

County Clare Studies

Essays in Memory of
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THE CLARE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY
CUMANN SEANDÁLAÍOCHTA AGUS STAIRÉ AN CHLÁIR

'The Exterminator General of Clare'
Marcus Keane of Beech Park
(1815-1883)

Ciarán Ó Murchadha

SOME time after his death in October 1883, the burial vault containing the remains of Marcus Keane was broken into by night, and the remains removed. Despite an intensive search by the constabulary, no trace of them was found. Even when the remains were recovered eight years later, under the sensational circumstances related at the end of this article, no clue emerged as to the identity or motivation of the perpetrators. However, tradition in the Beech Park area insists that the theft of the remains was a deliberate and symbolic act of desecration, carried out by local people for whom the deceased, in his lifetime, had been the focus of the most intense dread and loathing. For Marcus Keane was the Famine-era 'exterminator' par excellence, a powerful land agent who at that time carried out a massive eviction programme in Clare, causing immense human suffering and the deaths of unknown numbers of men, women and children.

In recent generations the once-vivid folk memory of Marcus Keane has faded so completely that today his name is largely forgotten in his native county. Even in the parishes surrounding his residence of Beech Park, near Ennis, remarkably few tales of his deeds survive. In West Clare, where the ruin of his summer residence, Doondahlin, still broods over the tiny cove and settlement of Kilbaha, recollection is somewhat sharper. But even here, only one specific memory survives, and that relates not to evictions, but to Marcus's connection with a particularly bitter chapter in the history of post-Famine evangelical proselytism and forced conversions to Protestantism.¹

The recent upsurge of interest in Famine history has inevitably led to a new attention on the part of scholars to significant participants in the tragic events of that time. This new interest comes as traces of them have vanished from the folk memory of their localities, and as the folk memory itself has all but dissipated. Marcus Keane is typical of such individuals. His story is important for what it tells us of the career of a major evictor, and also for the light it sheds on that especially grim and dark period at the end of the Great Famine which, even in the present flourishing climate of Famine studies, remains strangely neglected.

Throughout the Famine years, the Keane agency grew, and by the end of 1847, it was noted that many smaller landowners in west Clare were transferring their properties to it because of the reputation Marcus had already established as 'a well-known stringent and successful collector of rents'.²² More than likely, this drift to Keane management took place in other parts of the county as well. So many smaller landowners in Clare were now experiencing a drastic and sustained drop in rental income after several years of famine, that the employment of a ruthless agent such as Marcus was known to be, appeared to present their only means of staying off financial ruin. Such landlords could not have doubted that large-scale evictions would be central to Marcus's strategy for restoring their fortunes.

Famine Clearances and Exterminations

In the waves of evictions that took place in Ireland in the years after 1847, no county endured more than did Clare. From 1849 - the first year for which we have reliable statistics - until 1854, nearly one tenth of its population experienced permanent expulsion from their homes. In the Kiltrush Union, which suffered most atrociously of all, the situation was much worse, however difficult that may be to imagine.²³ When it is remembered that the campaign was already well developed when figures were first collected, some idea is obtained of the enormity of the population displacement that was involved. Staggering though these facts are, they give little insight into the agonies suffered by the evicted, the devastating impact of evictions on society as a whole, or even of the transformation of the landscape to the bleak and forbidding wilderness which visitors found so shocking.²⁴

A deeper cause than mere inability to pay rent lies behind the savage intensity of these evictions, to which, in a most insidious way, the Poor Law itself acted as a major stimulus. Under the Poor Law, the poverty tax, or poor rate, carried by each of the smallest holdings, was payable by the landlord, wholly or in part, depending on the size of the holding. Since the great majority of Clare holdings were so small as to incur a heavy rate liability on the part of landlords, which could no longer be recovered from the rents, rapidly increasing pauperisation of tenants threatened to drive the rate to insupportable levels. For many landlords, the only means of avoiding a potentially ruinous rate bill was to evict their smallholders and eliminate their holdings.

According to James S. Donnelly, it was probably fear of being swamped by pauperism that pushed landowners in Kiltrush towards clearances, and it is hardly likely that such a fear was confined to west Clare.²⁵ Yet another fear prevailed in the county generally, that if the eviction option were not taken immediately, it might soon be lost altogether if, as seemed likely, a measure of tenant right were granted by government.²⁶

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For the last two reasons, shortly into the eviction campaign, a veritable frenzy developed, with landlords vying with each other in an insensate rush to clear as much of their properties as possible. By the time the frenzy had died down, clearances had gone well beyond what was originally intended or indeed wise for the interests of the participants, the agents and landlords of County Clare.²⁷

Estate Consolidation

For some wealthier landlords, Famine-era evictions were less an expression of financial insecurity or fear of pauperism than a logical extension of estate improvement policies begun years before. For such individuals, famine destitution provided a conclusive, if inhuman, reason for the consolidation of smallholdings into larger units, to an extent that had previously been considered necessary, but physically impossible and morally unjustifiable. All the features of pre-Famine estate consolidation are to be found in certain Famine-era clearances: the clearing of middleman farms of cottiers; the conversion of some farms *in toto* to grass; the re-surveying of evicted lands and the redistribution of holdings among remaining tenants. Even the opprobrious term, 'extermination,' used by critics of these Famine-era clearances, had originated in the consolidations of the immediate pre-Famine period.²⁸

It is hardly a coincidence, therefore, that when the Famine clearances began in Clare at the end of 1847, it was the great magnates and pre-Famine consolidators, Colonels George Wyndham and Crofton Vandeleur who were first recorded as issuing extraordinary numbers of notices to quit.²⁹ Close on their heels was the agent of the Conyngham and Westby estates, Marcus Keane.³⁰

By the beginning of 1848, the correspondence of Poor Law inspectors in all Clare Unions was already laden with graphic details of the horrifying effects of clearances. Their reports portray a workhouse system that was overwhelmed with huge influxes of filthy, emaciated and fever-ridden half-skeletons; large crowds of the excluded clamouring desperately for admission outside, and a frightful level of mortality among recent admissions. The reports of Captain Kennedy, the inspector at Kilrush Union, are among the most shocking, with their descriptions of recently evicted tenants wandering in the hinterland, digging miserable burrows and 'scalps' in the bogs, and waiting in misery for the death that claimed thousands of them.³¹

If the sufferings of the Kilrush Union were most publicised at the time, all the other Clare Unions experienced heavy clearances. By May 1849, house-levelling had reportedly reduced the Ennistymon Union to a 'wilderness,' while the *Limerick and Clare Examiner* suggested that to date in the Ennis and Kilrush Unions respectively, some 13,000 and 15,000 persons had been ejected.³² In comparing these last two Unions with Ennistymon, the *Examiner* declared 'there was neither

such cruelty nor tyranny nor oppression as in the Union of Ennistymon, there were not exterminations and persecution so unrelenting and merciless.'

Among the different sources, official and otherwise, that drew attention to the Clare clearances, none was more outspoken or unrelenting in its criticism than the *Limerick and Clare Examiner*. From the beginning of the campaign, the Limerick-based *Examiner* published letters and eyewitness accounts from the distressed districts; dispatched its own reporters to eviction sites, and commissioned 'special correspondents' to describe the blighted landscapes of Clare. It printed detailed catalogues of evictions, giving the names of the landlords and agents involved. Above all, its editorials subjected the worst evictors to sustained and bitter attack.

A Catalogue of Evictions for 1848

It was in March 1848 that the *Examiner* first identified Marcus Keane as a major evictor.³³ Over the next two years, it would follow his career in a mounting barrage of detailed reportage and angry editorial denunciation that greatly exceeded its criticism of any other exterminator. The following catalogue of Keane's evicting activity during 1848 is derived substantially from the newspaper.

