

Milford Mills
and the creation of a gentry powerbase:
the Alexanders of Co. Carlow, 1790-1870

by

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A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

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June 2015

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Date: 30 June 2015

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Abbreviations

APMH	Alexander Papers, Milford House, Co. Carlow
BL	The British Library, London
CJI	<i>Journals of the House of Commons of the Kingdom of Ireland</i> , 20 vols. (Dublin, 1796-1804)
CSORP	Chief Secretary's Office, Registered Papers in the National Archives of Ireland
DLB	'Donegall Estate Letter Book 1771-74', Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, T1893/1 (Down, North, documents)
ILCRB	Irish Land Commission, Records Branch, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries & Food. Alexander Papers, Record no. EC 4917/Box no. 4580
LB1/2/3	Letterbooks of John Alexander II (1802-85) in the Alexander papers, Milford House, Co. Carlow
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NAK	National Archives, Kew, London
NLI	National Library of Ireland
PRONI	Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
PP	House of Commons parliamentary papers. All references as given by the 'House of Commons Parliamentary Papers' online resource available at http://parlipapers.chadwyck.co.uk/home.do , by Proquest LLC, as accessed through the National Library of Ireland
PPP	Pat Purcell Papers, Co. Carlow; a private archive, by permission of Mr Michael Purcell, Carlow
RLFC	Irish Famine Relief Commission papers, in National Archives of Ireland
RP	Rebellion papers, National Archives of Ireland
SOC	State of the Country papers, in the National Archives of Ireland

Note: The numerical title applied to the head of the Alexander family in the text (i.e. John Alexander I, John Alexander II) is a convention adopted by this author for the purposes of clarity and is not a reflection of how they were referenced in contemporary sources.
All references to acreage in the text are of Irish plantation measure, unless otherwise stated.

Abstract

This thesis assesses the origins, development and decline of an industrial and landed powerbase at Milford, Co. Carlow, from 1790 to 1870.

John Alexander I (1764-1843), a Protestant merchant from Belfast, arrived in Carlow in 1784 and, due to a combination of protective government legislation and his own considerable commercial talent, had created the largest milling complex in Ireland by the 1840s. The infrastructures, activities, successes and beneficial socio-economic impact of the mills saw Milford develop as a significant centre of population in the county.

The vast profits of *John Alexander & Co.* enabled the Alexander family to achieve considerable social and political power. With their purchase of a small landed estate, the Alexanders constructed a gentry identity among the county's elite, rising to its upper echelons by 1853 —all the more surprising given Carlow's traditional resistance to the social elevation of the merchant community. The emergence of Milford as a model landed estate enhanced the family's reputation at a county and wider level. In making the claim that this ascent was remarkable, the foundations and mechanics of this powerbase, as well as the tensions therein, are outlined.

In the second generation, the Alexanders' politics swung from a liberal paternalism to Tory self-protectionism in a bid to consolidate their privileged socio-political position. This set landlord and tenant at odds in Milford, and transformed the Alexanders' fame into notoriety, with electoral controversies in the area receiving national and international attention.

With the decline of their milling supremacy (due to the repeal of the Corn Laws, accident and legal disputes), their social and political powers had been fundamentally undermined by 1870. Despite scholarly neglect, this thesis illustrates and analyses the Alexanders' centrality and influence at a county, provincial and national level during this period.

Acknowledgements

Many people, too numerous to mention, have contributed to this project. To my neighbours, friends and colleagues, I want to express my thanks for the motivation they have provided by taking an interest in the topic. I wish to thank the Royal Irish Academy for its award of the Eoin O'Mahony Bursary in Irish History in 2014, which facilitated an important research trip to London. I would like to thank the staff at the many libraries and archives that I have had the pleasure of working in over the past four years, particularly those in the National Library of Ireland, the National Archives, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and Carlow County Library. Ms Melanie Hall of the Records Branch of the Irish Land Commission in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine deserves special thanks.

In Carlow, I must thank Mr Pat O'Neill, Mr Martin Nevin, the Carlow Historical and Archaeological Society, Mr Michael Purcell and Mr Turtle Bunbury for their assistance and advice. I also wish to thank Dr Anthony Malcomson who took this novice under his wing in 2013, and has been an invaluable guide through Irish archives ever since. His kind invitation to assist in a small way with the cataloguing of the Kavanagh papers in Borris House, Carlow, was a great honour, for which I will always be grateful. Mr and Mrs Morgan Kavanagh also deserve thanks for their kindness and hospitality.

The History Department of St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, has been a great source of solace and enlightenment since the beginning of the project. I wish to acknowledge Professor James Kelly for his kind assistance. Speaking at the History Department Graduate Seminars enabled me to present some of my findings in an encouraging environment. Huge gratitude is due to my supervisor, Dr Carla King, who has been a model of calm, diligence and patience over the course of the work. Her constant kindness and concern made the project so much easier, for which I will always be grateful.

The greatest enabler of this work has been John Alexander of Milford House, Co. Carlow. His enthusiasm for the project has been a great motivation and I truly appreciate the unlimited access he granted me to his home, his archive of family papers and his time. I only hope the finished product is as rewarding to him as his company has been to me.

To my parents, Jim and Peggy, I want to express my deep thanks for the interest they have always taken in our local history and for encouraging this in their children. Beyond

their generous financial assistance, I want to thank them for their love and support over many years. I want to acknowledge my siblings, Michael, Tony, Brian and Suzanne, their spouses and my nieces and nephews (the next generation to inherit Milford's legacy), for their constant encouragement over the course of my research, and for that gem of a motivator: 'Are you nearly done?'

Two women in my life have earned my deepest gratitude, however. This project simply would not have been undertaken were it not for the wisdom of my wife, Nóirín, who has been an endless source of advice and inspiration, and has gone to lengths beyond the call of duty to enable me to finish the project. Her sacrifices and eternal confidence have regularly humbled me and I hope she knows how much her efforts have been appreciated. Finally, I want to thank beautiful Aoibhín, who came into our lives in the middle of the work, and put everything into the most perfect perspective. To them both, I dedicate this work, with all my love.

Dublin

June 2015

Introduction

In a newspaper article of December 1852, a claim was made that Milford, a grain milling centre and landed estate in north-western Co. Carlow, ‘like one of the cities of central America has been discovered’.¹ The statement was made following an embarrassing incident for the area’s proprietor, John Alexander II, when it was alleged that he was an insufficient security for an election petition against the sitting member for the constituency of Carlow borough, John Sadleir. Rallying to Alexander’s defence, the Conservative *Carlow Sentinel* claimed that ‘it required a considerable quantity of [brass] to enable a lawyer to stand up in the presence of Mr Alexander and state that he was improperly described as an esquire, and that Milford was not known in this county!’² Ironically, the controversy brought wider public attention to the landlord’s doorstep and boosted his social and political profile, and the renown of his Carlow property.

However, it is the sentiment of the former statement that is most relevant to the topic in hand here. It portrays the Alexanders as Irish conquistadors, bringing their mercantile ambition and skills to bear on undeveloped raw materials, to spectacular effect. More importantly, it suggests an area of hidden wealth, a lost story, ignored grandeur and uncelebrated achievements, and in many ways, this is an accurate image to represent the neglect of Milford and its founding family in local and national historiography. This work aims to investigate the origins, consolidation and decline of this important industrial and landed powerbase, and to assess critically the family’s significant influence on, and contribution to both local and national affairs.

A substantial country house and demesne remains in the hands of the Alexanders at Milford, one of only three Anglo-Irish families who continue to occupy their ancestral

¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 25 Dec. 1852.

² *Ibid.*

homes in the county.³ Locals point proudly today to the ruin of an impressive ten bay, seven-storey oatmeal mill—once one of the largest industrial buildings in the country.⁴ They speak of days when Milford had its own post-office, constabulary barracks and railway station, when it was the one of the most renowned settlements outside the county town. Indeed, despite the lack of documentary analysis, the name itself speaks volumes and offers an invitation for research. Neither a barony nor townland, ‘Milford’ has survived in the locality for over 200 years and is the supreme legacy of the Alexanders. In one word, this simple placename testifies amply to the industry, prosperity and prestige that the area knew in the nineteenth century, and to success stories which the Alexanders engineered and implemented.

However, no substantial historical research has been conducted into what was the largest and most productive industrial site in Ireland in the 1840s. Despite this scholarly neglect, there is ample documentary evidence that the Alexanders were among the most powerful and influential of the Protestant landed elite of Co. Carlow, labelled ‘the most gentrified county’ in Ireland.⁵ Its limited historiography perpetuates the perception of the county as a non-contributor to the national story, a region with an insignificant historical legacy to complement its geographical status as the second-smallest county in the country. In 1833, in his preface to *The history and antiquities of the county of Carlow*, John Ryan noted that ‘the deficiency existed; and the author, feeling an interest in his native county, resolved at all hazards, to collect its history and survey its antiquities.’⁶ However, Ryan had few disciples and 175 years later, Thomas McGrath, editor of *Carlow: history and society* noted the continued dearth of publications (‘there have been no monographs on the history of County Carlow since [1941]’) when he claimed that ‘Carlow has been a

³ Jimmy O’ Toole, ‘The landed gentry in decline: a county Carlow perspective’ in Thomas McGrath (ed.), *Carlow: history and society* (Dublin, 2008), pp 751-74, at p. 754.

⁴ L.M. Cullen, ‘Eighteenth-century flour milling in Ireland’ in Andy Bielenberg (ed.), *Irish flour milling: a history, 600-2000* (Dublin, 2003), pp 37-56, at p. 56.

⁵ Jimmy O’Toole, *The Carlow gentry* (Carlow, 1993), p. xiii.

⁶ John Ryan, *The history and antiquities of the county of Carlow* (Dublin, 1833), p. v.

neglected county'.⁷ Historical studies which focus on the county have overlooked the centrality of Milford and the Alexander family to the economic, political and social landscape of the region. Therefore, while secondary literature on the topic is slim, the Alexanders' role in it is at best superficial, and at worst non-existent.

Besides a handful of short articles (re-printing material about Milford from nineteenth-century publications) over the last 50 years in *Carloviana*, the annual journal of the Carlow Historical and Archaeological Society, only one essay of original research has been attempted on an aspect of Milford's history.⁸ A short but significant chapter on the Alexanders appeared in Jimmy O'Toole's *The Carlow gentry* (1993), which has become the standard historical account of the family.⁹ While the mammoth *Carlow: history and society* is an outstanding contribution to the historical record (in excess of a thousand pages and with the stated objective of being 'the most comprehensive study of county Carlow to date'),¹⁰ it affords the Alexanders less than 20 sentences and fails to grant them, or Milford, any place of real significance in the county narrative. The essay in which they receive the greatest exposure (R. Timothy Campbell and Stephen A. Royle's 'The country house and its demesne in county Carlow') places the Alexanders among a group who only 'considered themselves to be gentry'.¹¹ In categorising them merely as 'middle-ranking gentry', those authors fail to appreciate the avenues of social ascent within the landed hierarchy (operating beyond the statistics of acreage and rental income) which allowed the Alexanders to rise to the apex of the county's elite by the 1840s.¹²

Beyond Carlow's unfortunate role as the poor relation of Irish county historiography, the

⁷ Thomas McGrath, 'Foreword' in *Carlow: history and society*, pp xxiv-xxv.

⁸ William Ellis, 'Electricity comes to Carlow' in *Carloviana* (1991), no. 39, pp 24-7. An article by the present author was published in 2009. 'Landlords, politicians, entrepreneurs: the Alexanders. Milford, Co. Carlow in the nineteenth century' in *Carloviana* (2009), no. 58, pp 70-93.

⁹ Jimmy O'Toole, 'Alexander of Milford' in *The Carlow gentry*, pp 1-8.

¹⁰ McGrath, 'Foreword' in *Carlow: history and society*, p. xxv.

¹¹ R. Timothy Campbell and Stephen A. Royle, 'The country house and its demesne in county Carlow' in *Carlow: history and society*, pp 723-50, at pp 724, 726.

