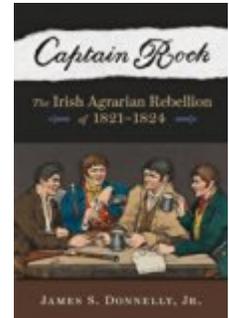


James S. Donnelly Jr. *Captain Rock: The Irish Agrarian Rebellion of 1821-1824.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009. xiv + 508 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-299-23314-3.



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In 1821, an agrarian insurgent movement called Rockism spread across Munster from an epicenter in western County Limerick, where it began as violent resistance to Alexander Hoskins, the grasping new agent of the Courtenay estates around Newcastlewest. This movement, the subject of James S. Donnelly Jr.'s study, was called, after its supposed leader, Captain Rock; devised for one Paddy Dillane, distinguished by stone-throwing exploits in an attack on a party of road-building laborers employed by Hoskins, the name rapidly acquired mythic overtones and was invoked by a multitude of local gang leaders and threatening letter writers. Across large areas of the province, state and gentry authority collapsed. Most dramatically, at the beginning of 1822, the situation in North Cork resembled the 1798 uprising, with mail-coaches stopped and a violent confrontation between soldiers and a crowd of tithes resisters commemorated by Maire Bhuidhe Ni Laoghaire in her celebrated poem "Cath Ceim an Fhiaidh."

This local mini-rebellion collapsed when mass attacks on North Cork towns were repelled with heavy loss of life, but lower-level Rockite violence (still involving remarkably extensive defiance of law and government) spread across Munster and adjoining areas of Leinster, driven by emissaries who realized strength lay in numbers. In summer 1821, the evangelical writer Charlotte Elizabeth Phelan (best known by her later married name Tonna) visited Reverend Hans Hamilton, rector of Knocktopher, at his residence, Vicarsfield, ten miles outside Kilkenny City.[1] As Tonna and her friends toured the countryside, small parties of Rockites were entering Kilkenny along the mountains of the Tipperary borderland; Hamilton received threatening letters (a favorite Rockite means of intimidation and a major source for their political consciousness). Returning to Vicarsfield some time later, Tonna found a state of siege. Every night Catholic servants were sent to an outbuilding (one of the most alarming aspects of Rockism for the elite was the extent to which employees were prepared to join conspiracies

against them), while the family and their Protestant attendants armed themselves and listened to shots fired by passing Rockites. Rockite shows of strength were not mere nighttime affairs. "I was shown from the window of the drawing-room, at noon-day, a body of Rockites, to the number of forty, well mounted, leisurely walking their horses within less than a quarter of a mile from the house, for the purpose of intimidation." [2] (Rockites often "borrowed" horses from farmers.)

Rockism slackened in late 1822 but resumed in 1823 and continued well into 1824, finally dying away into scattered outbreaks of banditry; it had been the most formidable challenge the governing apparatus faced since 1798. Widespread Rockite displays of savage public violence, such as mutilation of victims' bodies or gang rape of soldiers' wives and potential crown witnesses, showed the collapse of gentry power and the weakness of the state. Sending in large numbers of troops, the state mounted its own theater of repression, aiming to defeat Rockite terror by displaying greater terror and showing that Rockite activists (including the original Captain Rock, Paddy Dillane) could be turned as witnesses against confederates. At least one hundred people were hanged and six hundred transported, many under emergency legislation allowing summary trials for such noncapital offences as breach of curfew. What caused this outbreak?

Tonna, like many conservatives and evangelicals, blamed a centrally directed Catholic conspiracy, noting that Rockism was linked to the popularization of extracts from a commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John by the English Catholic cleric Charles Walmsley (alias Pastorini) who suggested Protestantism would disappear in 1825. In 1824, as Tonna read Thomas Moore's *Memoirs of Captain Rock* (1824), which attributed the disturbances to misgovernment, the privileges of the Church of Ireland, and failure to grant Catholic emancipation, she decided Moore was part of the conspiracy.