In February, Marcus Keane evicted 30 families on Westby property at Annaghneal, east Clare, levelling all their houses.³⁴ Later in the same month, he removed another 30 families from three townlands near Kilrush, to a total of 185 persons.³⁵ About the same time, in the district of Kilmaley, adjacent to his own seat at Deech Park, he had four townlands cleared.³⁶ Early in March, he conducted a particularly controversial series of evictions at Meelick in south Clare. We shall return to these evictions shortly.³⁷

Throughout the spring and early summer, Marcus pursued his evicting operations relentlessly, undeterred by adverse newspaper publicity and the increasing disquiet of the authorities, which had been communicated to him. For several months of the summer, news of the Young Ireland rebellion and its local repercussions displaced eviction coverage from the columns of the *Examiner*, but as regards west Clare, the deficiency is to some extent supplied by Captain Kennedy, the Poor Law inspector at Kilrush. Kennedy's reports to his superiors show that Keane was as busy as ever in August, evicting 175 persons at Kilmacduane, West Clare, on 9 August, and 123 more a few days later in an adjoining property.³⁸ At the end of the month, he was reported to be evicting at Benedict, Lissycasey, a district that to this point had escaped lightly.³⁹ In mid-September, Marcus was at work in north Clare, from where a special correspondent of the *Examiner* wrote that his name 'sounded in my ear wherever I wandered, and [his] acts as an agent. I did not hear one man praise'.⁴⁰

At the end of September, Keane was back in Kilmaley - a frequent tactic on his

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part was to carry out particularly heavy evictions in a given location in different phases many months apart from each other. Here he evicted 400 individuals on three townlands, leaving 'dreadful desolation' in his wake.⁴¹ The depopulation resulting from the Kilmaley operations was especially severe because the lands had been re-let wholesale to grazier farmers. Many of the unhoused were sleeping in ditches, and those on the relief lists 'hovered about like ghosts in the vicinity of their former dwellings until the relief ceased, and then they too, were obliged to become wanderers through the country.' Unknown numbers of evicted families perished.

In late October, Marcus returned to Meelick, where he evicted a further 80 families.⁴² In mid-November he was in the Kildysert area, and at Inagh, north of Ennis a week later. It was said of him at this time that he 'prays fervently at night, and superintends in person the operation of house levelling in the morning'.⁴³ Almost to the end of the year, Marcus maintained the unremitting pace of evictions by the clearing of several townlands in the Kilrush Union.⁴⁴

Evictions by Marcus Keane were even more extensive in 1849, but it would be tedious and time-consuming to catalogue them through that year. One indication of the energy expended by him in the campaign is that by May, he was so busily engaged in clearing properties that he was forced to surrender his leased farms, 'not having sufficient time to devote to them'.⁴⁵

Evictions at Meelick

Basic statistics survive for a great many of the evictions carried out by Marcus Keane. Typically, these furnish us with data on the numbers evicted, the names of the tenants, and frequently the size of each family. In remarkably few instances, however, do we possess a full description of the eviction process on a given site, such as might afford us a glimpse of the reality hidden behind each of the hundreds of cases whose bare facts are known to us. It is for this reason that the evictions carried out by Marcus Keane on the Marquis of Conyngham's property at Meelick in March 1848 are of such crucial importance. Because of the controversy aroused by the Meelick evictions, a body of documentation has survived that tells the story from the three contrasting perspectives of the engaged observer, the investigating authorities and the evictor himself. Through this documentation we can also examine the fate of some of the evicted families after they had been unhoused. Most importantly of all, Meelick tells us a great deal of Marcus Keane's work practices, and of the manner in which he justified his actions as he carried them out.

Even before the onset of Famine clearances, Marcus had the Meelick property in his sights, and in March 1847, he had served sixty processes there for non-

payment of rent. According to the *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, assistance in employment, seed, and contributions to relief committee funds, liberally provided by Conyngham to the Meelick tenants in 1847, had not been renewed in the current year.¹⁶ Since we know from other sources that certain middlemen leases had expired, or were about to expire in the locality, we can be sure that the withdrawal of relief was a prelude to the consolidation of the Meelick property.¹⁷

In September, Marcus Keane appeared at Meelick and demanded possession of a further eighty tenants. By his own account, he offered to allow them remain in their houses if they agreed to the redistribution of the lands among neighbouring tenants. Unable to take possession or clear the lands of stock because of tenant 'intimidation,' he withdrew. At the same time, the police reported that a notice had been posted on the chapel door at Meelick warning tenants against taking any 'evicted' land.¹⁸

In early March 1848 Marcus sent a large group of 'levellers' or 'wreckers' to Meelick, who proceeded systematically to clear the property. A preliminary two-day operation saw hundreds expelled from their homes and left to fend for themselves. After this Marcus withdrew his forces, temporarily, to other eviction sites. A few weeks later, with further evictions pending, the *Limerick and Clare Examiner* published a full description of the scene at Meelick, written by a 'special reporter' who had visited the locality in person.¹⁹

Evictions at Meelick: The Special Reporter's Account

The special reporter's account concentrates on the fate of four evicted families, related to him by family members or neighbours, and it concludes with a table containing details of all the evicted families in addition to those still awaiting eviction. As with so much of the *Examiner's* eviction reportage, the special reporter's account is couched in language that is vivid and highly emotional. Nevertheless it carries the power and immediacy of an eyewitness account, and as we shall see, its reliability can be readily measured against other descriptions.

The first case related by the special reporter concerned the family of Patrick Hickey, who had been served with a notice to quit under an ejectment order taken out by Keane 'nearly against the whole townland.' For a time Hickey clung desperately to his cabin, abandoning it only on the day the writ was due to be executed. Together with his wife and five children, he then sought and gained admission to the Limerick workhouse. Within a few days, however, he withdrew his family from the workhouse, fleeing the freezing conditions and rampant fever that prevailed there and which threatened their lives even more than the prospect of starvation outside.

Returning to Meelick, the Hickeys re-occupied their cabin, miraculously left

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intact by the levellers. Unfortunately, they also brought the fever with them from the workhouse, and within days, two of the children fell ill and died. Hickey was forced to scavenge materials for coffins in the neighbourhood, travelling 'no less than 20 houses to make the materials out; getting a few nails in one, perhaps, and a fragment of timber in another.' Shortly after the burial of the children, Hickey, his wife and the three remaining children fell ill. The parents died one after another, both lying dead in one bed for some time before being discovered and buried with the others. At the time of the reporter's visit, the three surviving children were still in fever.

The other three cases were equally harrowing. Inside the ruins of his house the special reporter found the family of Francis Carey, Hickey's neighbour, preparing an evening meal that consisted of 'a small parcel of spongy turnips and greenish tops by way of luxury.' Carey had been in much better circumstances than Hickey, and had managed to reclaim a few acres of his holding, even though Marcus Keane had refused him an outlet for his drains to a nearby stream. When he fell into difficulties after successive failures of the potato crop, Keane refused him any assistance that might have enabled him recover. Forbidden from letting his land for grazing, on Keane's orders, Carey's cattle were driven off and replaced by those of other men. Forced to sell off the cattle at a fraction of their value, Carey fell hopelessly into arrears, and his holding was included in Keane's general ejection.

When the levelling crew arrived, Carey was away from home, and his wife, who was heavily pregnant, firmly refused them entry. The following day, on Carey's return, possession was again demanded, and this time he yielded, caught as he was between the threats of Keane's men and the promise of £5 if he himself 'tumbled' the house. This latter promise, according to the special reporter, was 'a piece of management' on the part of Marcus Keane designed 'to make the levellings seem voluntary.' Carey thus destroyed his own house, all but one section of roof, under which he and his family sheltered as they waited for the promised 'compensation.'

The third case detailed by the special reporter related to a widow named Cherry, whom he alleged had been forcibly ejected. In the course of destroying the house, the levellers placed one of Widow Cherry's sick children outside the house, where she died within a short time. In the final case, a tenant named Gallagher, who held 26 acres, had gone to meet Marcus Keane in Limerick to offer him as much of his rent arrears as he had managed to raise. In his absence, his house was levelled and his infant children placed on the roadside.

The eviction table that follows these four case histories (which have been much abbreviated in the above summary) is too imprecise to allow of detailed analysis. However, insofar as it is possible to make out, the special reporter calculated

that a total of 141 persons had been unhoused at Meelick over the two days, whether by physical ejection, or 'voluntary' surrender. Those awaiting ejection he estimated at 129.⁵⁰

Evictions at Meelick: Police Investigation

For a short time, the Meelick affair became a minor *cause célèbre* when the *Irish* newspaper published extracts from the special reporter's account, together with his eviction table.⁵¹ The resulting publicity caused the authorities to order an investigation by the constabulary. This was carried out by Sub-Inspector Donovan of the Newmarket-on-Fergus station on 6 April, and on the basis of his enquiries, Donovan submitted a report, which was forwarded to Dublin immediately afterwards.⁵²

Donovan's report takes the form of a point-by-point comparison of the *Irish* article with his on-site observations at Meelick, but probably for practical reasons, he makes no attempt to compile a statistical table of his own. His report reflects a thorough and painstaking enquiry into the facts of the case, and its detached official tone presents a sharp contrast with the emotion-charged prose of the special reporter. But differences of tone and a few, mostly minor, discrepancies apart, the report bears out the latter's account to a remarkable degree.