¹² In addition, some of Campbell and Royle's findings are problematic. For example, they incorrectly claim that the family of farmer John Wilson were leasing Milford House at the time of the 1911 census, when that source clearly shows John Alexander III and his family were in residence there: *Ibid*, p. 745.

dearth of secondary literature on Milford has been directly influenced by a number of circumstances. Firstly, its existence as a milling giant was of relatively short duration (approximately 80 years, from 1790 to 1870) and knowledge of the enterprise has long since passed from living memory. The demolition of two thirds of the mill site in the early 1980s has also pushed the story towards obscurity. John Alexander II's efforts to control the version of his family presented to posterity is another contributory factor.¹³ Crucially, however, the failure to locate extensive documentary evidence has hampered investigations. To this end, Mr John Alexander's grant to this author of unlimited access to his private family archive provided a significant historiographical opportunity. Although partial and uncatalogued, the papers relating to his family's mercantile and landed interests allow for a fundamental reappraisal of their role in nineteenth-century Carlow. Similarly, Mr Alexander's endorsement of this research facilitated access to his family's pertinent 'Land Commission' papers held in the Records Branch of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in Portlaoise (accessed in 2011). Along with a thorough examination of contemporary newspapers, records of other Carlow estates (in public and private repositories), parliamentary papers and published contemporary material, it is possible to present a detailed examination of the Milford powerbase from its origins in the 1780s to its decline c. 1870.

This thesis has three main concerns. Firstly, it aims to present Milford mills as one of the most important and successful industrial operations in nineteenth-century Ireland and will provide further insight into the importance of the grain trade to the Irish economy, in both pre- and post-Famine Ireland. In presenting Milford as the most important industrial centre in Carlow and Leinster and 'one of the most extensive and celebrated in Ireland' in 1841, it will contribute to a subject area in which Andy Bielenberg has identified a scholarly void in his call for studies 'of the industrial communities that emerged in

¹³ See below, p. 237.

Ireland in this period, which provide some important insights into this relatively neglected group at the apex of industrial society'.¹⁴ The focus of research has assumed a northern bent with the linen industry being the subject of many studies. The present work attempts a detailed study of a southern milling firm during a period of extensive change (due to protective Corn Laws and their ultimate repeal in 1847) in an industry which saw Ireland being labelled 'the granary of Great Britain'.¹⁵ In 1891, just as the Alexanders' milling operations ceased completely at Milford, the *Irish Times* drew attention to Milford as a site of historical importance, 'where magnificent castellated mill buildings tell of an era when free trade and triple expansion were unknown. These edifices must have belonged to mighty milling magnates, and such actually are their proprietors.'¹⁶

Secondly, the thesis is an investigation into the infrastructures and hierarchies within contemporary landed society in Carlow. With the purchase of a modest landed estate c.1810 with their milling profits, the Alexanders stepped on to the bottom rung of the important ladder towards social and political elevation— admittedly with some resistance from the established gentry. The archive at Milford provides a valuable opportunity to study a medium-sized estate over an extensive and formative period, from 1810 to 1870. As L.P. Curtis has pointed out, 'without knowledge of how medium- and small-sized estates functioned in the same period [from creation to liquidation], the extent to which the great estate was typical of the whole can never be fully understood'.¹⁷ The development of the estate will be explored in detail in an effort to establish how and why it became the best-reviewed property in the county in the 1830s, and how this fuelled the Alexander powerbase. Political power was a key component of their landed identity and

¹⁴Mr and Mrs Samuel Carter Hall, *Ireland: its scenery, character &c.* (London, 1841), vol. i, p. 405; Andy Bielenberg, 'The industrial elite in Ireland from the Industrial revolution to the First World War' in Fintan Lane (ed.), *Politics, society and the middle class in modern Ireland* (Hampshire, 2010), pp 148-175, at p. 148.

¹⁵ Halls' *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 406.

¹⁶ *Irish Times*, 10 Sep. 1892.

¹⁷ L.P. Curtis Jun, 'Incumbered wealth: landed indebtedness in post-Famine Ireland' in *American historical review*, vol. 85, no. 2 (Apr. 1980), pp 332-67 at p. 333.

the family's remarkable move from liberalism to being headed by 'one of the vilest Orangemen in Ireland', will be explored in detail.¹⁸ In the wake of Catholic Emancipation, the Alexander heir's sense of Protestant entitlement was met with violent opposition from a determined tenantry and Catholic clergy. Therefore, an examination of the vicissitudes of the relationship between landlord and tenant at Milford will form a central part of this work.

Thirdly, the thesis presents Milford as a case study of the relationship between industrial wealth and the privileges and status it enabled within landed society. Crucially, it will be argued that the Alexander's non-landed assets provided a financial powerbase for the family which precipitated social and political elevation into the elite of Carlow's landed gentry by the 1850s. However, this position was not secure, and was threatened and seriously undermined by the demise of the family's milling firm in the following decade. Without milling profits and with only a modest rental income, the Alexanders could not maintain the lifestyle and status to which they had become accustomed. The conflicting priorities and ambitions of the two heads of the family during the timeline under study here— John Alexander I (1764-1843) as 'merchant' and his heir, John Alexander II (1802-1885) as 'Esquire'—will form a recurrent theme in the work. The thesis ends with a chapter that explores the impact of the mills' demise on the Alexander fortunes— social, political and financial.

Overall, this thesis seeks to examine the Alexanders's role at the heart of the county narrative in the nineteenth century. By a critique of this once formidable social, industrial and agrarian centre, Milford's importance as a powerbase in county Carlow will be established. Indeed the historian could adopt no better mantra at the outset than that adopted by John Alexander II in his efforts to end a minor domestic quarrel: 'My object being to elicit the truth and to place my family in their right position'.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 28 Mar. 1857.

¹⁹ John Alexander II to Rev Charles Rogers, 21 Dec. 1875 (LB2, APMH).

Chapter 1

The origins of the Milford Alexanders

‘The descendants of an ancient race, long settled in Ulster, possessing considerable estates, many of them enjoying the advantages of commercial eminence.’

Carlow Sentinel, 1853¹

i. Alexander origins in Ireland: 1610-1736²

Some of the Alexanders themselves acknowledged the difficulty of tracing their family’s origins in Ireland. In 1875, John Alexander II of Milford lamented:

There is not any subject so difficult to me as genealogy. I am very much behind in my knowledge of it as far as relates to my family. I have been endeavouring to grasp some particulars for your perusal, my object being to elicit the truth and to place my family in their right position.³

This statement was in response to repeated enquiries for information from Rev Charles Rogers, who was embarked on researching the two-volume *Memorials of the earl of Stirling and of the house of Alexander* which appeared in 1877.⁴ Although he had suffered the effects of a turbulent political career, the recent disintegration of his family milling business and the impending possibility of financial ruin, it seems Alexander did not meet his nemesis until tasked with assembling his family tree. The historiography of the Milford branch of the family had been much neglected by his family. His father, the original migrant to Carlow had no time to investigate his genealogy, as he was ‘too

¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 22 Jan. 1853.

² The following genealogy outline is based on information in Rev Charles Rogers, *Memorials of the Earl of Stirling and of the house of Alexander*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1877); *Burke’s Irish family Records* (1976); *Burke’s Landed gentry of Ireland* (1912); typewritten Alexander family tree in ‘Donegall Estate Letter Book 1771-74’ (PRONI, T1893/1); a printed genealogy of the origins of the Alexander family in Ireland (PRONI, D1362/1); printed and handwritten family genealogies (APMH).

³ John Alexander II to Rev Charles Rogers, 21 Dec. 1875 (LB2, APMH).

⁴ Rogers, *House of Alexander*.

deeply engaged in mercantile pursuits ever to pay any attention', and had disregarded similar enquiries in 1821 from a kinsman, Nathaniel Alexander, the then Bishop of Down and Connor.⁵ However, in search of prestigious roots, John II set out with a definite agenda. Almost one hundred years after his family's arrival in Milford, and in the midst of a financial crisis which threatened to overwhelm his social position, he latched onto genealogy as a means of establishing an identity amongst the local gentry which was unassailable in its longevity and appointments. However, he struggled to piece the tapestry together for posterity and deeply regretted not having asked more questions of his relatives in his youth. Travelling to meet the author in London in 1874, Alexander supplied Rogers with the documentation, anecdotes and suppositions he had at his disposal, most of which did not make it into the final text — a dry chronology of lineal descent, detailing little more than names and dates but which provided the core Alexander genealogy as published by *Burke's landed gentry* in later decades. John II was himself disappointed with the final document—'I cannot see that it has placed my branch in its full position'— which denied him public acknowledgement as the 'eldest son of the elder branch of the Irish family'.⁶

By the 1870s, John Alexander was eager to cast off the mercantile origins of his family's rise to power in Carlow, claiming to another researcher: 'My ancestors, though engaged sometimes in commercial pursuits, had all of them their country residences and held high position in their counties.'⁷ However, in reality, their origins were far more plebeian than he strove to suggest. In essence, the Alexanders formed part of the wave of the *gallaibh* (foreigners) who populated the Ulster Plantation. Despite their residency on the island for over four centuries, the modern perception of the Alexanders as belonging to an order different to that of the indigenous population can be traced back to their arrival in Ireland

⁵ John Alexander II, 1 May 1871 (LB2, APMH). Nathaniel Alexander was the nephew of John Alexander of Belfast's (1736-1821) first cousin, the 1st earl of Caledon.

⁶ John Alexander II to Rogers, 6 Jan. 1877 (LB3, APMH); John Alexander II, 1 May 1871 (LB2, APMH).

⁷ John Alexander II to Foster, 2 May 1877 (LB3, APMH).

as footsoldiers of colonial expansion, significant in their manpower rather than their credentials as political emissaries. From their arrival in the early seventeenth century, they acted as bulwarks in an attempt to enforce a loyalist, Protestant agenda in Ireland. While their migration was prompted by personal and pragmatic desires to improve their own standard of living, they formed an active part of the infrastructure of the Crown in opposition to native Catholic interests in Ulster.

As the plantation got underway, it is estimated that 16,000 Scots crossed to Ulster between 1603 and 1630. Presbyterians constituted the largest number of the migrants to that region, making the province, in effect, a Scottish colony.⁸ Radical in their religious beliefs, and staunch adherents to the processes of the Reformation, they became a significant and radical voice in Ireland. In direct contrast to family traditions, it is clear that the first Alexander settlers in Ireland were at a significant remove from the gentry status cultivated and enjoyed by their Milford descendants. It is traditionally thought that the family was a branch of the MacAlexanders of Tarbert in south Kintyre, which was a cadet branch of the Scottish House of Menstrie, later Earls of Stirling.⁹ An intriguing figure, the first earl of Stirling, Sir William Alexander (1580-1640), owned the small estate of Menstrie, Clackmannanshire near Stirling.¹⁰ He became a favourite of the James VI and was taken to London by the King after his accession, where he was knighted in 1614 and became a valued and respected court poet.¹¹ It is hardly surprising that the Milford Alexanders wanted to insert themselves into the genealogy of this adventurer who was in the bosom of the royal court, to the extent that spurious

⁸ Raymond Gillespie, 'Scotland and Ulster: a Presbyterian perspective, 1603-1700' in William P. Kelly & John R. Young (eds.), *Scotland and the Ulster plantation: explorations in the British settlement of Stuart Ireland* (Dublin, 2009), pp 84-107 at p. 84.

⁹ *Burke's Irish family records*, p. 8; Genealogy of the Alexanders of Caw, Co. Londonderry (PRONI, D1362/1).

¹⁰ For details on the life of the first Earl of Stirling, see Rogers, *House of Alexander*, vol. i; George Edward Cockayne, *The complete peerage*, vol. xii (London, 1953), pp 277-281; also, the account of Sir John Scot of Scotstarvet in Rev Charles Rogers, *The staggering state of Scottish statesmen from 1550 to 1650, by Sir John Scot of Scotstarvet, with a memoir of the author and historical illustrations* (Edinburgh, 1872), pp 75-7.

