1873–1923”, *Éire-Ireland*, 10 (1975), pp. 24–37; A. Shallice, “Orange and Green and Militancy: Sectarianism and Working-class Politics in Liverpool, 1900–1914”, *Bulletin of the Northwest Labour History Society*, 6 (1979–80), pp. 15–32; and L. W. Brady, *T. P. O’Connor and the Liverpool Irish* (London, 1983). See also, P. J. Waller, *Democracy and Sectarianism: A Political and Social History of Liverpool, 1868–1939* (Liverpool, 1981).

<sup>98</sup> Joan Smith, “Labour Tradition in Glasgow and Liverpool”, *History Workshop Journal*, 17 (1984), pp. 32–56.