But Donovan does more than merely confirm the special reporter's allegations. He also provides us with valuable extra information regarding the four families, which casts an even more tragic light on their situation. He tells us, for example, that the surviving Hickey children were now in the Limerick fever hospital, and that Widow Cherry's child had died in a miserable hut thrown together by her mother on a remote mountainside - neighbours would not take in the other sick children because of the threat to their own families. Gallagher had been secure until two years previously when the middleman to whom he paid his rent surrendered it to Lord Conyngham on the expiration of the lease. Gallagher, Donovan informs us, had been much better off than the other tenants, in that sixteen years earlier he had been able to pay the large sum of £100 to the previous occupier for the 'interest' of the holding. After his house had been levelled, neighbours had taken in his children, and he was now living, wretchedly, in the shell of his ruined house.

If anything Donovan reveals that the special reporter's account, no matter how impassioned and partisan it might have been, actually understated the true extent of the tragedy at Meelick. This is especially evident in his methodical review of the circumstances of those families listed in the eviction table. Here he gives many additional details; unhoused families living in makeshift huts built on the roadside, or up against the gables of their destroyed houses, with others huddling in the

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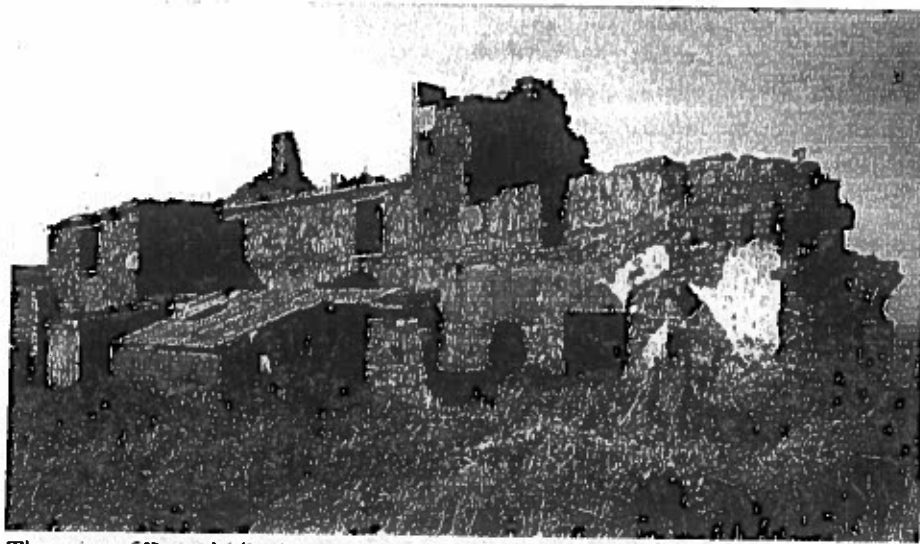
ruins, waiting miserably for the paltry compensation promised by the agent. He tells us of cases where ejected tenants were scattered among relatives in adjacent townlands, or among the streets and slums of Limerick City. There is one particularly graphic instance where a widow whose house had been levelled, had since been living with her family in a 'pig-house' in a neighbouring townland. This evidence is all the more impressive for the manner in which it translates through Donovan's carefully neutral tone, as, for example, where he conveys a strong sense of the constant nagging terror endured by families who existed in daily anticipation of being ejected.

Donovan's report is careful in another sense, in that he is at pains to preserve legal distinctions as to the *status quo ante* tenure of those unhoused, and the exact manner of their removal. He distinguishes between 'recognised' tenants on the estate, and those who had never paid rent to the head landlord. He also carefully separates instances where houses were 'thrown down' by their occupiers, from those where tenants were 'turned out.' Such precision was necessary, given that Donovan had been supplied with Marcus Keane's initial response to the special reporter's allegations, in which the agent sought to hide behind these fine legal distinctions to conceal the full extent of the devastation he had caused at Meelick.⁵³

Evictions at Meelick: Marcus Keane's Defence

If Donovan's report supplies us with a useful yardstick by which to measure the general accuracy of the *Examiner's* eviction reportage, both are crucial to an evaluation of Marcus Keane's defence of his conduct. Keane's version is found in two letters, one published in the *Clare Journal* on 3 April, and the other, a private response written a few weeks later in answer to a direct request for clarification by T.M. Redington, the Under Secretary.⁵⁴ The greater part of the first letter is taken up with a refutation of certain details of the special reporter's case histories. Thus Patrick Hickey, whose misfortunes had been unfairly ascribed to the Marquis Conyngham, was not, and had never been a tenant on the property. Francis Carey had not been refused an outlet for his drainage; neither had he been prevented from taking grazing cattle; Mary Cherry had indeed been 'turned out,' but she owed two years rent. Gallagher had rented a farm, but had not paid a shilling rent, and owed more than £70.

The plausibility of Marcus Keane's version rests on the fact that where possible he adheres closely to technical truths. Patrick Hickey, for example, had been a tenant of the middleman who had previously rented the land; and therefore, as Donovan carefully stated, and Keane reiterated, he was not a 'recognised' tenant of the Conyngham estate. He belonged rather to the category of 'squatter,' and



The ruins of Doondahlin, Marcus Keane's summer residence at Kilbaha.

therefore had no tenure rights at all. Similarly, Keane's assertion that only six tenants were 'turned out' at Meelick, in the sense of being physically ejected, is also accurate in a technical sense (Donovan concluded that seven tenants were evicted in this manner).⁵⁵ But this, of course, is no more than a half-truth, since the great majority of those unhoused at Meelick had been induced to tumble their own houses. In Marcus's lexicon, these are 'voluntary' surrenders, and even though he allows that on one townland the occupiers of six houses were 'taken possession of,' these unfortunate persons were, like Patrick Hickey, mere 'squatters or persons who had never paid rent to Lord Conyngham'.⁵⁶

It is a measure of Marcus Keane's arrogance that his second letter – the reply to the Under Secretary – doesn't bother to address the extra detail of Donovan's report, extracts of which had been sent to him, but merely encloses a copy of his published letter for reference. Central to both letters is the extraordinary claim that the Meelick tenants, generously relieved by Lord Conyngham in previous years, had failed to pay their rents, not because of poverty and distress, but because of 'a strongly formed and general combination' against the landlord.

Any notion of conspiracy on the part of ungrateful tenants can be instantly dismissed: all of the Meelick tenants had been stricken by successive years of crop failure. What follows in the second letter, however, inadvertently reveals the real reason for the evictions. 'These people,' Marcus says of the tenants 'were holders of very small farms...under an old and very cheap letting, a tenancy at will. The holdings were much reduced in size by subletting'.⁵⁷ Clearly, therefore, what had

happened at Meelick is the calamity of a ruinous decade: this 'old and ruinous' the land among the estate could not be accepted. What in circumstances is the ability of property and its appeal to the human imagination of the cruel and the afflicted suffering because of what we know the British indigenous people. It is nothing

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happened at Meelick was that the expiration of the middlemen leases and the vulnerability of a ruined tenantry had provided the expedient moment to rationalise this 'old and very cheap letting,' by clearing the property and redistributing the land among other tenants.

Of itself, estate consolidation was not necessarily an inhuman process, and indeed could be accepted as a legitimate long-term aspiration of efficient estate management. What makes Marcus Keane's behaviour so reprehensible in the circumstances is the absolutely ruthless manner in which he pursued it on the Meelick property and indeed throughout all his extensive domains, without any regard to the human consequences. Neither of his letters shows the slightest appreciation of the cruelty with which this estate consolidation was effected, nor of the dreadful suffering and widespread mortality that occurred as a direct result. In view of what we know to have taken place at Meelick and other eviction sites, the bland disingenuousness of statements such as the following, taken from his second letter, is nothing short of bloodcurdling:⁵⁶

...many of the tenants not only gave up possession of their own free will and threw down their houses in the absence of myself and my bailiffs, but some came to request I would not delay in demanding possession, as they were anxious to get their compensation. They appear however to have since changed their minds in hope, I suppose, of making better terms.

The Ennis Wreckers

Marcus Keane managed his far-flung property portfolio from offices annexed to the main residence at Beech Park. We know that he employed a clerical staff and legal advisers, and in the field, a small army of under-agents, bailiffs, rent-collectors, drivers and keepers.⁵⁹ Of all those in his employ, the single largest component was a group of 'levellers' or 'wreckers,' whose presence at an eviction site was intended to overawe tenants into compliance with ejectment writs, and to destroy houses to prevent their reoccupation afterwards by the expelled tenants.

At an earlier phase of the Famine, one factor that had deterred landlords from engaging in wholesale clearances, had been the apprehension of a violent reaction on the part of tenants, or on their behalf by the secret societies. By 1848, however, prolonged attrition by famine had shattered rural communities beyond the possibility of resistance, dispersing those who had been inclined to violence to the jails, convict ships and workhouses or to their deaths by fever and starvation. In this context, the threatening notices posted at Meelick, and the 'intimidation' suffered by Marcus Keane's bailiffs in the autumn of 1847 represented a last feeble attempt at this sort of community resistance.