¹¹ Rogers, *Staggering state of Scottish Statesmen*, p. 75.

genealogical links were drawn with the earl in subsequent years. Centuries later in 1874, John Alexander II of Milford spoke of an ambiguous connection with the earldom as relayed in family lore:

Altho' I cannot charge my memory with having ever heard any reliable tradition connecting us with the Menstrie, still the strong impression on my mind is that my old maiden aunts, Fanny and Mary, sisters to my father, were upwards of 60 years ago, convinced that my father, the elder branch of the Irish family, was lineally descended from that original Scotch stock.¹²

In support of this, the early generations of Alexanders in Ireland continued to use the crest of their Scottish counterparts on their correspondence, and the Milford Alexanders had two such seals.¹³ Among several pieces of crested plate which had come to Milford House, John II inherited a solid silver, two-handled tankard inscribed with the Alexander crest, ('hand and dagger, ship, crescent etc.') and motto (*per mare, per terras* – by sea, by land) which John II referred to an eminent Dublin silversmith who claimed it was ancient, dating prior to 1690. Excitedly, Alexander told Rogers he would be 'much gratified to learn that you can identify it as the very goblet out of which Menstrie himself quaffed his liquor!'¹⁴

So although John Alexander II claimed his ancestors were of the 'same family as the Earls of Stirling', the link was in all likelihood purely nominal and geographical.¹⁵ His excitement and eagerness to be enrolled in the Menstrie genealogy was characteristic of his attempts to solidify and advertise noble roots, but ultimately, he was to be disappointed and the use of the arms and seals of the earls of Stirling by the Milford Alexanders appears to have aspirational rather than legitimate.

¹² John Alexander II to Rev. Charles Rogers, 22 Jun. 1874 (LB2, APMH).

¹³ *Ibid*, and Rogers, *House of Alexander*, vol. ii, p. 66.

¹⁴ John Alexander II to Rogers, 22 Jun. 1874 (LB2, APMH).

¹⁵ John Alexander II to Foster, 2 May 1877 (LB3, APMH).

A less tenuous link with the Menstrie was through their Scottish landlord, Sir James Cunningham of Glengarnock, who was a close associate of the first earl.¹⁶ Like Sir William, Sir James Cunningham was 'particularly known' to James I and was distinguished in being personally requested by the king to participate in the scheme of plantation in 1610.¹⁷ In turn, Cunningham advertised the project to his tenants who appreciated that competition for land and prosperity was intense in Scotland. Despite their distaste for the native inhabitants, Ireland (and Ulster in particular) was very attractive to the Scots.¹⁸ Sir James's purchase of lands in Donegal was assisted by a loan of £400 sterling from Sir William Alexander.¹⁹

Therefore, in a very real sense, the first Alexanders travelled to Ireland on the back of a royal invitation. While they could claim feudal and nominal links with some landed gentry and nobility in Scotland, it was as aspiring and determined tenants for aristocratic land undertakers that they participated in the scheme of plantation.²⁰ Their migration to Ireland speaks of a desire to better their lot in life. Conditions and prospects in Scotland would appear to have been relatively bleak given the decision to relocate to a different country, and one, at that, in a perpetual state of siege. The dream of many of these migrants, which was manipulated by much contemporary promotional literature, was to acquire land and assume a certain degree of gentility which this allowed.²¹ The family name of Alexander does not appear among the owners of baronies or lands in Ulster prior to 1609 and so their history in Ireland lies subsequent to that date.²² Appropriately enough, like each of the five Milford masters, the original settler was named John

¹⁶ Rogers, *House of Alexander*, vol. ii, p. 61.

¹⁷ King James quoted by M. Perceval Maxwell, *The Scottish migration to Ulster in the reign of James I* (London, 1990), p. 102.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pp 15-6.

¹⁹ Rogers, *House of Alexander*, vol. ii, p. 62; Genealogy of the Alexanders of Caw, Co. Londonderry (PRONI, D1362/1).

²⁰ 'Pedigree of Alexander of Minstrie, Earls of Stirling 1545-1842' (NLI, genealogical office, Ms 174).

²¹ Perceval-Maxwell, *Scottish migration to Ireland*, p. 278-9.

²² 'A survey of the Province of Ulster commenced in 1580 and completed in 1609 by Vice Treasurer of Ireland, Sir Thomas Ridgeway', in Rogers, *House of Alexander*, ii, p. 59.

Alexander. In terms of Perceval-Maxwell's four categories of undertenants, John Alexander was almost certainly among the tillers of the soil.²³ After the King issued a commission for the plantation of Ulster in April 1610, Sir James Cunningham was among the Scottish noblemen who received a portion of land (amongst those forfeited by the flight of the earls in 1607) in the largest denomination of two thousand acres on 19 July.²⁴ Thirty-nine settlers in total migrated with Cunningham to the barony of Raphoe, where two portions of land in Eredy in Donegal were subdivided into the hands of nine loyal retainers (Alexander among them) to hold, protect and farm for their overlord.²⁵ So it was in Eredy (modern-day Errity, outside Manorcunningham) that John Alexander was first planted on Irish soil. This land was held under the very strict proviso that the grantee should 'alienate the premises to no mere Irishman, or any other person or persons, unless he or they first take the oath of supremacy'.²⁶

Resistance to plantation was expected, and the threat of attack from the native population was very real and constant. Sir James was obliged to build a castle and bawn for the protection of the settlers within four years of his grant. By 1619, the settlement in Eredy had grown and John Alexander was living in a small village of twelve houses outside Sir James's bawn of lime and stone, where Cunningham's wife and daughter lived.

Alexander and his five sons held several holdings in the district of Laggan, between Lough Foyle and Lough Swilly. The early days of the Eredy planters were marked by determined efforts to hold what they had acquired and they earned a reputation for assertiveness and productivity above other settlers. Perceval-Maxwell has claimed that Cunningham was the most satisfactory undertaker in the entire scheme at this point.²⁷

²³ Perceval-Maxwell, *Scottish migration to Ireland*, p. 275.

²⁴ For the territory assigned to Scottish undertakers, see the map in Aidan Clarke & R. Dudley Edwards, 'Pacification, plantation and the Catholic question, 1603-23' in T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin and F.J. Byrne (eds.), *A new history of Ireland iii: early modern Ireland, 1534-1691* (Oxford, 1978), p. 198.

²⁵ Rogers, *House of Alexander*, vol. ii, p. 61; Rev George Hill, *An historical account of the plantation in Ulster at the commencement of the seventeenth century* (Belfast, 1877), pp 506-9.

²⁶ Rogers, *House of Alexander*, vol. ii, p. 60.

²⁷ Perceval-Maxwell, *Scottish migration to Ulster*, p. 132.

Following Sir James's death in 1623, his son Sir John Cunningham developed his father's lands into a manor with the power to create tenures. In 1629, John Alexander, with the other original settlers, took the Oath of Supremacy and became a denizen, gaining the right of residency, of passing land to an heir, and a certain legitimacy in the eyes of the Crown. In 1641, the settlers of Eredy were called upon to defend their grants and holdings by active resistance to Sir Phelim O' Neill's revolt which was raised in the neighbourhood of Laggan, where sectarian tensions were high.²⁸ A small settler army was organised to oppose the rebels, whom they managed to defeat quite decisively. The rebellion was renewed in 1649 and as on previous occasions, John Alexander and his eldest son John jnr were called upon to defeat recalcitrance, rendering service that was considered important to Sir Alexander Stewart, a commander of the settler army.²⁹

The family not only retained but promoted their Presbyterian roots and beliefs. The original settler's youngest son Andrew became a Presbyterian minister, and married Dorothea Caulfeild, the daughter of another minister. Their eldest son in turn was also named Andrew Alexander and he was present in the attacking forces of Sir Alexander Stewart at the lesser-known Siege of Derry that took place in 1649.³⁰ As a result, Andrew gained the favour of Captain (later Sir) Thomas Philipps, governor of Culmore fort, near Derry.³¹ The new town of Limavady was built by Phillipps in 1610 to house new Protestant settlers, mostly from Scotland. On 10 April 1679, Andrew Alexander was 'granted in fee farm' a dwelling house, lands, gardens and tenements by George Phillipps (heir to Sir Thomas) at Ballyclose, in the parish of Drumachose near Limavady. The first Alexander burial plot in Ireland was in the churchyard of Drumachose, Limavady, and this town, together with their land holding in nearby Ballyclose (an entailed property of

²⁸ Rogers, *House of Alexander*, vol.ii, p. 64.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 65-6.

³⁰ See W.P. Kelly, 'The forgotten siege of Derry, March-August, 1649' in William Kelly (ed.), *The sieges of Derry* (Dublin, 2001), pp 31-52, at p. 41.

³¹ Rogers, *House of Alexander*, vol. ii, p. 99; notes on family genealogy (APMH).

hereditary descent), was to remain the emotional and historical heartland of Alexander interests in Ireland until its sale by John Alexander I of Milford in 1827.³²

It was at this stage, in Limavady, that the fortunes of the Alexanders as merchants began to consolidate. As a tanner and son-in-law of the town's proprietor, Andrew Alexander (the third generation of settler) was admitted and sworn as a freeman of the Corporation of Newtownlimavady in September 1665, and was elected burgess ten years later—a sign of his family's growing respectability and prestige.³³ Rogers claims that through commercial pursuits in Derry, which was only 12 English miles away, he attained 'considerable opulence', building a residence for himself in Limavady bearing the date 1666.³⁴ He appears to have achieved one of the objectives of his forefathers' migration when he married into the Scottish gentry, bolstering his social rank as a result of his union with a daughter of the Laird of Hilles (owner of a landed estate), following the early death of his first wife, Jessica Phillips.

Perturbed by Catholic attacks on Protestants and Presbyterians alike, Andrew was again prompted into active defence of his inheritances and became an adherent to the revolutionary government and a supporter of William of Orange. On 6 December 1688, almost the entire male population of Limavady, Andrew Alexander prominent among them, travelled to Derry to defend the city against the siege, where he gained the rank of captain. This episode became a key element of Alexander mythology in Ireland, which not only provided a sense of identity, but also was a valuable tool to prove Alexander loyalty in subsequent centuries. The actions of Captain Alexander also inspired a Milford descendant two centuries later in his unashamed militancy and determination to defend Protestant rights. It was this record of action and defiance that provided John Alexander

³² John Alexander II to Rogers, 1 May 1871 (LB2, APMH). For the entailed status of the Ballyclose property, see 'Deed leading the uses of a recovery suffered by John & Andrew Alexander of the lands of Ballycosh in the county of L'Derry, April 13th 1757' (PRONI, D1118/3/1/15).

³³ F.G. Boyle (ed.), *Records of the town of Limavady 1609-1808* (Londonderry, 1912), p. 14.

³⁴ Rogers, *House of Alexander*, vol. ii, p. 99.

II of Milford with a valuable pedigree which he would use to bolster his loyalist credentials in the midst of the electoral affrays of the 1840s, as he recalled 'the glorious motto of "No Surrender", written in characters too plain to be misunderstood. We have nailed our banner to the mast, and clinched the nail on the other side, determined to conquer or to die.'³⁵

For his actions, Andrew Alexander was condemned as treasonous by King James in the 'Jacobite' parliament in Dublin on 12 May 1689. Included on an alphabetical list of the disloyal, the Captain was among those 'attainted and declared traitors for their adherence to the Protestant religion'.³⁶ The possibility of losing all his grants and patents, or suffering the penalty of death was nullified with the relief of the city by Williamite forces in July of 1689. Following the success of the Williamite forces, and the subsequent introduction of the penal code in 1695, Catholic ownership of land in Derry and Donegal fell to under 4 per cent by 1703.³⁷ Alexander fortunes looked promising, but would be even more so if the issue of their Presbyterianism could be overlooked or indeed, overcome. By the 1680s, there was growing resistance to non-conformist religions in Ulster; many Protestants were suspicious of their principled and conscientious resistance to the Oath of Supremacy, some even assigning disloyal motives to it and alerting the Lord Lieutenant to the fact.³⁸ The Alexanders were not immune to such tensions. Their religion had been a key factor of their planter identity, but its aura of resistance and independence was now an obstacle to social and financial advancement. As early as the second generation, John Alexander, eldest son of the original settler, 'deserted' Presbyterianism and embraced the established Church, despite the fact that his youngest brother, Rev Andrew, was a minister, as we have seen. J.L. McCracken has commented

³⁵ William McComb, *The repealer repulsed* (Belfast, 1841), p.133.

³⁶ Quoted by Robert Simpson, *The annals of Derry* (Londonderry, 1847), p. 169.

