

Kyle Hughes and Donald M. MacRaild, *Ribbon Societies in Nineteenth-Century Ireland and its Diaspora* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018, 346 pp., £90 hardback, £29.95 paperback)

In the 1810s Ribbon societies appeared in Ulster, emerging from the aftermath of 1798, Defenderism and the sectarian tensions of the late-eighteenth century. Throughout most of the nineteenth century Ribbonism, and anxieties about it, reached into multiple aspects of Irish society, yet very few people ever openly admitted membership and almost all evidence of Ribbon activities lies in police and court records. Varieties of Ribbonism have generated a very rich historiography, but most historians have framed their studies within a particular chronological or regional framework. This engaging book by Kyle Hughes and Donald MacRaild presents the first full-length study that ranges across the nineteenth century and investigates multifaceted dimensions of Ribbonism in Ireland and the diaspora.

Ribbonism has been a familiar fixture in studies of agrarian violence and rural protest, and while this book examines these aspects, the main picture that emerges here is of the urban character of the societies and their role as an ‘amalgam of friendly society, trade association, social club and confraternity’ (p. 163). Exclusively Catholic and male, Ribbonism was characterised by ritualised swearing of oaths and the use of passwords, known as ‘goods’, to recognise members. Ribbonmen appeared in many guises and were affiliated with different groups with names like the Sons of Shamrock, Sons of Hibernia, Rednecks, Bogmen, Knights of St. Patrick, Trashers, Hibernians, Billy Welters, Billy Smiths and Irish Sons of Freedom. Along with fraternal and trade-union activities, religion and anti-Orangeism were central to Ribbon outlooks. At the same time, the Catholic Church condemned their secrecy, was suspicious of their politics and worried about their poteen making.

The authors interrogate both Ribbonism and its wider perception, distinguishing between what they refer to as ‘real’ Ribbonism and ‘general’ Ribbonism: events that can be linked to identifiable societies, and the generic, exaggerated use of the term by the authorities and the press to refer to collective violence and a shady Catholic underground. The spectre of Ribbonism instilled genuine fears among Protestants, and reflected a ‘condition of collective national psychosis that was prepared to believe social conflict, class war, and the break-up of the union really could happen’ (p. 309). At the same time, Ribbonism was no myth, as historian A. C. Murray once claimed

in this journal in 1986; there is too much evidence of shared traits between groups found in different regions of Ireland and abroad, and that they enjoyed some level of popular support.

This book opens interesting new perspectives on Ribbon networks among Irish emigrants. These connections were dramatically revealed in the early-1840s during the trial of Dublin trader and leading Ribbonman Richard Jones, when evidence found on him pointed to correspondence and meetings between Ribbonmen in Ireland and Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester and other towns and cities in Scotland and the north of England. After the Great Famine, Ribbon networks extended in Britain and also the United States, where they shared characteristics with both the Irish Emigrant Aid Association and the infamous Molly Maguires of the Pennsylvania coalfields. Ribbonism's 'tramping system' appealed to migrants and brought help with finding a job, and if one couldn't be found locally, money was advanced for board or to move on to the next town. Membership also brought financial assistance for workplace injuries, and the book presents plenty of evidence from Ireland and the diaspora to sustain George Cornewall Lewis's 1836 characterisation of Ribbonism as a form of early trade unionism. Ribbonism was also frequently linked to sectarian street fighting and rioting in Britain, and while clandestine habits remained in the post-Famine years, there is less evidence of sedition. Interestingly, when the Ribbon 'captain' William Robinson was arrested in Liverpool in the 1850s, he escaped conviction partly because the Unlawful Societies Act only applied to Ireland – technically Ribbon activities were not illegal in England.

Daniel O'Connell grabbed opportunities to publicly condemn Ribbon violence, and he was also a free-market liberal who disliked wage-fixing and collective bargaining. Yet O'Connellism and Ribbonism did not exist in different worlds. Richard Jones' involvement in the murder of the Protestant merchant Andrew Ganley in Dublin has previously been considered as primarily trade-related, but the book reveals that Ganley had received threatening letters instructing him to vote for O'Connell in 1837, which he refused to do. Dublin's politics were close-knit, and the murder was a product of the 'shady connections occasioned by the city's numerous campaigns, public meetings, and reform causes' (p. 143).

In the early-nineteenth century some Ribbonmen held direct links with United Irishmen, and there were degrees of overlap with Fenianism in the 1860s, but overall Ribbonism's Catholic nationalism was more moderate than republicanism. And in the

1870s, Ribbonmen and Fenians came into violent conflict in Ulster. Ribbonism's insurrectionary potential, and officials' perception of it, peaked in the late-1810s and early-1820s, and was shaped by the wider UK context of political unrest and the 1819 Peterloo Massacre and the Cato Street Conspiracy. By the 1870s Ribbonism had become less shadowy and mainly found 'expression in public national identification' and 'collective mutuality' (p. 229). The book brings to light comical images from these years in the magazine *Zozimus* that poked fun at the constabulary's exaggeration of the Ribbon threat. By the close of the century Ribbon societies merged with the more open and respectable Ancient Order of Hibernians, which operated with the support of the Catholic Church.

This important book advances our understanding of Ribbonism and how seriously the state considered the threat it presented, as well as Catholic politics and social organisation more widely in nineteenth-century Ireland and the diaspora. It demonstrates considerable levels of politicisation among urban and rural workers in nineteenth-century Ireland and emigrant centres during periods when more overtly nationalist movements were at a low ebb. The Ribbonmen may not have been staging rebellions and holding monster meetings, but they were engaged in regular acts of defiance and reformism, and their 'low' politics challenges the traditional nationalist narrative of the nineteenth century.

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