Residence at Killybeg

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By the time clearances began in earnest, as we have seen, tenants were usually so docile as to leave their houses on the serving of the ejection notices, or sufficiently malleable to be induced to destroy their own houses. Others surrendered their land on the promise of being left in their houses as 'caretakers' to be removed at leisure at a later time; others again on the promise of a ticket to the workhouse. Evictors rapidly learned to exploit tenant vulnerability in this manner in order to avoid the cost of legal actions and to reduce operational expense. Although Marcus Keane would consistently use such methods throughout his campaign, from an early period he also maintained a force of levellers for use whenever large numbers of houses were to be destroyed.

According to his own account, Marcus Keane first assembled these levellers when local people physically prevented his bailiffs from driving off stock at Meelick in September 1847.⁶⁰ Afterwards they were retained as a unit and deployed in many different areas of the county. Our sources speak of a force of between 30 and 40 men - Marcus indeed puts their number at an exact 37, all of them from the Ennis area. The tools of their trade consisted of sticks, pickaxes, and crowbars, and although a later source credits Marcus with the invention of a kind of grappling hook for the removal of thatch, we have no contemporary reference to its use by wreckers during the clearances.⁶¹

In September 1848, in one district of the Kilrush Union, a special correspondent of the *Limerick and Clare Examiner* observed the levellers going about their work,⁶²

...a band of men scouring the country like a banditti of roving Arabs, carrying with them implements of destruction, to demolish houses and drive hundreds to beg. It would astonish...to witness the avidity with which these wretches perform in one district their revolting duty, and emboldened by a large posse of black belted gentlemen, tear the last shred of thatch from over the fever-stricken patient or the suffering widow.

Despite the *Examiner's* general - and understandable - antipathy towards the levellers, there is at times almost a note of pity in its treatment of these unhappy individuals, who probably had no other means of avoiding starvation or the workhouse than their despised occupation. Nearly all of them were young, the greater number no more than nineteen or twenty years of age, and in the *Examiner's* reportage they are generally furtive, uneasy, and not very competent in their work. To fortify themselves in their unpleasant task, they were frequently described as being drunk, on alcohol supplied by their overseer.

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crowbars from Ennis to supply this band of levellers, who were about to embark on evictions in the parish of Inagh.⁶³ One occupier whose cabin was spared, was sent into Ennistymon to procure whiskey, and 'after partaking of this preparation out of a jar without a handle,' the levellers proceeded to destroy 35 cabins, unhousing a total of 200 persons. In mid-December, a gang of 'thirty or forty scoundrels from Ennis,' some of them armed with fowling pieces and blunderbusses, seized cattle for unpaid rent in the Cratloe area, taking advantage of the absence of their owners at Limerick market.⁶⁴ The bailiffs, reportedly drunk, had licences to bear arms, granted them by the agent who was also a magistrate, an individual who can only be Marcus Keane.

Henry Keane and Renewed Evictions at Meelick

Invariably the levellers were directed in their work either by under-agents or by Henry Keane, Marcus's younger brother. Marcus himself rarely features on site during evictions. We know of two under-agents employed by Marcus Keane, Dan Sheedy and Basil Lukey Davoren. Of Sheedy, little is known beyond the fact that he operated in west Clare.⁶⁵ Davoren, on the other hand, was the son of an Ennis solicitor, and somewhat down in his personal fortunes before he took employment with Marcus Keane.⁶⁶ It was Davoren, a burly individual, who led the levellers at Inagh in November 1848, flourishing a blackthorn stick, and apparently revelling in what he called 'slaughtering houses'.⁶⁷ We have one other brief description of him a few months later in the same locality, 'armed cap a pie,' walking 'in advance of a line of wreckers, proceeding to their work'.⁶⁸

By far the strangest individual employed by Marcus Keane was his brother, Henry. As he later told a parliamentary inquiry, Henry was neither under-agent nor overseer, but served in a general capacity in his brother's office. On Marcus's behalf, he carried out scores of evictions, the most interesting from our point of view being a further round at Meelick in February 1849.⁶⁹ Here, in the first week of February alone, Henry had 27 houses thrown down on one townland, scattering their 135 occupiers, either 'to swell the vagrant list' of Limerick City, or to perish of fever or exposure to cold on the roadside.⁷⁰

The evictions had been in progress for a full week when a reporter for the *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, who was particularly anxious to meet Henry Keane, travelled the short distance to the parish. Henry was located at Meelick Cross, after a journey through townlands which bore the marks of his passage: a trail of wrecked houses, with families at work constructing shelters in the ruins or building roadside huts from the broken debris. The reporter found Henry to be a 'fine young man' who nevertheless cut an outlandish be-whiskered figure, with his military dress and 'Jim Crow' hat tied under his chin. When he arrived, Henry and

his 'thirty Ennis rascallions' were setting about the removal of a family named Kinnavane from their cabin.⁷¹

However, when the wreckers reached the Kinnavane house, the occupier, his two brothers and some local people confronted them. After a short scuffle, which was watched from a distance by a pistol-waving Henry Keane, the levellers were driven off.⁷² Resistance of this kind was by now a rare phenomenon at evictions, and only when the reporter entered the cabin (at the Kinnavanes' request) did the reason for it become evident. On the floor of the cabin, on a pile of straw, the Kinnavanes' mother, an aged woman, lay on her deathbed. Her sons told the reporter that they were merely seeking to allow their mother to die in peace before surrendering the cabin.

Minutes later, Henry Keane intruded into this moving scene, muttering threats that he would level the house if he had to remain there for a week. Inside the house (which he had entered without hindrance), he delivered himself of a strange, disjointed commentary:

Kinnavane, you acted a blackguard, and I won't leave this house till I see the sky through it. I am a gentleman, and though my cowards ran, I have a few of the best in Clare that will stick with me to death...Kinnavane, I must put your mother out; I won't stir till she is put out by the ditch side; I am the poor man's friend...I tell you I am your friend... I will do all in my power against you, and you have on your floor the worst of the Keanes.

To be sure, Henry Keane's words are reported to us here by a source that cannot be considered impartial, but they are of a piece with examples of his bizarre locution that we come across elsewhere.⁷³ The report as a whole, it should be added, is largely free of the heavy and irritating sarcasm that permeates much of the *Examiner's* references to the Keanes. The reporter even refrains from making the obvious conclusion that Henry might have been drunk.

Keane stayed in the Kinnavane cabin all night, departing only with daylight. Later on in the morning, he accosted the reporter, threatening that if he published his name or that of his brother, Marcus in connection with the evictions, three hundred ejection notices would be served immediately on 'the most respectable persons in Meelick'.⁷⁴ More extravagant threats followed in a semi-coherent monologue, punctuated with the waving of a stick, and ending with the now familiar refrain that Henry was 'the poor man's friend.'

Within a few days, Henry Keane completed the evictions, this time under the watchful eye of a force of police from local stations, who stood by with bayoneted rifles. Their presence was unnecessary: the local people were so much

to be so scarce that numbers of the evictions, in a Kinnavane cabin, the dying mother, the house was reduced to a pile of ruins reported at home to the Keanes.

More of the West Clare

More examples of the latter type of Keane were situated which had been controlled with some local concentration. The most notorious example was that of the Kinnavane cabin, to which he had returned to perhaps to provide a solution to a problem of a comparative type, namely, the period from 1845 to 1850 in the United Kingdom, the period of the famine.

In the case of the Kinnavane cabin, the Kinnavane family were completely evicted from the cabin and there was a total loss of life. The Kinnavane family were the only family in the area that had a total loss of life. The Kinnavane family were the only family in the area that had a total loss of life. The Kinnavane family were the only family in the area that had a total loss of life.

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beyond resistance that numbers of them pleaded with the reporter not to publish details of the evictions, in order to prevent their houses being levelled. At the Kinnavane cabin, the dying widow was taken out by two of the levellers, after which the house was reduced to rubble. On the same day, nine families, totalling 48 persons, were ejected at Meelick, in the *Examiner's* phrase, 'hunted like rats' from their homes.⁷⁵

Marcus Keane in West Clare

About two fifths of the lands controlled by Marcus Keane – 60,000 acres by his own reckoning – were situated in the Kilrush Union, a very large portion of which he therefore controlled.⁷⁶ It was here, probably, that clearances by Marcus were most densely concentrated; and certainly it was the Kilrush evictions that earned him greatest notoriety.