³⁷ J.G. Simms, 'The establishment of Protestant ascendancy, 1691-1714' in T.W. Moody & W.E. Vaughan (eds.), *A new history of Ireland iv* (Oxford, 1986), pp 1-30, at p. 13.

³⁸ James Seaton Reid, *The history of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (London, 1837), vol. ii, p. 421.

on the social strata of Presbyterians by claiming that ‘most of the dissenters were tenant farmers or merchants; there were not very many gentry among them’.³⁹ Whether Captain Andrew Alexander (of Siege of Derry fame) converted or not is uncertain, but unlikely given that his father and maternal grandfather were ministers. By 1717, his son John Alexander (the fourth generation of settler) had definitely become a member of the established Church of Ireland, signing a register in his local parish church of Drumachose, declaring his ‘unfeigned assent and consent to all and everything contained and prescribed in and by the *Book of Common Prayer* and administration of the Sacraments and other rites and ceremonies of the Church of Ireland’.⁴⁰ So the Alexanders became members of the Protestant elite, and what Simms has called ‘the classic age of Protestant ascendancy, when the families that had acquired land in the seventeenth century, and those who became assimilated to them by joining the established church, enjoyed a virtual monopoly of political, social, and territorial power’.⁴¹

With increased respectability, there followed social and commercial aggrandizement. John Alexander inherited his father’s property at Ballyclose but also managed to purchase a small estate at Gunsland in Co. Donegal. He continued the family practice of trading in Derry where he was so successful that he built a town residence at the Diamond, and became an established part of the commercial infrastructure of the city.⁴² In 1699, he held the largest tenement in Newtownlimavady from the town’s new owner, William Conolly of Newhall, later Speaker Conolly of Castletown, Co. Kildare. Both men were elected burgesses of Limavady corporation on the same day, 24 June 1701.⁴³ The indenture of 1713 refers to John Alexander primarily as a tanner.⁴⁴ His eldest son John (1689-1766), part of the fifth generation, retained the ancestral links with the lands of Ballyclose, but

³⁹ J.L. McCracken, ‘The social structure and social life, 1714-60’ in *New history of Ireland*, vol. iv, pp 31-56, at p. 40.

⁴⁰ Boyce, *Records of the town of Limavady*, p. 33.

⁴¹ Simms, ‘The establishment of Protestant ascendancy’, p. 1.

⁴² Rogers, *House of Alexander*, vol. ii, p. 100.

⁴³ Limavady Corporation book, 1659-1736 (PRONI, D663/2).

⁴⁴ ‘Deed from William Conolly Esq. to Mr. John Alexander Jnr, Nov. 1712’ (PRONI D1118/3/1/10).

solidified the primary reputation of the Alexanders as a merchant family in the town of Limavady. In June of 1716, 'John Alexander, jun., Merchant' was admitted and sworn a Freeman of that town.⁴⁵ By 1757, he was referring to himself as a 'Gentleman' in leases he granted to tenants, and had extended his business into the linen trade by 1764.⁴⁶ John married Sarah Macauley of Drumnagisson in Antrim, and they had three sons and many daughters. Their youngest son, John, was to be the father of the first Alexander who settled in Milford, Co. Carlow.

ii. 'The man who came down from Belfast': John Alexander (1736 – 1821)

While details of his biography remain shady to his present-day descendants in Milford House, Co. Carlow, the John Alexander who fathered the first head of the Milford branch of the family holds a special place of honour in the family genealogy, affectionately, or perhaps just succinctly, referred to as 'the man who came down from Belfast'.⁴⁷ Born on 26 January 1736, he was among the sixth generation of settlers in Ireland, who enjoyed increased security and prosperity in the wake of the Williamite settlement.⁴⁸ However, as a younger son, there was little chance of him inheriting the family lands at Ballyclose. Indeed, John jnr was left only with the promise of £100 from the paternal estate which he would receive on his father's death (which occurred after 1771).⁴⁹ While there is some evidence of John's involvement in the affairs of the Corporation of Limavady in later life, it appears that he appreciated early on that he would have to make a life for himself

⁴⁵ Boyce, *Records of the town of Limavady*, p. 56.

⁴⁶ Lease to Thomas Hall (PRONI, D1118/3/1/14); D1491/1 refers to John Alexander as a linen merchant (papers of the Alexander family of Limavady, PRONI).

⁴⁷ Interviews with John Alexander V, 9 Jul., 4 Dec. 2010.

⁴⁸ Date of birth inscribed on his portrait in Milford House.

⁴⁹ For the eldest son Alexander Alexander see D1118/3/1/15; for John Alexander's bequest of £100, see D1118/3/1/17 (papers of the Alexander family of Limavady, PRONI).

outside the family property.⁵⁰ Bravely, John decided to venture further afield, possibly inspired by the successful emigration of his first cousin, and later (1800) first earl of Caledon, James Alexander (third son of his father's younger brother, Nathaniel) to India in 1752 where as a 'nabob' he made a vast fortune (reputed to be in the region of £150,000 by 1772) in the East India Company civil service.⁵¹ Although he remained in Ireland, young John Alexander would have admired this development. His reputation with his present-day descendants is that of a 'maker', a proactive and diligent constructor of his own fortune and destiny.⁵² In direct contrast to the apparent profligacy, carelessness and leisurely habits of some of the Milford generations, his legacy was a proud one of hard work, dedication and perseverance, a success story favoured with good luck, but to a large extent, self-engineered. It was a story that began with the decision to relocate to the province's largest commercial stage. Given his mother's roots in Drumnagisson (now Cushendall), in Co. Antrim, he would certainly have been aware of the mercantile potential of that region's fastest-growing urban centre—Belfast. For an ambitious and capable young man with a business pedigree, the town—about to experience unprecedented growth—was certainly the place to be.

Belfast was the third most commercial town in Ireland after Dublin and Cork, and the town's transatlantic commerce predated that of any other town in the north of Ireland.⁵³ By the time of Alexander's arrival there in the late 1750s, the population was in the region of 8,000, and would increase to 13,000 over the next 30 years. These were days of expansion and industry, and Belfast traded extensively with the colonies of north America, the West Indies, the Baltic, Spain and France. The most important export was linen, and the town increasingly managed to bypass the linen factors of Dublin as its trade

⁵⁰ Boyle, *Records of the town of Limavady*, p. 105.

⁵¹ See 'Introduction: Caledon Papers' (Belfast, 2007), p. 3, available at http://www.proni.gov.uk/introduction_caledon_d2431.pdf, accessed 12 Mar. 2012. For the relationship between James Alexander, 1st earl of Caledon and John Alexander of Belfast, see Burke's *Irish Family Records* (London, 1976), pp 8-16.

⁵² Interview with John Alexander V, 4 Dec. 2010.

⁵³ Thomas M. Truxes, *Irish-American Trade, 1660-1783* (Cambridge, 1988), pp 78-81.

expanded. One of the most successful and renowned merchants of Belfast in the 1750s was Daniel Mussenden. Since the 1720s, he had engaged in several commercial enterprises with remarkable success, trading in flaxseed, lumber, linen and servants to the colonies, and importing sugar, rum and molasses from Barbados; in Thomas M. Truxes's estimation, he was 'perhaps the town's most important merchant in this period'.⁵⁴ By 1757, Mussenden was ill and ageing and devoting more time to his land than his businesses, and so delegated much of the responsibility of his many concerns to a senior, trusted official named John Bradshaw, with whom he was also in partnership in a linen firm.⁵⁵ In October 1757 we find a letter addressed to an employee of Bradshaw's, a 'Mr. John Alexander, Merch't, Belfast'.⁵⁶ This is the earliest reference to his presence in Belfast, and shows that at twenty-one years of age, 'Jack' was already engaged in trading, and was actively and intimately involved in the business affairs of a partner of Belfast's leading merchant. This speaks volumes about his precocious business acumen, efficiency and initiative. Bradshaw clearly saw skill and potential in his young protégé and rewarded him in May of 1758, with a junior partnership in a new firm 'Bradshaw & Alexander', which inherited the business of Mussenden on the latter's retirement in that year.⁵⁷

As a rising star in the Belfast business world, Alexander attended dances and entertainments given by the leading lights of genteel society, like George Portis Esq., a business associate of Mussenden's and the father-in-law of Alexander's friend, William Benson.⁵⁸ A major player in the mercantile and civic communities, Portis had been a Burgess of Belfast Borough since 1707, was a justice of the peace for Co. Antrim, a member of Belfast Corporation and above all, a gentleman and the holder of a significant

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵⁵ Letters from Robert Carson to John Bradshaw, 13 and 27 Dec. 1755 (Mussenden papers, PRONI, D354/326, D354/328).

⁵⁶ Letter of William Benson to John Alexander, 27 Oct. 1757 (Mussenden papers, PRONI, D354/951).

⁵⁷ Norman E. Gamble, 'The business community and trade of Belfast, 1767–1800', unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation (University of Dublin, 1978), p. 37.

⁵⁸ Benson to John Alexander, 27 Oct. 1757 (Mussenden papers, PRONI D354/951).

estate.⁵⁹ He was customs collector of the town of Belfast, holder of the rights to Lord Donegall's manorial mills and was a partner (with his brother James) in a linen business with houses in Dublin and London.⁶⁰ Wealthy, respected and influential, Alexander would have been considered privileged to attend one of the Portis soirées. At one such event, he made the acquaintance of Anne Portis (1733-1796), a younger daughter of the family and certainly one of the most eligible women in Belfast.⁶¹ Arranged marriages were commonplace at the time, and it was not uncommon for young merchants to marry into the family of their senior partner.⁶² In his examination of contemporary Belfast society, Norman Gamble cites their union as an example of 'the existence of matches whose effect could only have been the advancement of the social status of one of the families involved'.⁶³ If the marriage was indeed arranged, it speaks volumes for the high regard in which he was held by his social superiors as a junior partner in one of the town's most lucrative firms.

For Alexander, the marriage to the young Anne Portis allowed him to take another crucial step on the social ladder by admitting him to the gentry of Belfast. They were married by Rev Bernard Ward in St. Anne's Church, Belfast on 29 May 1760.⁶⁴ John Alexander's societal elevation was proclaimed in a short, but loaded announcement in the pages of the *Belfast Newsletter*, as the lower rank of 'Mr. John Alexander of Belfast, Merchant', was contrasted with – while being linked to – 'George Portis Esq.'. In addition, the correspondent adroitly drew a distinction between the nineteen-year-old bride's major attractions: 'a young lady of great beauty and merit, with a handsome fortune'.⁶⁵ It was

⁵⁹ Robert M. Young, *The town book of the corporation of Belfast 1613-1816* (Belfast, 1892), p. 198; details on the Portis family genealogy supplied to author, via e-mail in March 2011, by Mr Chris Pigott.

⁶⁰ John Alexander to George Portis, 27 May 1772 (PRONI, DLB); C 11/210/4 (NAK) refers to their partnership at Cateaton St., London in 1755.

⁶¹ Dates inscribed on the rear of her portrait in Milford House.

⁶² Gamble, 'Business community and trade of Belfast', p. 37.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Raymond Gillespie and Alison O'Keeffe, *Register of the parish of Shankill, Belfast 1745-1761* (Dublin, 2006), p. 285.

⁶⁵ *Belfast Newsletter*, 3 Jun. 1760.

his new wife's very name, along with her generous dowry that provided Alexander with two powerful new additions to his credit rating. It is no coincidence that Alexander was admitted and sworn a freeman of the borough of Belfast within four months of his wedding.⁶⁶ Of more symbolic than practical importance, the ceremony declared that Alexander was now a bona-fide member of Belfast society.⁶⁷ His religion also facilitated his advancement as, by contrast, the Presbyterian Waddell Cunningham, probably the richest merchant in Belfast at this time, was not admitted until 1773.⁶⁸ The importance of this marital alliance with the Portises should not be underestimated, for it was critically understood and respected by the young groom and his descendants. To this day, the portraits of Anne Portis's father and some of her siblings are the only non-Alexander subjects to adorn the walls of Milford House, holding pride of place in the dining room, opposite the paintings of their in-law John Alexander of Belfast and his spouse. Within a decade of his marriage, his Portis connections enabled John Alexander's elevation to one of the most important and influential positions in Belfast town, that of sub-agent to its proprietor, and one of the country's wealthiest landlords, Lord Donegall.

iii. John Alexander as land agent: 1769-99

In the year subsequent to Alexander's marriage, the fifth Earl of Donegall came of age and acquired control of his vast Irish estates which comprised over 90,000 acres in Antrim, including the town of Belfast and part of Carrickfergus. Holding over a quarter of a million acres in Ulster alone, his landed estate was 'the greatest at present in Ireland', according to Arthur Young in 1776.⁶⁹ An absentee, the earl chose to make his principal

⁶⁶ Young, *Town book of the Corporation of Belfast*, p. 297. Alexander was sworn in with a group of other merchants on 27 Sep. 1760.