Catholic spokesmen, and the large body of Protestant opinion with misgivings about the principle of Protestant ascendancy and the tithe system--such as the Whigs who were Moore's patrons and formed much of his readership--strongly disputed this interpretation. They pointed to class divisions among Catholics, with priests denouncing Rockism while Rockites targeted Catholic middlemen and land grabbers, such as John Marum (brother of the Catholic bishop of Ossory) who was murdered in March 1824 despite surrounding himself with hired toughs. (Marum's killers feared he would displace an old-established family of Protestant middlemen, notoriously more lenient toward undertenants than he was likely to be.) Furthermore, liberals pointed out, Rockite sectarianism reflected concrete grievances, such as the tithe system whereby agricultural produce was taxed to support Church of Ireland clergy. Rockites resisted rents and tithes set under high wartime prices and unrevised after incomes had fallen, and a state machinery, associated with Protestant privilege and violent repression, which had just made eviction and tithe collection much easier to accomplish and which seemed complicit in a recent and provocative campaign of evangelical proselytism (of which Tonna was a vehement supporter). As Donnelly shows, the basis on which tithes were levied was heavily skewed in favor of grazing and against tillage, and fell heavily on the poorest cultivators; he notes that the area of the Rockite insurgency was closely correlated with the area where potatoes, the food of the poorest, were eligible for tithe. Less convincingly, Catholic and liberal apologists maintained that popular belief in Pastorini had been greatly exaggerated, and claimed that where it existed it had been induced by agents provocateurs.

Modern academic literature similarly tends to play down Rockite millennialism and to present the movement as simply economic. Donnelly, however, offers a finely modulated interpretation which argues that Rockism blended economic and

political concerns with millennialism. Rockism resembled millennial cults in colonized societies that have experienced repeated reverses; these often combine hope for impending deliverance by supernatural beings with belief that the faithful must take the initiative themselves.

Current academic literature on Irish agrarian movements also emphasizes the role of class divisions within what outsiders and apologists often saw as an undifferentiated peasant community. Other major upheavals in pre-Famine Ireland are indeed best interpreted as class conflict between better-off farmers and cottiers and laborers (notably the Shanavest-Caravat conflict of 1806-11, classically analyzed by Paul Roberts).[3] Donnelly, however, shows that the extent and intensity of the Rockite movement reflected its ability to mobilize cross-class support in resisting landlord rationalization and state repression after the post-war decline in agricultural prices and the harvest shortages of 1819 (the more extensive near-famine of 1822 produced temporary cessation of Rockite activity, as activists focused on survival). A significant number of large farmers and their sons participated in Rockite violence, though most Rockites came from poorer backgrounds; many better-off farmers gave passive support from a mixture of fear and sympathy, offering financial contributions or refusing to cooperate with state authorities. (On the Courtenay estate, Protestant middlemen targeted by the Hoskins regime encouraged resistance, though elsewhere middlemen faced Rockite attack from below as well as landlord rationalization from above.)

At the same time, class divisions did not disappear, and Rockism's demise was accomplished in part by reopening them. Along with repression, legislation that reduced the burden of tithes by spreading it more equitably not only removed numerous activists but also intensified plebeian Rockite demands on farmers for financial support (including legal expenses). A significant indication of reestablished state authority was the resultant

willingness of significant numbers of Munster farmers to assist repression of post-Rockite banditry in 1824.

As for politics, Donnelly also shows that there were significant links between Rockism and the better-organized, more politicized Ribbon movement found in urban centers; town "Liberties" (built-up areas just outside town boundaries) supplied many Rockite recruits, and Rockite notices (generally composed of wandering schoolmasters, whose role, with that of other itinerants, is sensitively analyzed) combined sectarianism with echoes of United Irish rhetoric and even referred to contemporary uprisings in Greece and Spain. This was not highly sophisticated politicization, but it was political nonetheless.

Donnelly has studied Rockism over many years; whereas previous scholars tended to rely on printed sources, he combines exemplary command of the secondary literature with in-depth surveys of contemporary newspapers (notably the Whig-liberal *Dublin Evening Post* and *Leinster Journal*; it might have been useful to include a Tory paper) with extensive work on the State of the Country Papers in the National Archives (Dublin) and other archival material. This produces a survey of Rockism that takes full account of its social and ideological complexities, which does not scant dissection of both state and popular violence, and provides a terrifying picture of the poverty, violence, and desperation of 1820s Ireland. This was a crowded countryside--a recurring motif was murder in broad daylight witnessed by many passers-by, who said nothing--a violent province, with the state very far from exercising a monopoly of force; a hungry land, with several layers of subletting between head landlord and poorest cottier tenant and a significant amount of intimidation and violence directed against "strangers" from a few miles away, seen by locals as illegitimate competitors for food and employment available locally, pitifully scarce in relation to the numbers competing for it.