Source material for the history of the Kilrush Union at this period of the Famine is rich, more so perhaps than for any other Irish Poor Law Union. This is so particularly in relation to eviction statistics, which are detailed and, as far as it is possible to judge, comparatively accurate.⁷⁷ According to the most authoritative of these statistics, in the period between November 1847 and the middle of 1850, some 14,364 persons in the Union were permanently removed from their homes, amid scenes that replicated many hundred-fold the dreadful experience of the Meelick tenants.⁷⁸

It was in April of 1848, that Captain Kennedy, the Poor Law inspector at Kilrush, began to compile details of the evictions that had taken place in the Union since his arrival there the previous November.⁷⁹ Kennedy's data gathering was closely monitored by the Poor Law Commissioners, whose concern was not with the humanitarian aspects of the Kilrush clearances, but with the possibility that landlords were illegally dumping their surplus tenantry on the Union's overburdened resources.⁸⁰ As the evictions continued to escalate over the next year, Kennedy kept adding to his tally, and in the summer of 1849 the eviction tables, together with extracts from his letters and reports to the Commissioners were published in a blue book.⁸¹

The publication of Kennedy's reports and statistical returns gave to informed opinion in Britain, for the first time, some idea of the gigantic scale of the human tragedy unfolding in Ireland, and not just at Kilrush. Clare landowners, predictably, were outraged, and landlords in the Kilrush Union felt themselves to be so unjustly maligned that they held a meeting to discuss how best to respond. In the end, if we are to believe the *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, our only source for the meeting, prudence dictated that no action be taken.⁸²

Of all those implicated in Kennedy's published returns, only Marcus Keane

chose to respond. He did so through a petition to the House of Commons, something that could hardly have been more calculated to draw attention to his conduct.⁸³ In his petition, Marcus Keane declared that Kennedy's accounts of the evictions were grossly exaggerated and his tables of evictions riddled with inaccuracies. He demanded an inquiry, and his demand was echoed, for completely opposing reasons, by other sources, including the newspapers and concerned philanthropists in England.⁸⁴

Accordingly, a Select Committee was appointed to inquire into the administration of the Kilrush Union and the causes of the destitution that obtained there. The Committee, which was chaired by the radical M.P., Poulett Scrope, sat during June and July 1850. Among the evidence that emerged during the course of its proceedings were the statistics with which this section began.⁸⁵ There is a certain irony in the fact that the very existence of reliable eviction statistics and the exposition of the horrors that lay behind them, is due, at least in part, to Marcus Keane himself.

Marcus Keane and the Scrope Committee

Marcus Keane performed confidently before the Scrope Committee, presenting his arguments with vehemence, and with apparent conviction.⁸⁶ Reiterating the charges of gross exaggeration and inaccuracy contained in his petition, he maintained that only half the number of evictions claimed by Kennedy had taken place. He accepted that Kennedy had not exaggerated the depth of the prevailing distress in the Kilrush Union, but held that this arose from the failure of the potato crop, and was not due to the conduct of the landlords.⁸⁷ He produced specific evidence that refuted, plausibly, much of Kennedy's published evidence regarding the evictions and house levellings attributed to him, and he cast doubt on the credibility of some of those employed by Kennedy in the collection of eviction data.⁸⁸

But however vigorously Marcus presented his case, he could not deny that he had carried out evictions on an enormous scale, and his justification for these is fearsomely straightforward. In his version of things, he had only evicted persons who had not paid their rents, and who were living on 'deserted, non-productive' lands:⁸⁹

I think if ejections had not been made, and if the land had not been taken up from paupers in time, and put into the hands of men who were capable of cultivating it and turned to some advantage, complete ruin as well as disorder would have been the result to the country; and an entire failure of produce; and I believe too, that if those people had not been removed completely from the possession of the land, and in

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on to the House of Commons, intended to draw attention to his and that Kennedy's accounts of the alleged evictions riddled with malice were based on completely the newspapers and concerned

intended to impinge upon the administration of the Government that obtained a radical MP, Wm. H. Scrope, sat that emerged during the course of this session began.⁹⁰ There is a 'reliable' evidence of the fact and the is due, and the report to Marcus

before the Scrope Committee, and with approval of the nation.⁹⁶ and inaccuracies contained in his number of evictions claimed by Kennedy had not appreciated the situation, but held that the blame from the conduct of the landlords.⁹² plausibly, much of Kennedy's cause levelling attributed to him, those employed by Kennedy in the

case, he could not say that he and his justification for those evictions, he had only a few persons engaged on 'deserving' property.

the land had not been taken up from who were capable of cultivating it well as disinterestedly as the law the use; and I believe that if those the possession of the land and in

many cases from the possession of houses, the result would be that the good tenants would leave the land and leave the country; that every man that could go would remove himself.

The 'good' tenants, he believed, would have left because of the plundering of their property by 'pauper' tenants.⁹⁰ When it was suggested to him that non-payment of rent was not the fault of evicted persons, he agreed readily, but managed to imply in an added remark that those he evicted were lazy tenants 'who had lived on in listless idleness from one year to another'.⁹¹ His attitude to 'pauper' tenants was expressed elsewhere in a passing reference to the occupiers of a hut he had thrown down, as 'eight or nine robbers' who preyed on their neighbours.⁹² 'When people become poor,' he declared later on, 'they very often become dishonest, to supply the very calls of their nature; and when they are scattered about on the townlands, they have more opportunities of exercising their propensities'.⁹³

He refused to entertain the idea that evicted tenants had suffered any deterioration in their condition; they were no less or more paupers now than they had been before.⁹⁴ On the other hand, since the evictions, an improvement had taken place in the appearance of the countryside, and there was now 'a better and more industrious class of men in possession of the land in the Kiltrush Union than before'.⁹⁵

Neither did Marcus accept that his primary motivation in evictions had been the improvement of the estate 'without consideration of the circumstances of the tenant.' 'I say', he declared, 'that there was more consideration for the feelings and wants of the poor people who were removed than there was for an increase of income'.⁹⁶

The Exterminator General of County Clare

Only once in his examination by the Scrope Committee did Marcus Keane come near to acknowledging that excesses might have occurred during the clearances. This was near the close of his testimony when he was asked if it was his opinion that, however painful the process of ejection on a large scale might have been, it was necessary for restoring the prosperity of the Union after the effects of the Famine. He agreed fully, adding:⁹⁷

Nobody has felt more than I have done the painful duty of executing those evictions. I judge that a great deal was left to my own discretion about what was to be done, and if in any respect too much was done, I feel that I am responsible for it in many of the properties, not all, but I felt that it was absolutely necessary for the interest of the country as well as the interest of private properties.

If there were those among his hearers who were ready to accept this statement at face value, or who did not see through the tissue of contradictions, half-truths and evasions that make up so much of Marcus's testimony, other witnesses were able to challenge it to devastating effect. One witness in particular, Francis Coffee, was uniquely qualified in this regard. Coffee was himself a land agent, who had carried out evictions in the Kilrush Union, and who possessed an intimate local knowledge to rival Marcus's own.⁹⁸

It was Coffee who, at Captain Kennedy's behest, had compiled the eviction figures given above, and revealed also that in the same period Keene had evicted some 2,800 individuals, exclusive of 67 families who were allowed remain as 'caretakers'.⁹⁹ According to Coffee, Marcus had levelled no less than 500 houses. If the caretaker families - all of them were ultimately destined for eviction - are included, then according to Coffee's estimate, Marcus Keane was responsible for the unhousing of 20 per cent of all persons evicted in the Kilrush Union.

In all this it must be remembered that Marcus Keane had evicted extensively in all the other Unions situated within the boundaries of County Clare, to an extent that must have exceeded significantly those he carried out in Kilrush. When this is taken into consideration, then it is clear that the derisive title, 'The Exterminator General of Clare,' bestowed on him by the *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, is an apt one.¹⁰⁰

The Land Agent

Considered purely as a land agent, Marcus Keane had much to recommend him; from his wide experience of estate management, to his clear ideas on the improvement of properties under his control, and his determination to effect them. We may well believe that he pursued with vigour the goals of which he tells us incidentally in his testimony before the Scrope Committee: the replacement of bad tenants by good, the consolidation of holdings, the remodelling of farms, and the creation of a strong industrious class of tenant farmers. When he condemns the 'fearfully evil' conacre system of land holding, and presents himself as having struggled for years against the primitive Rundale system of collective farming, we can believe this also.¹⁰¹ His assurances to the Committee that rents on the properties under his management were comparatively low, are confirmed by Fr. Meehan, the parish priest of Carrigaholt, who was certainly no friend of his.¹⁰² And one does not have to endorse the *Clare Journal's* description of Marcus in 1851 as 'one of the best and most indulgent agents in the county,' to realise that for his employers, he was an eminently successful one who modernised their properties and salvaged their revenues.¹⁰³

But as we have seen, this programme of estate consolidation was purchased at

the price of considerable human suffering, and the mortality of children in the form of political violence. To the Scrope Committee's 'concocted and concocted' evidence.¹⁰⁴ In its *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, written in the year of the Queen's Jubilee, there is no evidence of political violence, or even the suggestion of his writing having been done after all, was a mere possibility.