⁶⁷ For the historical origins of Belfast freemen and Belfast borough, see PP 1835 (23-28), *First report of the commissioners appointed to inquire into the municipal corporations in Ireland*, Belfast borough, p. 698.

⁶⁸ Gamble, 'Business community and trade of Belfast', p. 20; Young, *Town book of the corporation of Belfast*, p. 299.

⁶⁹ Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland: with general observations on the present state of that kingdom*, vol. ii (London, 1880), p. 166.

residence in England and embarked on a series of financially extravagant schemes to rebuild Fisherwick Park in Staffordshire. By 1768, his properties were mortgaged for a sum in excess of £60,000, and his Irish estates were looked upon as the means for recouping this money. Fortuitously, the vast majority of leases on his Antrim properties were due to expire within the decade of his coming-of-age and he was afforded a free hand to enhance the earning-power of his land. Charles Henry Talbot (created an Irish baronet in 1790) was employed as Donegall's chief agent in Dublin, but another agent was needed in Belfast to manage the northern properties. On 9 October 1767, George Portis jnr was officially appointed by Donegall to what Peter Roebuck calls 'the influential and lucrative post of chief receiver and accountant to the Earl of Donegall's estate in south county Antrim and Inishowen in Co. Donegal'.⁷⁰ Portis's appointment can be largely attributed to the weight lent by one of his two sureties, Sir (later Lord) George Macartney, a kinsman of Portis's and a rising star in the field of international diplomacy who became Irish chief secretary in 1769.⁷¹

The exigencies of his post required Portis to appoint an assistant on the ground to handle the day-to-day business of the estate office and to hold the fort while he was away.

Shrewdly choosing to retain Lord Donegall's patronage within his immediate family group, he suggested his brother-in-law as a worthy choice. So it was that in late 1769, John 'Jack' Alexander, without any previous experience in the field of agrarian politics and administration, accepted an onerous and influential position in Belfast life which certainly boosted the public profile of his family. By entering into the employment of Lord Donegall as sub-agent, he was to play a critical role in what James S. Donnelly stresses were 'events on the Donegall estates at a critical point in their administrative

⁷⁰ Peter Roebuck, 'Middle Years 1764-80' in idem, *Macartney of Lisanoure 1737-1806: essays in biography* (Belfast, 1983), p. 136, and n.36, p. 328.

⁷¹ Both W.A. Maguire and Thomas Bartlett refer to Portis as Macartney's cousin. Maguire, 'Lord Donegall and the Hearts of Steel' in *Irish historical studies*, vol. xxi, no. 84 (Sep. 1979), pp 351-76, at p. 357 and Thomas Bartlett, *Macartney in Ireland 1768-72: A calendar of the chief secretaryship papers of Sir George Macartney* (Belfast, 1978), p. 394.

history'.⁷² Defining himself officially in 1772 as 'Under Agent or Receiver for the Estate of [...] the Earl of Donegall in the said county of Antrim', his duties and responsibilities were myriad.⁷³ Alexander began work at a time when fear and uncertainty pervaded the estate as substantial 'fines' to Lord Donegall were levied on existing tenants who wanted to renew their leases as compensation for years of sub-valuation rents; this was, in essence, an opportunistic attempt to benefit from the widespread desire to retain the status quo in a volatile environment. In Gamble's view, the Antrim estate was 'exploited for the contribution it could make to alleviating [Donegall's] chronic indebtedness.'⁷⁴ It was Alexander's lot to act as the local face and mouthpiece of the greater Donegall administration at this time of great upheaval. Maguire and Donnelly have charted the abuse and blame levelled at Donegall for the harsh treatment of his tenantry and the mass emigration from Antrim in the 1770s in the contemporary press and subsequent histories.⁷⁵ Shielded nicely by his absenteeism, it was Donegall's unfortunate agents, Alexander and Portis, who bore the brunt of the hostility on his behalf. To many of the tenants and under-tenants — whom Alexander labelled 'the lower class' — he was resisted as the local arm of an estate machine imposing unjust duties.⁷⁶ The gravity of the situation is made clear in a despairing note from Alexander to Portis: 'Unless you receive instructions to punish every person who treats Lord Donegall or his servants with contempt, it will be absolutely impossible for an agent, or any person concerned under him'.⁷⁷

Many distressed parties organised their resistance to the Donegall estate into an oath-bound society calling itself the 'Hearts of Steel', which sought violently to resist renewal

⁷² James Donnelly, 'Hearts of oak, hearts of steel' in *Studia Hibernica*, no. 21 (1981), pp 7-73, at p. 35. The approximate date of Alexander's appointment can be judged by a reference made in a letter from Alexander to Talbot dated 2 Nov. 1771, where the writer refers to previous and related correspondence of 'about two years ago' (PRONI, DLB).

⁷³ 'Copy of an Affidavit sent to Mr. John Doherty, Att'rny. Dublin, 20 August 1772' (PRONI, DLB).

⁷⁴ Gamble, 'Business community and trade of Belfast', p. 18.

⁷⁵ Maguire, 'Lord Donegall', pp 358 – 360; Donnelly, 'Hearts of oak', p. 23.

⁷⁶ Alexander to Portis, 18 May 1772 (PRONI, DLB).

⁷⁷ Alexander to Portis, 15 May 1772 (PRONI, DLB).

finer and raised rents (by vandalising crops, burning haystacks and maiming cattle) and to prevent the removal of tenants whose leases were not renewed. On 23 December 1770, a group of up to 600 people marched into Belfast and demanded the release of one of their number from custody in Belfast Barracks. The resulting fracas saw the destruction of homes and the killing of three protestors by troops, in what F.J. Bigger referred to as 'The Ulster land war of 1770'.⁷⁸ As late as March 1772, Alexander reported the continuing turbulence on the ground to Lord Donegall: 'The disturbances and illegal proceedings of the country have become more general [...] At present it is a very difficult matter to obtain debts of any kind from the county as disobedience and opposition to the laws universally prevail.'⁷⁹

Tasked with implementing a programme which hoped to raise in excess of £30,000 on the Antrim estate, Alexander was obliged to exert strict pressure on the tenantry, which was extremely difficult in the aftermath of poor harvests in 1769-71 and the slump in the linen industry between 1772 and 1774, of which the sub-agent would have been acutely aware.⁸⁰ Given this state of affairs, it is hardly surprising that many of the 'Steel' prisoners 'peremptorily' objected to Alexander's presence on the juries for their trials.⁸¹ It was his duty to report back on his efforts to enforce and oversee the new leasing system in a very hostile environment, to his often unsympathetic superiors. This unenviable task required skills of diplomacy, determination and ingenuity, with great keenness of mind to distinguish between the needy tenants and those who could afford to pay but refused. His contribution to the running of the estate and his role in policy-making and implementation have been largely overlooked. In Maguire and Donnelly's surveys, he is relegated to the role of a subservient clerk, and he is not referred to at all in Bigger's account. While he did not have as high a public profile as Talbot or Portis, Alexander's presence and

⁷⁸ F.J. Bigger, *The Ulster land war of 1770* (Dublin, 1910).

⁷⁹ Alexander to Lord Donegall, 16 Mar. 1772 (PRONI, DLB).

⁸⁰ Donnelly, 'Hearts of oak', pp 27-9.

⁸¹ Alexander to Portis, 23 Apr. 1772 (PRONI, DLB).

activities were probably more keenly observed and felt by the tenantry at large. With Donegall in England, Talbot in Dublin and Portis invariably commuting between the two, it was primarily left to John Alexander, as the man at the coal-face, to translate estate policy into reality.

Initially, Alexander embraced austerity as the most effective form of estate management. He also felt a powerful message could be sent to dissenting parties by the state punishment of the 'Hearts of Steel' who had violently resisted estate policy. Such measures could in fact induce many defaulting tenants to pay and restore peace to the community. To Lord Donegall himself, he expressed his views that all recent violent acts were 'horrid works', carried out by 'wicked, deluded wretches' with 'evil purposes'.⁸² Although he clearly abhorred violence, he believed summary justice was necessary for the greater good. In relation to the illegal activities of John Blair and his son on the Donegall estate, Alexander believed 'the hanging of father and son would do more good than twenty others; however the son (I think) will swing'.⁸³ In April 1772, he hoped examples would be made of the captured, and enthusiastically attended the assizes in Carrickfergus where many were tried for 'Hearts of Steel' crimes. Four men were sentenced to death in Alexander's presence, and he appears disappointed to have been directly involved in only one trial, serving as a juror in a case against Samuel Asken for perjury, 'which was so glaring that we returned our verdict instantly without leaving the box'.⁸⁴ However, when the levels of violence subsided, the sub-agent became acutely aware that the dire poverty of many tenants on the estate was at the root of the estate's managerial problems.⁸⁵

Faced with this reality, Alexander quickly realised that austerity could only bring in so much money. While he was used to manoeuvring between the frightened under-tenant, the recalcitrant lessee and the obstinate wealthy middleman who seemed prepared to call

⁸² *Ibid.*, Alexander to Lord Donegall, 29 Feb. and 6 Mar. 1772

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Alexander to Portis, 30 May 1772.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, Alexander to Portis, 23 Apr. 1772.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Alexander to Hamish McClure, 10 Nov. 1772; Alexander to Talbot, 23 Nov. 1772.

Donegall's bluff and resist to the last, Alexander was also keenly aware of the acute suffering of a minority of tenants. He had always been prompt to distinguish between what he called the 'cunning and artful' tenants, and those in genuine need of leniency and assistance.⁸⁶ His stated mission involved 'bringing in all that can be procured without absolutely ruining any family that appears to have honest intentions'.⁸⁷ In performing his duties, Alexander displayed some of his political thinking. He associated himself with what John Bew calls 'the political moderates of Belfast, a weighty body of opinion often labelled 'whig'', and was on familiar terms with many of the foremost cultural and political heavyweights of the day.⁸⁸ His medical needs were attended to by his neighbour Dr Alexander Haliday (1727-1802), founder of the Northern Whig Club in 1790, a leading light in Belfast's academic and political circles and labelled 'the doyen of Belfast whiggery' by R.B. McDowell.⁸⁹ He was also an acquaintance of Dr William Drennan, the radical poet and commentator, and later founder of the United Irishmen.⁹⁰ The reformer Henry Joy, proprietor of the *Belfast Newsletter*, claimed to know Alexander personally in an affidavit of 1772.⁹¹ However, because of his ancestors' religious conversion, many more avenues of political and social advancement were open to Alexander than to his associates —Haliday and Drennan were Presbyterians, and Joy was of Huguenot heritage. From his intimate dealings in mercantile Belfast, he would certainly have viewed Belfast as 'the home of upwardly mobile Presbyterian Ulster and the most flagrant example of this group's lack of political representation.'⁹² Alexander was aware of the injustice of their disenfranchisement, and sympathised with their

⁸⁶ Ibid, Alexander to Portis, 2 May 1772.

⁸⁷ Ibid, Alexander to Talbot, 30 Sep. 1771.

⁸⁸ John Bew, *The glory of being Britons: civic unionism in nineteenth century Belfast* (Dublin, 2009), p. 32.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 33. Haliday's attendance on Alexander is mentioned in a letter from Alexander to Talbot, 23 Dec. 1771 (PRONI, DLB); R.B. McDowell, 'The age of the United Irishmen: reform and reaction, 1789-94' in *A new history of Ireland iv*, pp 289-338, at p. 318.