Donnelly's account is structured thematically rather than chronologically, with chapters on ideology and organization, millennialism, Rockite social composition and leadership, tithes and rents, patterns of Rockite violence, and government repression. This polyvalent approach probably illuminates the decentralized movement more than a linear narrative, but involves repetition (the murder of the former head of the County Limerick police, Major Richard Going, is discussed in similar terms on pages 49-50 and 141-142) and fragmentation (the discussion of Rockites' systematic incendiaryism might be linked more closely to the analysis of threatening messages in chapter 3). Nevertheless, Donnelly's overview of a phenomenon previously studied in detail is a contribution of lasting value to the "history from below" of pre-Famine Ireland.

What was the long-term legacy of Rockism? It was not wholly defeated; it could not prevent eviction altogether, but fear of peasant resistance helped defer the large-scale clearances eventually witnessed in the Famine years, when potential resisters were helpless. By displaying the weaknesses of landlord and state authority, Rockism provided incentives for the state to offer concessions, which in turn encouraged agitators to become aware of their potential strength. Donnelly suggests that much of the energy behind Rockism was channeled into the O'Connell movement from the mid-1820s, with the Liberator seen as messianic deliverer as well as political agitator.[4] O'Connell characteristically had the best of both worlds during the Rockite campaign, taking Rockite money to defend prisoners charged in connection with the campaign, while using the court proceedings to denounce Rockism. The extension of tithe to pastoral and dairy farmers helped to ease the pressure on other tithe payers, but it also increased support for abolishing tithe altogether as better-off farmers were made to share the burden. In the early 1830s, O'Connellites participated in a renewed anti-tithe agitation in which organized nonpayment of tithes was backed up by

popular violence, reducing many Protestant clerics to a state of siege and forcing concessions by displaying the impotence of the authorities to enforce tithe collections. In terms of extent, violence, and cross-class support, Donnelly suggests, the "tithe war" significantly resembled Rockism, which, unlike previous agitations, had been directed against tithes in principle rather than the details of their implementation; and like the earlier agitation, critics of the present state of affairs could point to class divisions as proof that the tithe resistance had nothing to do with agrarian violence. In a speech to parliament on May 31, 1832, O'Connell urged this view by noting that the house of the prominent tithe resister Pat Lalor--father of the agrarian reformer James Fintan Lalor--had been attacked by Whiteboys aggrieved at his eviction of small tenants.[5]

On the other side of the political divide, ultra-conservatives like Tonna gloomily contemplated the passage of Catholic emancipation and the renewed violence of the Tithe War. Learning with dismay that Irish Catholics saw the Catholic Relief Act as belated fulfillment of Pastorini's prophecies, she feared Walmsley had indeed been prophetically inspired--albeit by the Devil--and decided that the time of the Apocalypse, the final days of popish persecution and the triumph of Antichrist, were at hand. Neither loyalists nor Rockites in pre-Famine Ireland held a monopoly on millennialism, any more than a monopoly of violence.

Notes

[1]. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, *Irish Recollections* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2004). This is an abridged edition of her *Personal Recollections* published in 1841.

[2]. *Ibid.*, 43.

[3]. Paul E. W. Roberts, "Caravats and Shanavests: Whiteboyism and Faction Fighting in East Munster, 1802-11," in *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914*, ed. Samuel

Clark and James S. Donnelly Jr. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 64-101.

[4]. Rionach Uí Ogáin, *Immortal Dan: Daniel O'Connell in Irish Folklore* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1995).

[5]. Daniel O'Connell, *The Speeches and Public Letters of the Liberator*, ed. M. F. Cusack, 2 vols. (Dublin: McGlashan and Gill, 1875), 1:205.

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