Proprietor of the Exterminator Keane

It is a common-sense idea to suppose that the proprietors of the Exterminator were the proprietors of the Exterminator. The evidence of the Exterminator's writings, with their bluntness, indulgence, phobias and other neighbourly suggestions, to say the least, is an immediate conclusion was a firm conviction. The Exterminator's school of thought. The proprietors only lived in the Exterminator's family.

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the price of incalculable human suffering, social dislocation and depopulation, horrific large-scale mortality and lasting psychological injury. Had Marcus been an adherent of some form of political economy, his overall attitude, encapsulated in a cold-blooded aside to the Scrope Committee that 'the country has had to go through a fearful ordeal,' could not have more graphically illustrated the bankruptcy of the creed.¹⁰⁴ In its critique of his parliamentary petition, indeed, the *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, wondered that Marcus did not hold the 'Cork chair of Political Economy at the Queen's University'.¹⁰⁵

However, there is no evidence to show that Marcus had any acquaintance with political economy, or even that he possessed the slightest capacity for intellectualisation. Some of his writings, indeed, reveal a rather shaky grasp of the basics of literacy.¹⁰⁶ Marcus, after all, was no more than an opportunistic land agent with the narrowest perspective possible on his function.

Prosperity and Proselytism: Keane Estates in Post-Famine Times

If a certain improvement in living standards was evident on Keane-controlled estates in the period after the clearances had ended, so too was an atmosphere of gnawing anxiety and fear. Those tenants who, by the hazards of fate, had survived evictions and house levellings, and emerged from the estate consolidation process with their holdings enlarged, had to measure their survival against the accusing ghosts of their former neighbours who had not, and whose land they now held. Survival on Marcus's terms made these tenants his creatures, and during the 1850s an unsubtle intimidation was exercised to bend them to his will in matters ranging from voting for landlord candidates at elections, to sending their children to estate schools that purveyed his particular brand of evangelical Protestantism.¹⁰⁷ One can only wonder at the psychological burden carried by these tenants and their families.

The story of the proselytising campaign carried out by Marcus Keane and members of his immediate family in west Clare has been told many times before.¹⁰⁸ However, since previous writers on the subject have concentrated on the most dramatic episode of the campaign, the famous incident of the 'Little Ark of Kilbaha,' this has served to obscure the fact that the campaign was much more widespread than the Ark story would suggest. Recent research has shown that proselytising activity extended to Keane properties in the Ennis area also; there are indications of it at Kilrush as well.¹⁰⁹

But regardless of its extent, the proselytising campaign was no more a moral crusade on Marcus Keane's part than his estate consolidation could be said to constitute applied political economy. Little in the way of deep-seated ideological commitment lay behind the souper activity in County Clare, which faded quickly

with the collapse of the overall evangelical campaign that had helped sustain it. By the early 1860s, Marcus was even contributing to the chapel-building programme of the Catholic Church in Clare, which, apparently, had no scruples about accepting his donations.¹¹⁰ The only victims left behind – almost casually – by the souper campaign were the unfortunate converts, who were either forced to emigrate or re-conform, or who remained scorned and ostracised for years on the margins of their communities.

Later Years

Those activities that made Marcus Keane notorious took place over a relatively short period in his relative youth, spanning the years between the earliest evictions in 1847 and the end of the evangelical campaign in the mid-1850s. At the latter date, he was just forty years of age, and for several more decades continued to act as agent for the Westby and Conyngham estates. For much of this period, he lived quietly at Beech Park, and at Doondahlin, Kilbaha, in the summer. At Doondahlin, there is evidence of a happy, even idyllic family life.¹¹¹ If one were to judge by references to his kindness to Conyngham and Westby tenants during the famine of the early 1860s, it might even seem possible that Marcus's demeanour towards the lower orders had changed in these decades also.¹¹²

In Marcus's activities over these years, there is much that, in another individual, might be said to reflect a harmless eccentricity. During the 1860s, for example, he interested himself in antiquarian matters, developing a hypothesis that the round towers of tenth-century Ireland were built by a pagan race he called the 'Cuthites.' In 1866, on a tour to Kilkenny in search of evidence for this bizarre theory, he suffered the indignity of being arrested in mistake for a wanted Fenian leader.¹¹³ On another journey, to Italy, in 1872, Marcus was reportedly presented to the pope, and narrowly escaped immolation during an eruption of Mount Vesuvius.¹¹⁴

In 1868, the Cuthite absurdity was enshrined in print, in a book entitled *Towers and Temples of Ancient Ireland*, which was profusely illustrated with engravings cribbed from Petrie. The few authorities that bothered to review the book dismissed it as a farrago of speculative nonsense.¹¹⁵ Nothing daunted by this criticism, Marcus continued with his idiosyncratic researches into the early 1880s. At the time he died, he had begun to construct a mausoleum at Beech Park, whose remains still reveal the mark of his strange antiquarian obsessions.¹¹⁶

The extent to which these obsessions are part of an overall pattern that includes his abnormal fixations in relation to clearances and proselytising activities is a question that is perhaps best left to the student of psychology. At any rate, beneath the apparently harmless eccentricity, the Exterminator General of Clare still lurked. In the early 1860s, Marcus carried out a series of evictions in Kilkee,

expulsion of thousands of tenants in 1847, the first phase of the 'clearances' called. An elderly tenant, fathered evictions, in 1850, he sought to Lord Enniscorthy, son of his employer, to be elected in 1851.¹¹⁷

Final days of life

When Marcus died in 1880, he was buried in the *Clare Journal* published a short obituary notice – independent of the 'sour sense, sarcasm and bitterness' of the landlord and agent – the numbers of the *Journal*, and the burial in the cemetery of Ennis attended the funeral a few days later. In the obituary of the 'respectable and eminent' John Keane, some of whom he called 'his disciples in order to propagate his sect.'¹¹⁸ 'I was never able to collect that the [sic] would be a pity to see people who should be a source of pleasure to the usefulness of the [sic]'.¹¹⁹

The description of Marcus entirely differs in fact, as he were a man of the 'most ordinary circumstances' and 'might be considered a very ordinary old man.'¹²⁰

Marcus's remains had been on basis, pending the completion of was the collapse of the [sic] [sic]

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Exterminator General of Claire ... a series of ...

ejecting large numbers of tenants after the expiration of a lease of part of the town in 1859. In the first phase of the evictions, 74 dwellings were emptied of their occupants and levelled. An element of particular vindictiveness seems to have lain behind the Kilkee evictions, in that they were carried out, partially at least, in revenge for a slight to Lord Francis Conyngham, son of his employer, during an election in 1857.¹¹⁷

Last Earthly Tributes

When Marcus died in October 1883, the *Clare Journal* published a short obituary notice which praised the 'sound sense, sagacity and earnestness' of this 'kind and generous landlord and agent'.¹¹⁸ Large numbers of the county gentry and the business community of Ennis attended the funeral a few days later, as well as hundreds of the 'respectable tenant-farmers' from Keane-managed estates, some of whom travelled long distances in order to pay their respects.¹¹⁹ 'It was meet', the *Journal* reflected, 'that the last earthly tribute paid to so popular a man should bear some proportion to the usefulness of his life'.

The descendants of Marcus's victims marked his passing with a tribute of an entirely different kind, as we have seen from the incident in which his remains were stolen from the burial vault. The remains were to be recovered under circumstances as strange as their disappearance, and, indeed, the whole episode might be seen as an appropriate epilogue to a life that had had its full share of oddity.

Marcus's remains had been interred at Kilmaley cemetery, on a temporary basis, pending the completion of his mausoleum at Beech Park. Interred alongside was the coffin of a family governess named Barnes, who had died some months



Grave of Marcus Keane in the burial ground at Beech Park.

previously.¹²⁰ In September 1884, workmen sent to remove the lead-lined coffins of Miss Barnes and Marcus Keane to the new burial site at Beech Park found the vault empty. The entry stone had been replaced, leaving no clue as to when the desecration had happened. The Keane family rejected the notion that the theft of the remains was related to Marcus's notorious past, and preferred as an explanation a supposed local superstition that forbade the transfer of remains from one cemetery to another. The country people, who knew what had happened, were reported to be extraordinarily 'reticent' on the subject.¹²¹

After a time the sensation died down, and in 1887, when Fr. Patrick White, the parish priest of Miltown Malbay, referred to the disinterment in a bitter retrospective article about the souper conflicts in west Clare, they were still unaccounted for.¹²² In his article, White does not identify Marcus by name, referring instead to 'a local little despot, who lived near Ennis,' who was the 'guiding spirit' of the souper campaign. One particularly angry passage describes how 'the agent's own hands' had wielded the crowbar that smashed the altar of a temporary church in Kilbaha, and it is followed by the comment that 'where those hands are now, not all the police intelligence, nor the rewards offered can discover'.¹²³ Behind White's professed condemnation of the 'barbarous act,' one can distinguish, if not satisfaction, then certainly an implicit notion of providential retribution.