⁹⁰ Jean Agnew (ed.), *The Drennan McTier letters* (Dublin, 1999), vol. i, p. 219. Alexander and Drennan would later work together on the foundation of the Belfast Academical Institution. See below, pp 158-9.

⁹¹ 'Copy of an Affidavit sent to Mr. John Doherty, Att'ny. Dublin, 20 August 1772', signed by Henry Joy (PRONI, DLB).

⁹² Bew, *Glory of being Britons*, p. 29.

political grievances. His surviving correspondence documents his efforts to be liberal in his actions as agent, and show him to be a humanitarian with a sense of fairness, who was very sympathetic to actual suffering. In this light, his ostensibly bloodthirsty demand for summary justice against the 'Hearts of Steel' must be seen as a reaction to his fear of naive and ignorant individuals being drafted into a violent and destructive agenda, rather than a disallowance of the 'Hearts of Steel' grievances.⁹³

On a daily basis, Alexander defended tenants whom he felt were justified in their claims for rent abatement, and also made several pleas to Talbot for leniency in the payment of fines where he perceived a family was experiencing genuine poverty and distress.

Invariably, those tenants with a large number of children most exercised his pity.

Although the times allowed little room for sentiment and the sub-agent was repeatedly obliged to justify his charity to Talbot, the case of William Wilson of Tobergill appears to have particularly moved Alexander. Unable to pay the rent, let alone the fine, Wilson was served with an ejectment notice by Talbot's Dublin office, which would render his nine children homeless. Described as 'extremely poor' by Alexander, he took great pity on the family and petitioned for the retraction of the ejectment, pleading for mercy and understanding:

I am sure Lord Donegall would not choose to proceed against him. Therefore I beg you'll stop the progress of the ejectment, and send me an account of the costs immediately, in which account I once more must be an advocate for your extension of charity, in reducing as low as you can, for the man is honest tho' poor and hitherto rather indolent, but the prospect of losing his habitat has now roused him.⁹⁴

As he gained more experience, Alexander gradually perceived the need for generosity in his role as estate manager, and attempted to communicate his thoughts on the duties incumbent on landlords to his superior in Dublin and his employer. Alexander bravely expressed his view that the interest and well-being of landlord and tenant were inter-

⁹³ Alexander to Portis, 18 May 1772 (PRONI, DLB).

⁹⁴ Ibid. Alexander to John Doherty, 30 Nov. 1773.

dependent, and repeatedly used the vocabulary of nursing to suggest a role for the landlord as protector and nurturer.⁹⁵ To Lord Donegall in June 1773, while admitting that rent collection was his priority, he stressed that ‘at the same time, it will be necessary to nurse some of the poorer tenantry in particular, for the future advantage of them and your Lordship, whose interest must always be inseparable’.⁹⁶ Such utterances go at least some way to countering W.A. Maguire’s supposition that ‘perhaps the only official contact [Donegall] and his agents had with these submerged inhabitants of his property was in trying to get them convicted of their crimes when they became Steelboys’.⁹⁷

The ‘Donegall Letter Book 1771-74’ shows Alexander working tirelessly for the Donegall estate during these years. He performed his new role with gusto and appears to have enjoyed its responsibilities - thanking Lord Donegall for his ‘present happy situation at his Lordship’s house’ in July of 1772— probably a reference to his residency in the ruins of Belfast Castle, the greatest physical symbol of the landlord’s presence in the town.⁹⁸ (Destroyed by fire in April 1708, it was never re-built but the surviving portion of what John Alexander would call ‘the old ruinous house’ and the out-offices were renovated and used as the residence and rent office of the Donegall estate agent.)⁹⁹ However, he faced many obstacles in the effective performance of his duties. One of his greatest challenges in the role of land-agent— one which probably informed his later business career and that of his descendants in their desire for commercial independence— was his subservience to a higher central authority, a challenge exacerbated by the geographical distances between Belfast, Dublin and Staffordshire. Relatively independent and extremely decisive as a merchant, Alexander found his patience tested as a cog in a greater administrative wheel. Frustrated by the dictates of head office and

⁹⁵ See for example, Alexander to Talbot, 23 Nov. 1772 (PRONI, DLB).

⁹⁶ Ibid, Alexander to Lord Donegall, 16 Jun. 1773.

⁹⁷ Maguire, ‘Hearts of steel’, p. 376.

⁹⁸ Alexander to Lord Donegall, 1 Aug. 1772 (PRONI, DLB); Colin Johnston Robb, ‘The Story of the Donegall Family’s Old Belfast Seat’ in *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 Dec. 1947.

⁹⁹ Alexander to Talbot, 19 Feb. 1773 (PRONI, DLB); Johnston Robb, ‘Old Belfast Seat’.

delayed correspondence, the content of which was often restricting and counter-productive, he manifested a desire throughout his agency for greater independence to free himself from the need for constant sanctioning from Portis, the chief agent in Dublin and Lord Donegall himself which he perceived as a debilitating weakness in the effective running of the Receiver's office.

Alexander's correspondence with Talbot often itches with impatience, and his desires are necessarily couched in very discreet terms; with his brother-in-law, he could afford to be far more direct and blunt. Informing Portis that the need for a free hand was becoming ever more pressing for his own efficacy and protection, Alexander stressed 'you had better obtain from Lord Donegall a power for me to act, as otherwise I may sometime or other get into a scrape'.¹⁰⁰ In actuality, the 'scrape' was just as likely to occur with Talbot as with the unhappy tenantry. Talbot regularly found fault with Alexander's *modus operandi*, from being critical of his choice of estate employees to his style of book-keeping, and the tone of their correspondence is often strained, as typified by the sub-agent's regular explanations, and his reticence when he ventured to offer advice or an opinion on a point of policy.¹⁰¹

The third of his superiors, George Portis, although a member of his immediate family, was no less problematic. Six years younger than his brother-in-law and inexorably bound to him on both a personal and professional basis, Alexander often found himself bowing to Portis's wishes. Confident to the point of arrogance, and assertive to the point of rudeness, Portis clearly revelled in the prestige of his role as agent to Lord Donegall, but shared little of Alexander's interpersonal skills, affability or diplomacy. He dismissed Alexander's hopes for a more lenient agency, believing that 'the least relaxation in favour

¹⁰⁰ Alexander to Portis, 2 May 1772 (PRONI, DLB).

¹⁰¹ Ibid, Alexander to Talbot, 25 Jan. 1773.

of the tenantry would be adding fresh fuel to a well-lighted fire'.¹⁰² With few public relations skills, he ruffled many feathers by his blunt pronouncements and ill-judged acts. He dismissed the town corporation as a site of 'plague and vexation', and in April of 1773 he insulted many of the most wealthy and influential citizens of Belfast by carelessly suggesting the rancour of the times was limited to the Presbyterian population, leading to a controversy which exercised his ire rather than his contrition.¹⁰³ This must surely have been an embarrassment for Alexander, given his Presbyterian roots, and his dealings and friendships with many prominent Presbyterians in the town, such as the Mussendens, Haliday and Drennan. Although Portis assured Talbot that 'private piques or resentments never will nor never can interfere with my duty', he later conceded that he had made many enemies and it is clear that he was highly sensitive to slights and was intolerant towards any challenge to his authority, imagined or otherwise.¹⁰⁴ In Belfast, his public persona was highly ostentatious. Martha MacTier suggested that Portis was open to bribes or 'hush money' in his role as Collector for the port of Belfast, which she alleged boosted the job's regular income from £300 to five times that amount.¹⁰⁵ Portis's personality and his priorities as agent—which apparently could not have been 'more mean, more ridiculous, more inconsistent'—led McTier to dismiss the entire Belfast administration: 'Lord D[onegall] never can be of any good, nor get leave to be so, while there are such a set of menials in this place'.¹⁰⁶ Alexander was fully aware of his brother-in-law's weaknesses. Many of his business affairs were subjects of public gossip in which he was accused of being wilfully underhanded and self-serving.¹⁰⁷ Even in his early days as agent, Talbot was suspicious of Portis's accounts and queried Alexander about this. Loyal to his brother-in-law, Alexander defended his name but sent the

¹⁰² Ibid, Portis to Talbot, 7 Aug. 1772.

¹⁰³ Ibid, Portis to Talbot, 22 Apr. 1773.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, Portis to Talbot, 22 Apr. 1773; 30 Dec. 1773.

¹⁰⁵ *Drennan McTier letters*, vol. ii, p. 365.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 125.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 221.

correspondence to Portis for approval first.¹⁰⁸ This loyalty was to diminish over time, especially after George Portis suffered a complete (and public) mental breakdown, a subject which 'engrossed' the town and was surely a source of pain and embarrassment for the Alexanders.¹⁰⁹ Neither Portis's reputation nor his mind recovered from this incident which marked the beginning of the end of his authority in Belfast. He managed to retain the role of Collector until 1790, but it appears he lost the Donegall agency immediately.¹¹⁰ Given the troubles of his in-law, Alexander became increasingly aware of the imperative of securing a future within Belfast society and the Donegall administration which was independent of Portis patronage.

From the early-1780s onwards, Alexander was determined to forge his own identity in the town. As Portis's illness developed, he was allotted greater responsibilities by Lord Donegall, such as his appointment as seneschal of the manor of Belfast in October of 1784.¹¹¹ Through his wife's family, Alexander also benefitted from the patronage of the chief secretary, Sir George Macartney. In a letter of 5 June 1771, Alexander described how his 'heart is overflowing with gratitude' to Macartney for some unknown favour that was readily attended to by the then chief secretary. Links with such influential people allowed him greater claim to being one of the higher order, to use his own terminology. In 1772, the objections made against him by the 'Steel' prisoners in court were a cause for pride as they categorised him as a Belfast gentleman.¹¹² When Arthur Young visited the town in August of 1776, the fact that he was directed to John Alexander says much about the latter's elevation to the elite of contemporary society.¹¹³ Recommended to Young as one of four authorities on Belfast commerce and agriculture by Dr Haliday, Alexander

¹⁰⁸ Alexander to Talbot, 2 May 1772; Alexander to Portis, 2 May 1772 (PRONI, DLB).

¹⁰⁹ *Drennan McTier letters*, vol. i, p. 237-8.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 289; it seems Portis's replacement as agent was the attorney Thomas Ludford Stewart, *ibid*, vol. ii, pp 324, 464.

¹¹¹ *Belfast Newsletter*, 16-20 Jul. 1784.

¹¹² Alexander to Portis, 23 Apr. 1772 (PRONI, DLB).

¹¹³ Young, *A tour in Ireland*, vol. i, p. 162. The author was directed to Alexander and three others by a letter from Haliday.

was included by the author in a select list 'of the most distinguished characters in Ireland – Characters that would reflect a lustre upon any nation'.¹¹⁴ Indeed, the text of *Tour in Ireland* contains the first printed reference to 'John Alexander, Esq., Belfast'.¹¹⁵ To this outsider, the merchant and agent bore all the marks of a gentleman.

iv. John Alexander and the Belfast Mills, 1787.

John Alexander performed the role of subagent for thirty years from 1769 to 1799. His employer, the fifth earl of Donegall (marquis of Donegall from 1791), died in January 1799, and was succeeded by his eldest son, George Augustus Chichester. When Chichester came of age in 1791, he had already amassed debts of £40,000, and was to be notorious throughout his life for his financial extravagance and indebtedness.¹¹⁶ On his succession, he was assailed by creditors and the Donegall estate entered a period of turmoil from which it was not to recover.¹¹⁷ The ensuing chaos in the receiver's office in Belfast can only be imagined and it brought about 'a universal change of station', according to Martha McTier.¹¹⁸ In March 1799, Alexander (a recent widower) left Belfast Castle and resigned his position the following month.¹¹⁹ This change in situation would almost certainly have been embraced rather than suffered by Alexander. Having survived Lord Donegall, Talbot and Portis, he probably did not have the energy or interest for the new landlord's debt management. A very wealthy man at this stage, his resignation also allowed him to return full-time to his commercial interests, for at heart he remained a merchant. In his early years as subagent he maintained his interests in the

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. xxiv.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁶ W.A. Maguire, *Living like a lord: the second marquis of Donegall, 1769-1844* (Belfast, 1984), p. 11.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 19.

¹¹⁸ *Drennan McTier letters*, vol. ii, p. 477.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 477, 489.

Bradshaw & Alexander partnership until the company was dissolved in 1771.¹²⁰ On breaking with his earliest mentor, Alexander developed his independent interests as a trader in the spirits and linen business. Alexander was prominent in the establishment of the Linen Hall in the town, subscribing £100 for the purpose in 1782, was a member of the Linen Hall Committee by 1785, and was selected as a representative of the trade by a committee in Belfast to treat with other linen merchants in the region.¹²¹ However, it was his subsequent venture into flour-milling which was to make him a fortune and form a part of the famous Milford milling empire. Indeed, by the time of his resignation as sub-agent in 1799, his milling property alone in Belfast was valued at an impressive £16,000 – eight times the annual allowance of the new Lord Donegall.¹²²

Until 1765, flour milling in Belfast was virtually non-existent. A number of small mills for grinding oats and rye were conducted on a traditional needs-only basis. In the 1750s, George Portis snr held the rights to Belfast's manorial mill at the junction of Mill St. and Millfield.¹²³ By the 1790s, other modest manorial mills had been established westwards on Falls Road.¹²⁴ Local inhabitants were compelled by their leases to bring their corn there for grinding, and the miller in turn was obliged to grind it, regardless of quality. Thus, in Gamble's view, 'it was virtually impossible for a manorial mill to engage in the specialised, large-scale business of flour production.'¹²⁵ Alexander himself admitted that he 'knew too much of such expenses' and losses, as suffered by his father-in-law in the milling trade.¹²⁶ This monopoly was increasingly challenged as a number of small

¹²⁰ The final reference to the company in the *Belfast Newsletter* is dated 22 Feb. 1771.

¹²¹ *Belfast Newsletter*, 26 Apr. 1785; [Henry Joy], *Historical collections relative to the town of Belfast: from the earliest period to the union with Great Britain* (Belfast, 1817), pp 224–6. Alexander was selected along with the sovereign, Waddell Cunningham, Henry Joy and seven others.

¹²² Gamble, 'Business community and trade of Belfast', p. 358. For Lord Donegall's reduced annual allowance, see Maguire, *Living like a lord*, p. 28.

¹²³ The site of 'Belfast Old Mill' on the junction of Mill St. and Millfield is shown on 'A plan of Belfast Old Mill belonging to John Alexander esq. By Thos. Pattison, 4th Aug 1818' (PRONI D556/217).

¹²⁴ These mills can be seen on a map of Belfast dated 1791, facing the title page in James McAllister, *A Belfast chronicle, 1789* (Belfast, 1989).

¹²⁵ Gamble, 'Business community and trade of Belfast', p. 356.

¹²⁶ Alexander to Portis, 27 May 1772 (PRONI, DLB).

handmills were set up in the vicinity of the town and allowed tenants to honour their leases which only restricted them to contain their milling needs within a set distance of the town. As an increasing number of private mills were established in the vicinity of Belfast in 1765, the business of the manorial mills was undermined.¹²⁷ George Portis snr had been 'doubtful of a remedy at law and therefore submitted to the innovation in his time'.¹²⁸ The lease on the manorial mill at Mill Street (a building in dire need of refurbishment) expired in 1773 and nobody seemed interested in taking it on.¹²⁹ Portis jnr, the Donegall agent, had hoped to take over the manorial mills himself but was cowed by worries of potential losses and expense.¹³⁰ Not so Waddell Cunningham, who took on the lease in 1779 and in partnership with William Harrison (incidentally, a clerk in the estate office) had the mills converted into flour mills, with retail agencies in the town.¹³¹ Working closely beside Harrison, Alexander would have become intimately aware of the progress, weaknesses and potential of the business and the mills. When Cunningham decided to retire into banking, Alexander seized the opportunity and made an offer. The Belfast mills (including those on Mill Street and the newer premises on the Falls road) were accordingly sold to him, sometime in 1789.¹³²

Gamble believes the connection between the estate office and the mills 'is of some interest' in explaining the purchase, but that author was arguably unaware of an even greater influence which convinced Alexander to take on the mills—the advice, insight and experience of his eldest son and namesake at this time, in the nascent milling empire of Milford, co. Carlow.¹³³ As his son's involvement in the trade predated his own by five years, we must assume that the driving initiative to establish the family in milling reached

¹²⁷ Gamble, 'Business community and trade of Belfast', p. 356.

¹²⁸ Ibid. Portis to Talbot, 31 Jul. 1773.

¹²⁹ Ibid; Portis to Henry Ellis, 3 Oct. 1771 (PRONI, DLB).

¹³⁰ Portis to Talbot, 31 Jul. 1773 (PRONI, DLB).

¹³¹ Gamble, 'Business community and trade of Belfast', p. 359.

¹³² The first reference to *John Alexander & Co.* in the *Belfast Newsletter* is on 28 Jul 1789 and the first advertisement for *John Alexander & Co.* at the Belfast mills is in *Belfast Newsletter*, 17-20 Nov. 1789.

¹³³ Gamble, 'Business community and trade of Belfast', p. 359.

Belfast from Carlow, rather than the other way around as has been assumed.¹³⁴ Their combined efforts over the next thirty years were to establish the Alexanders as the premier milling family in Ireland.

¹³⁴ See for example, Jimmy O'Toole, *The Carlow gentry*, p. 4, and John Duffy, *Barrow bridges and related aspects* (Carlow, 2007), p. 129.

Chapter 2

The establishment of Milford Mills

'Not to be surpassed by any in Great Britain, either in the extent of their operations or the excellence of their machinery'.¹

Sir James Emerson Tennent MP, 1839

i. John Alexander I's investment in Co. Carlow, 1784

Several factors combined in the construction of the Alexander powerbase in Carlow, including the acquisition of land, building the infrastructure of a landed estate and an increased role in public governance and social activity in the county. These factors will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter. However, it can be said categorically that the determining factor in their establishment as gentry figures in Carlow was their non-landed wealth and the powers it afforded them. There was a manifest link between the family's financial strength and its socio-political powers; without a vast fortune, the Alexanders would have enjoyed only a limited elevation to the privileged ranks of the merchant community. Jimmy O'Toole has argued the family was distinctive in being 'one of the very few entrepreneurial gentry families to settle in County Carlow.'² However, this assessment must be qualified, as their gentry status was essentially built in Carlow rather than brought to it. Indeed, historically, the worlds of the gentry and the entrepreneur appear to have been distinctly inimical in social terms in the county as we shall see. An exploration of the origins of this wealth is therefore critical to understanding the Alexanders' ascension.

¹ Sir James Emerson Tennent, MP for Belfast borough in the House of Commons, 14 Mar. 1839, quoted in John Henry Barrow (ed.), *The mirror of parliament: session of 1839* (London. 1839), vol. ii, p. 1212.

² O'Toole, *Carlow gentry*, p. 4.

The Alexanders' rise to gentry status was built upon the successful trading operations of John Alexander in Belfast and significant amounts of his merchant capital were invested in Carlow through his son. His eldest son, John, was born on 27 February 1764, and inherited his father's business-sense and ambition. From the age of five, he grew up in the environs of Belfast Castle, surrounded by the bustle, controversies and demands of the estate office.³ From a young age, John I of Milford – as he was to become – diverted all his energies into becoming the consummate businessman, apparently more consumed by the excitement of the deal, than by a determined drive for financial gain. Having decided against following his father into a land agency (indeed, probably warned against it), he sought investment potential outside of Belfast. His move to Co. Carlow in 1784, at the age of twenty, is intriguing and cannot be definitively explained but the impetus appears to have come from John Alexander Snr.⁴ Throughout his correspondence, Alexander Snr repeatedly looked to the south as the hub of commercial Ireland.⁵ He was quick to make the distinction between 'merchants here [Belfast] & in Dublin, by the latter of which this kingdom is generally guided'.⁶ Family lore tells us that it was the father who first rode down from Belfast on horseback to ascertain Carlow's investment potential.⁷ He was a regular visitor to Dublin and would have been very aware of business developments in the province of Leinster. Indeed, the most likely reason for the migration was probably Carlow's contemporary reputation as an agricultural hub which was growing rich on the government grain premiums offered by the Inland Bounty Act of 1758.

Carlow is an inland county in the province of Leinster, second only to Louth as the county with the smallest geographical area.⁸ Its primary trading route was on the river Barrow,

³ Rogers, *House of Alexander*, vol. ii, p. 102.

⁴ 'Copy of marriage settlement between John Alexander Esq. and Christian Nickson, spinster, dated 7th day of September 1801' (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

⁵ Alexander to Mr Fort Gorman, 7 Aug. 1773 (PRONI, DLB).

⁶ Ibid. Alexander to Robert Alexander, Derry, 8 Feb. 1772.

⁷ Interview with John Alexander V, 9 Jul. 2010.

⁸ Samuel Lewis, *A topographical dictionary of Ireland*, 2nd edition (London, 1840), vol. i, p. 255. The area of Carlow is given as 219, 863 acres.

which flows though the county town of Carlow in the north-west and follows a southerly course down the western side of the county to the village of St. Mullins at the southern extremity. By the late eighteenth century, Carlow town was regarded as a prosperous centre with a famed market, which had made modest attempts at industry and whose inhabitants enjoyed a higher standard of living than many of its counterparts. During his travels in the south of Ireland in 1777, Thomas Campbell was impressed by ‘a cleanness and neatness in the streets, I had not hitherto seen on this road [...] Such are the happy effects of a little trade!’⁹ Artisans enjoyed healthy wages and Maura Duggan has argued the case for the county’s financial stability and buoyant economy in the 1790s.¹⁰ On the arrival of the Alexanders, the county had a long-standing reputation for prime agricultural land — which is one of the county’s defining characteristic in the popular imagination.¹¹ In 1790, John Robert Scott had summarised the county’s agriculture as ‘rich in soil, high in cultivation’, and Wakefield included Carlow with Kilkenny, Kildare, Meath and Louth as counties with ‘an abundance of exceedingly rich soil’.¹² By the 1840s, its reputation as one of Ireland’s premier agricultural counties was solid and indisputable. ‘Carlow is one of the most fertile and best-cultivated of the counties of Ireland, and has been termed “the garden of Erin”’. It is almost exclusively an agricultural county’, according to Mr and Mrs Samuel Carter Hall who travelled extensively through the county shortly before the Great Famine.¹³ Though exaggerated (according to modern agriculturists) the reputation itself

⁹ Thomas Campbell, *A philosophical survey of the south of Ireland – in a series of letters to John Watkinson MD* (London, 1777), p. 96.

¹⁰ Charles Topham Bowden, *A tour through Ireland* (Dublin, 1791), p. 94; Mary L. Duggan, ‘County Carlow, 1791-1801: a study in an era of revolution’, unpublished thesis presented for the degree of Master of Arts of the National University of Ireland (December, 1969), pp 1-19.

¹¹ In September 2010, Carlow enjoyed the second-highest average price paid per acre of agricultural land, at €13,334. The national average was €10,131. See <http://www.laois-nationalist.ie/tabId/167/itemId/4992/Land-prices-have-stabilised.aspx>, accessed 20 Jul. 2012.

¹² John Robert Scott, *Parliamentary representation: being a political and critical review of all the counties, cities and boroughs of the kingdom of Ireland with regard to the state of their representation* (Dublin, 1790), p. 9; Edward Wakefield, *An account of Ireland, statistical and political* (London, 1812), vol. i, p. 580.