In October 1891, eight years after the discovery of the empty vault, grave-diggers engaged in re-opening an adjacent plot were astonished to find, just underneath the soil, the stacked coffins of Marcus Keane and Miss Barnes.¹²⁴ As before, there were no clues as to what had happened or when. An explanation for this apparently insoluble mystery is supplied by local tradition, which identifies seven men local men as the perpetrators. Their original intention had been to remove the body of Marcus Keane from the coffin and throw it in the nearby river. This plan was aborted, according to this version of events, when they failed to open the heavy lead-lined coffin, whose enormous weight made it too heavy to carry to the river.¹²⁵ There was also the complicating factor of the coffin of Miss Barnes, towards whose remains they intended no disrespect. Indeed, the fact that the men removed both coffins from the vault suggests that they were unable to distinguish between them in the dark. At any rate, instead of abandoning the coffins where they lay, they eventually decided to re-bury them in the nearby grave, relying on the disturbance of the soil in a recent burial to hide their deed.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 The folk tradition of the west, of course, preserves a *general* association of Marcus Keane with the savagery of Famine-era evictions. The association of his brother,

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 133000, 11 December, p. 30.
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to remove the lead lined coffins and away to Black Park, found the heavy machinery to which the theft of the coffin was an explanation: 'numbers of remains from one knew what had happened, were rejected'.

In 1857, when Dr. Patrick White, to the dismay of many a bitter sinner, was in the area, they were still not identified. He, by name, lived near Ennis. He was the titular charge of the area, describes what then took place, the idea of a 'y' the coffin on the other side those, nor the fact of the coffin can on of the fact of the coffin can imply means of the coffin.

very of the coffin, and perhaps it were a good idea to find just is Keane and the 'Bones'. As red or when the explanation for local tradition. It is identified original intention of the coffin to find and then the nearby sion of coffin. The coffin, aaked ous weight made one of the ing factor of the coffin. This disrespect. In fact, the fact that ggests that the coffin should be ate, instead of being buried to re-bury them in the nearby cent burial to find the coffin.

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Henry, with them is even stronger. Information from Paddy Nolan, Carrowbloughmore House, Kilkee.

- 2 H. Montgomery-Massingbred (ed.), *Burke's Irish Family Records* (London, 1976), p. 652.
- 3 For nickname, see *Burke's Irish Family Records*; for popularity of Long Bob, see *Clare Journal*, 12 December 1842; *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, 12 April 1848.
- 4 Kieran Sheedy, *The Clare Elections* (Dun Laoghaire, 1993), p. 461
- 5 *C.J.*, 11, 29 March 1841.
- 6 *Correspondence relating to the Measures Adopted for the Relief of Distress in Ireland* (Board of Works Series) First Part, p. 308; *Correspondence relating to the Measures Adopted for the Relief of Distress in Ireland* (Commissariat Series), Second Part, p. 203; *Limerick Chronicle*, 28 March, 29 April 1846; *L.C.E.*, 15, 29 April 1846; *C.J.*, 27 April 1846.
- 7 *C.J.*, 20 July 1846. Mullins described Westby as 'the best and most kind-hearted charitable landlord,' and Keane as his 'benevolent' agent.
- 8 *C.J.*, 18 January, 1 February 1847.
- 9 *C.J.*, 18 February 1847.
- 10 *Burke's Irish Family Records*, p. 653.
- 11 *C.J.*, 20 December 1847
- 12 See Ciarán Ó Murchadha, *Sable Wings Over the Land, Ennis, County Clare, and its Wider Community during the Great Famine* (Ennis, 1998), pp. 87-89, 91-97, 111-113. For Wynne see also Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond, the Great Irish Famine* (Dublin, 1999), pp. 59-69.
- 13 Keane, for example, persuaded Fishbourne that tenants were hiding their seed in order to obtain free supplies from the government, *Correspondence...Commissariat Series, Second Part*, p. 203.
- 14 He did however contribute to the Ennis and Kilmaley relief committees.
- 15 See *General Valuation of Rateable Property in Ireland, Ennistimon Union, Valuation of the Several Tenements comprised in the above-named Union situate in the County of Clare, Inagh Parish*, p. 44.
- 16 Figures are derived from *Return of Owners of Land of One Acre and upwards in the Several Counties, Counties of Cities, and Counties of Towns in Ireland* (Dublin, 1876). These properties do not appear to have changed appreciably in size in the intervening period.
- 17 *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee on the Clare Election Petition; together with Proceedings of the Committee* (1853), p. 20.
- 18 *Report of Her Majesty's Commissioners of Inquiry into the Working of the Landlord and Tenant (Ireland) Act, 1870, and the Acts Amending the Same* (London, 1881), p. cxxvii.
- 19 *Return of Owners of Land*, p. 110.
- 20 James S. Donnelly, *The Land and People of Nineteenth Century Cork* (Dublin, 1975),

- p. 173; *Report from the Select Committee on Kilrush Union, together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix, and Index* (London, 1850), p. 196.
- 21 Patrick White, P.P., 'Proselytism in West Clare: A Retrospect,' in *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, third series, vol. viii, no. 5 (May 1887), p. 415.
 - 22 Ignatius Murphy, *A People Starved, Life and Death in West Clare, 1845-1851* (Dublin, 1996), p. 53.
 - 23 James S. Donnelly, 'The Famine Clearances in the Kilrush Union,' pp. 1, 6. I am grateful to Professor Donnelly for permission to cite from this invaluable unpublished paper. The Kilrush clearances are also dealt with in Prof. Donnelly's forthcoming book, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, to be published in Spring 2001.
 - 24 Ciarán Ó Murchadha, 'One Vast Abattoir, County Clare, 1848-1849' in *The Other Clare*, vol. 21 (1997), pp. 65-66.
 - 25 Donnelly, 'Kilrush Clearances,' p. 11.
 - 26 For this fear, see *L. & C.E.*, 3 November 1847.
 - 27 Donnelly, 'Kilrush Clearances,' p. 6; *Report on the Kilrush Union*, pp. 225, 231.
 - 28 For one use of this term in pre-Famine times, see *C.J.*, 2, 9 January 1843.
 - 29 *L. & C.E.*, 22 September, 3 November 1847.
 - 30 *L. & C.E.*, 3 November 1847.
 - 31 For an account of Kennedy, see Ignatius Murphy, 'Captain A.E. Kennedy, Poor Law Inspector and the Great Famine in the Kilrush Union 1847-1850' in *O.C.*, vol. 3 (1979), pp. 16-25.
 - 32 *L. & C.E.*, 2 May 1849. For other contemporary estimates, see *L. & C.E.*, 18, 25 April 1849.
 - 33 *L. & C.E.*, 11 March 1848. The editorial indicates that Keane had already been evicting heavily for some time already. The editorialist intimated that the *Examiner* had not previously referred to these evictions because it had wished to avoid inflaming 'the widespread odium, the hostility, which [Marcus Keane's] extensive exterminations have unavoidably raised up against him in the bosom of the peasantry.'
 - 34 *Papers relating to Proceedings for the Relief of Distress and State of the Unions and Workhouses in Ireland*, Sixth Series, 1848, vol. lvi (999), pp. 508, 509.
 - 35 *C.J.*, 13 March 1848.
 - 36 *L. & C.E.*, 11 March 1848.
 - 37 *L. & C.E.*, 11 March 1848.
 - 38 *Reports and Returns relating to Evictions in the Kilrush Union* (London, 1849), pp. 21, 22.
 - 39 *L. & C.E.*, 2 September 1818.
 - 40 *L. & C.E.*, 20 September 1848.
 - 41 *L. & C.E.*, 23, 30 September 1848.
 - 42 *L. & C.E.*, 25 October 1848.

- 43 *C.J.*, 12, 19 November 1847.
- 44 *C.J.*, 12, 19 November 1847, pp. 37, 38.
- 45 *C.J.*, 12, 19 November 1847.
- 46 *C.J.*, 12, 19 November 1847.
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- 48 *C.J.*, 12, 19 November 1847.
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- 68 *C.J.*, 12, 19 November 1847.
- 69 *C.J.*, 12, 19 November 1847.
- 70 *C.J.*, 12, 19 November 1847.

- 43 *L.&C.E.*, 18, 24, 29 November 1848.
- 44 *Reports and Returns*, pp. 37, 38, 40.
- 45 *C.J.*, 10 May 1849.
- 46 *L.&C.E.*, 31 March 1847.
- 47 Marcus Keane to T.N. Redington, 25 April 1848; Report of Sub-Inspector Donovan, National Archives of Ireland, Outrage Reports, Clare, 1848, 5/380, 5/319.
- 48 Keane to Redington, 25 April 1848; Donovan Report, O.R., Clare, 5/319.
- 49 *L.&C.E.*, 22, 25 March 1848.
- 50 The catalogue contains minor errors of addition; actual figures and estimates are mingled together.
- 51 *The Pilot*, 29 March 1848.
- 52 Donovan Report; *L.&C.E.*, 8 April 1848.
- 53 Reference is made to Keane's version in the county inspector's letter of instruction to Donovan, County Inspector Rutland to Donovan, 5 April 1848, O.R. Clare, 1848, 5/319.
- 54 *Clare Journal*, 3 April 1848; Redington to Keane, 16 April 1848; Keane to Redington, 25 April 1848, O.R., Clare, 1848, 5/380.
- 55 Donovan Report.
- 56 *C.J.*, 3 April 1848.
- 57 Keane to Redington, 25 April 1848, O.R., Clare, 1848, 5/380.
- 58 *Ibid.*
- 59 Drivers were scouts for rent collectors and evicting teams; keepers were hired to watch growing crops, in order to prevent insolvent tenants from harvesting and disposing of them.
- 60 Keane to Redington, 25 April 1848, O.R., Clare, 1848, 5/380.
- 61 White, 'Proselytism in West Clare,' p. 415.
- 62 *L.&C.E.*, 13 September 1848.
- 63 *L.&C.E.*, 2 December 1848.
- 64 *L.&C.E.*, 16 December 1848.
- 65 For references to Dan Sheedy, see *L.&C.E.*, 8 April 1848; 25, 29 August, 29 September 1849.
- 66 For Davoren's background, see *C.J.*, 29 January 1846; *L.&C.E.*, 14 February 1849.
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- 68 *L.&C.E.*, 28 February 1849.
- 69 *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee on the Clare Election Petition, together with the Proceedings of the Committee* (1853), p. 19.
- 70 *L.&C.E.*, 14 February 1849.

- 71 *L.&C.E.*, 24 February 1849.
- 72 *Ibid.*
- 73 See *Clare Election Petition*, pp. 7-33.
- 74 *L.&C.E.*, 28 February 1849.
- 75 Marcus Keane would return to Meelick in May to distrain for unpaid rent, and in October, a further round of evictions took place there when the lease on another middleman farm expired, *L.&C.E.*, 16 May, 13, 17 October 1849.
- 76 *Report on the Kihush Union*, p. 86.
- 77 Donnelly, 'Kilrush Clearances,' p. 2.
- 78 Donnelly, 'Kilrush Clearances,' p. 5; *Report on the Kihush Union*, p. 218.
- 79 Captain Kennedy to Poor Law Commissioners, 13 April 1848, *Reports and Returns*, p. 6.
- 80 Commissioners to Kennedy, 15 April 1848, *Reports and Returns*, p. 6.
- 81 *Reports and Returns relating to Evictions in the Kihush Union* (London, 1849).
- 82 *L.&C.E.*, 11 August 1849.
- 83 Keane's petition was published in the *Clare Journal*, 20 August 1849. Details were also published in the *Limerick and Clare Examiner* together with a satirical commentary, *L.&C.E.*, 11, 15, 18, 22 August 1849. The manuscript petition is in the papers of Sir Lucius O'Brien, who presented the petition to the House of Commons on his behalf, National Library of Ireland, Inchiquin Papers, 4632.
- 84 *L.&C.E.*, 18 August 1849.
- 85 *Report from the Select Committee on the Kihush Union, together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index* (H.C., July 1850).
- 86 *Report on Kihush Union*, pp. 86-104, 189-196.
- 87 *Report on Kihush Union*, pp. 87, 88, 98, 102.
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- 89 *Report on Kihush Union*, pp. 89, 90.
- 90 *Report on Kihush Union*, p. 89.
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- 92 *Report on Kihush Union*, p. 97.
- 93 *Report on Kihush Union*, p. 196.
- 94 Donnelly, 'Kilrush Clearances,' p. 20; *Report on Kihush Union*, p. 98.
- 95 *Report on Kihush Union*, p. 89.
- 96 *Report on Kihush Union*, p. 95.
- 97 *Report on Kihush Union*, p. 196.
- 98 See Donnelly, 'Kilrush Clearances,' p. 4; *Report on Kihush Union*, p. 217.
- 99 *Report on Kihush Union*, p. 220.
- 100 *L.&C.E.*, 29 March 1848.
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- 102 Meehan repeated this on several occasions. In a letter published in the *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, (30 January 1850) he stated that rents on the Westby estate near Kilrush were one third those on the adjoining Vandeleur property. He told the Scrope Committee that rents were lower and the tenantry much better off in Kilballyowen, the western district of his parish, controlled almost in its entirety by Marcus Keane, than in neighbouring Moyarta, *Report on the Kilrush Union*, pp. 104-105, 110.
- 103 *C.J.*, 18 September 1851.
- 104 *Report on Kilrush Union*, p. 102.
- 105 *L. & C.E.*, 15 August 1849.
- 106 The *Limerick and Clare Examiner*, for example, made great derisive use of the spelling and syntactical howlers that litter his petition to Parliament, *L. & C.E.*, 11, 15, 18, 22 August 1849.
- 107 See, for example, the evidence of tenants Luke Hanrahan, Stephen Browne and Michael McMahon at the *Select Committee Inquiry into the Clare Election Petition* (1853), pp. 49, 63, 75. For Marcus Keane's proselytising activities, see Ignatius Murphy, *Fr. Michael Meehan and the Ark of Kilbaha* (Ennis, 1980).
- 108 Most thoroughly in Murphy's, *Fr. Michael Meehan and the Ark of Kilbaha*.
- 109 Ó Murchadha, *Sable Wings over the Land*, pp. 235-237; *C.J.*, 5 June 1854.
- 110 *C.J.*, 9 March 1863.
- 111 This emerges from a family diary, in private hands.
- 112 *C.J.*, 23 December 1861, 28 April, 28 July, 15, 23 December 1862, 8 June, 23 December 1863, 4 January 1864.
- 113 *C.J.*, 26 February 1866.
- 114 *C.J.*, 13 May, 17 June 1872
- 115 *Towers and Temples of Ancient Ireland, their Origin and History Discussed from A New Point of View* (Dublin, 1867). For reviews of this volume, see *Dublin University Magazine*, January 1868, pp. 106-115, March 1868, pp. 328-335; *The Irish Builder*, vol. x, no. 200 (April 1868), pp. 91-92; *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, vol. v (1869), pp. 375-384.
- 116 The surrounding wall, all that was ever built of this edifice, forms a great semi-circular enclosure backing onto a deep precipice. It bears a marked resemblance to pre-historic structures such as Cahercommaun in the Burren, or Dún Aengus in Aran, which Marcus would have been familiar with. Had he been informed that such structures were fortifications and had no funereal function at all, it would probably have made no difference to Marcus. I am grateful to Mr. Eddie Lough for this *aperçu*.
- 117 See Ignatius Murphy, 'A Town for Sale, Landlord-Tenant Relations in Kilkee in the 1860s' in *Dal gCais*, vol. 10 (1991), pp. 21-35.

- 118 *C.J.*, 1 November 1883.
 119 *C.J.*, 5 November 1883.
 120 *C.J.*, 18 September 1884. The vault belonged to the long-vanished Burkes of Straburgh, a family to whom the Keanes claimed kinship.
 121 *L.C.*, 16 September 1884; *C.J.*, 18 September 1884.
 122 White, 'Proselytism in West Clare,' pp. 411-421.
 123 White, 'Proselytism in West Clare,' p. 418.
 124 *C.J.*, 5 October 1891.
 125 Information from Colin Casey, Beech Park.

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For most of the following years Coffey and O'Connell published a small number of articles in the case. For the chronological order accessible to the reader, the references to illustrations in the original edition of the book are due to the editors of the

book and articles illustrating the book. The book is published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford. The book is published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford. The book is published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford.

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