¹³ Mr and Mrs S.C. Hall, *Ireland, its scenery, character & c.* (London, 1841), vol. i, p. 404.

was enough to attract many wealthy investors inside its borders, determined to harness the potential of its natural advantages.¹⁴

By the end of the eighteenth century the county had somewhat more advanced levels of farming than most of its neighbours. Carlow's butter, potatoes and onions were highly regarded – the first of these, even internationally.¹⁵ By 1811, Wakefield's statistics showed that Carlow's harvest labourers enjoyed significantly higher wages than their counterparts in many neighbouring counties and the author commented that 'in Carlow, the people seem to enjoy more comforts'.¹⁶ It has 'the best grazing land' in the country, and as a dairying county, it was 'perhaps the first in Ireland'.¹⁷ Arguably the single greatest influence on Carlow industry and agriculture in the eighteenth century was the Inland Bounty Act of 1758.¹⁸ The capital's thriving flour market was over-reliant on expensive imports and the act was recognition by the Dublin government of the need to offer stimuli to domestic tillage, encouraging transportation of wheat and flour to Dublin by land, thus ensuring an adequate supply of corn and flour in the city. Bounties were only offered on the transportation by land of corn and flour. To existing and prospective grain farmers, the greatest attraction of the act was the fact that the premiums paid significantly exceeded the carriage costs themselves, much to the incredulity of Arthur Young, the act's greatest critic.¹⁹ In addition, by offering a greater bounty on the carriage of flour (20 per cent more than the carriage costs) than on wheat (only 1.5 per cent), the act stimulated a phase of flour-mill building in the county which was to establish it as a significant corn centre by the end of the century.²⁰ Cullen has argued that the early eighteenth-century flour trade was based in small mills grinding for a local

¹⁴ Michael Conry, 'The personality of Carlow: landscape and people' in Thomas McGrath (ed.), *Carlow: history and society* (Dublin, 2008), pp 1-30, at p. 11.

¹⁵ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, pp 323-4, 450, 267-8.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, vol. ii, pp 215-23. The average daily wage during the harvest in Carlow was 2s 2d as compared to 1s 4d in counties Wicklow, Laois and Wexford, and 1s 9¼ in Kilkenny. *Ibid*, p. 775.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, vol. i, p. 418, 324.

¹⁸ 31 Geo. II, c.3 (3 Mar. 1758).

¹⁹ For Young's objections, see *Tour in Ireland*, vol. ii, pp 243-278.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 244.

market, often subject to manorial milling rights (like George Portis's mill in Belfast) and executed on commission for local farmers.²¹ The 1758 bounty changed the enterprise radically in terms of motivation, purpose, size and revenue. Essentially, the grain trade evolved from a needs-based to a profit-driven enterprise within a few years. To extract the optimum premiums on land carriage for their flour and wheat, the new millers increasingly chose rural sites which were significantly inland as opposed to portal or urban locations which had been the norm since medieval times.²² The greater the distance from Dublin, the greater the reward; Young noted that the mill in Barnahely in Cork was the most distant mill from Dublin at 131 miles.²³ Young – a critic of the act's attack on pasturage and the exorbitant and, as he saw it, wasteful rewards in favouring carriage by cost-heavy roads rather than cheap waterways – acknowledged that 'in consequence of this act, many of the finest mills for grinding corn that are to be found in the world were erected'.²⁴ The act resulted in the opening of 166 flour mills across the country between 1758 and 1785.²⁵

The effect of the bounty was slow but significant in Co. Carlow. It did not feature in returns for the act's first four years but bounties paid to the county increased from £160 in 1762 to £800 in 1770. Young claims this jumped to £2,479 in 1777 (see Table 2.1 below).²⁶

²¹ L.M. Cullen, 'Eighteenth-century flour milling in Ireland' in Andy Bielenberg (ed.), *Irish flour milling: a history, 600-2000* (Dublin, 2003), pp 39-58, at pp 41-2.

²² Colin Rynne, 'Development of milling technology in Ireland, c.600-1875', in Bielenberg (ed.), *Irish flour milling*, pp 13-38 at pp 20-1.

²³ Young, *Tour in Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 277.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. ii, p. 244.

²⁵ Rynne, 'Development of milling technology in Ireland', p. 33.

²⁶ Young, *Tour in Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 256.

Table 2.1 Inland carriage of corn from Co. Carlow to Dublin 1761-70²⁷

Year	Corn Carriage to Dublin (Stones)	Total bounties Paid (£)	County's national ranking in terms of greatest volume carried to Dublin
1761-2	44,987	160. 7. 2	6 th of 13 counties
1762-3	46,782	161.13.11	6 th of 15
1763-4	65,266	228. 3. 5	6 th of 17
1764-5	25,777	94. 6. 4	10 th of 20
1765-6	35,587	151.19. 9	7 th of 17
1766-7	14,276	59.16. 7	6 th of 16
1767-8	42,818	197. 0.11	13 th of 22
1768-9	114,018	849. 4. 8	7 th of 24
1769-70	70,041	800. 0. 8	9 th of 24

One clear result of the measure was a gradual but steady shift towards tillage crops across the county. In July of 1776, Young visited Carlow and noted that ‘tillage is very much increased here, and almost intirely [sic] owing to the inland premiums’.²⁸ That same year, Charles Vallancy observed that in Carlow, ‘the land abounds with grain’, and commented on the development of two extensive flour mills and granaries in the vicinity of Leighlinbridge, and ‘several smaller mills’.²⁹ Nine new flour mills were constructed in the county between 1758 and 1791.³⁰ By 1780, Young named Carlow with Louth, Kildare and Kilkenny as ‘the greatest corn counties’.³¹ The amount of flour carried to Dublin from the county rocketed from just 78 stone in 1769 to 382,953 stone fifteen years later.³² These impressive trade figures and Carlow’s favourable profile in Arthur Young’s account (undoubtedly perused by John Alexander snr in Belfast— an account to which he contributed) attracted many external parties to the county, eager to harvest its profit fields.

²⁷ *CJI*, vol. xiv, pp 83-6 and pp 387-9; vol. xv, pp 185-9.

²⁸ Young, *Tour in Ireland*, vol. i, p. 70.

²⁹ Edward J. Law, ‘Vallancey’s military surveys of 1776-77 & 1796 as relating to county Carlow and its immediate environs’, in *Carloviana* (2012), pp 90-3, at p. 92.

³⁰ *CJI* (Dublin, 1771), vol. xiv, appendix p. cclxxxviii, ‘An account of the number of corn mills at present in Ireland [...] erected since the commencement of the inland bounty on the 1st of June 1758, to the 25th of December 1790’.

³¹ Young, *Tour in Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 92.

³² *CJI*, vol. xv (Dublin, 1772), p. 185 and vol. xvi (Dublin, 1796), appendix xxxi.

Closely observing Waddell Cunningham's progress in the Belfast Mills, it is safe to say that the Alexanders journeyed south with milling in mind.

John Alexander jnr signed his first business contract in Carlow on 1 August 1784, so his arrival in the county can be dated to earlier in that year.³³ He ventured beyond the prosperous county town, however, in his search for the best site for investment. Four miles down-river from Carlow town lay Ballygowan, a townland on the western bank of the river Barrow which was lauded for the quality of its soil. It formed part of the barony of Idrone on the estate of John La Touche Esq. of Harristown, Co. Kildare. A Huguenot, MP and one of the original members of the board of the Bank of Ireland, he held a considerable quantity of land in Carlow, and enjoyed an estimated total rental of £6,000-£7,000, according to Wakefield.³⁴ Perhaps the most noteworthy part of the Ballygowan townland was the area known locally as Aughnagash.³⁵ Here, at *Áth na gCos*, 'the crossing place of/for the feet',³⁶ a crude but important stepping-stone existed across the Barrow, which made it a local landmark of great strategic, commercial and social importance. Given that no bridge existed across the river in its run from the county town down to Leighlinbridge (a distance of almost eight miles), the ford lay almost halfway between the towns, with the river serving as an attractive commercial trade-route to markets north and south. Significantly, the colloquial place-name has not survived in the popular memory as it was ousted by another denomination, conferred on the area by an investor who saw immense potential beyond the humble stones of the ford. In time, Aughnagash would form the core of the Alexander powerbase of the nineteenth century.

³³ 'Copy of marriage settlement', 7 Sep. 1801 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

³⁴ On John La Touche (1732-1810), see *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, vol. v (Cambridge, 2009), p. 334; Edith Mary Johnston-Liik, *History of the Irish parliament, 1692-1800* (Belfast, 2002), 6 vols., vol. vi, pp 62-3; Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 263.

³⁵ Phil Kennedy to Samuel Faulkner, 9 Jul. 1789; Patt. Hackett to Samuel Faulkner, 4 Jul. 1796 (Faulkner papers, NLI, p.3500); 'Estimate of a Bridge at Aughnagash over the River Barrow', 21 Mar. 1790' (Faulkner papers, PRONI, MIC21/4).

³⁶ With thanks to Dr Ciarán Mac Murchaidh for his assistance with the translation of the placename, 7 Oct. 2012.

In an effort to make his efforts and the success of Milford mills even more impressive in later years, John Alexander I would tell correspondents and friends in the 1830s that ‘the spot which they now cover was an exposed and uninteresting district, without a single tree when Mr Alexander came to reside there’.³⁷ Similarly, Carlow landlord Henry Bruen would tell the House of Commons in 1836: ‘When he [John I] came to that county about forty years ago, he has told me, when viewing these improvements, that one cabin, without a tree or a bush, was all he found on his arrival’.³⁸ The juxtaposition credits Alexander as the catalyst, transforming a bleak landscape into a productive and prosperous centre of excellence. The unmistakeable (and singularly uncharacteristic) whiff of hubris in these statements may be accounted for by the tumultuous political context in which they were made, but it does not alter the fact that the statements were in fact misleading and untrue. For on his arrival in Ballygowan, a considerable milling operation was already in place at Aughnagash with an impressive entrepreneur at its helm. Alexander would enter an incredibly fruitful partnership with this individual, reap enormous profits with him, but, for reasons to be explored below, he would succeed in buying him out in 1827 and then summarily dispatch the partnership and its history to obscurity, even oblivion — an unfortunate move which masks a remarkable story of a meeting of similar minds. However, the Alexander tenants (in a petition to the House of Commons in 1836) recalled how their landlord had originally come among them ‘as a miller, in partnership with a Mr Connolly [sic], a Catholic gentleman of great wealth’.³⁹

Mills on the Ballygowan site had indeed been established by a wealthy businessman named James Conolly, perhaps as early as 1775. Born in 1741, Conolly hailed from New Haggard outside Trim in Co. Meath, but it was in Dublin city that he established his

³⁷ James Emerson Tennent, *Letters to the north from a traveller in the south by J.K.* (Belfast, 1837), p. 17.

³⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 12 Mar. 1836.

³⁹ *A statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow referred to in a petition of Nicholas Aylward Vigors Esq, presented to the House of Commons on the 15th Feb. 1836* (London, 1836), hereinafter *A statement of persecutions...*, p. 35.

reputation.⁴⁰ His rapid ascent in the capital's trading world can be gleaned from the pages of *Wilson's Dublin Directory* where he first appears in 1780 as a wholesale 'Corn-merchant' (or factor) at 83 Fleet St. Five years later, he was listed as a director of the Grand Canal Company, and acquired additional premises on Aston Quay the following year. By 1798, he was a partner in a brewery (*Conolly, Somers & Co.*) on King Street, and lived on prestigious Sackville Street by 1801. He was a leading light among Dublin's Catholic merchant community, pursuing avenues of social mobility in the late eighteenth century.⁴¹ By 1810, apart from the principal mills in Ballygowan, he also owned a depot in Kildare, and flour mills on Dublin's Grand Canal Dock, in co. Westmeath and another substantial premises on his land at New Haggard, Co. Meath, where his country seat was also located.⁴² By this date, his reputation as perhaps the foremost authority on the corn and milling industry was assured. By 1805, 'James Conolly, Esq.' was active as a judge in the seed corn class at the prestigious Dublin Spring Show, a position he was joined in three years later by Arthur Guinness II.⁴³ Wakefield evidently held Conolly – 'an eminent brewer of Dublin, and a gentleman of great intelligence' – in high regard and recorded a number of his observations in his work; indeed, the author considered him worthy of very high office: 'There are many Catholic merchants who would form excellent bank directors. Of these, I shall instance as one, Mr Conolly, who is eminently fitted for the discharge of so important a station.' He had the ear of both Robert Peel as Chief Secretary and John Foster as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and was regularly called

⁴⁰ 'Court of the Irish Land Commission, Land Purchase Acts. Estate of John Alexander, county Carlow. Abstract of title' (hereinafter 'Abstract of title'), p. 21d (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917). Conolly gives his age as 75 in 1816. His Meath connection is mentioned in his evidence in PP, 1823 (561), *Report from the select committee on the employment of the poor in Ireland*, evidence of James Conolly, pp 65-70, at p. 65.

⁴¹ Lisa Marie Griffith, 'Social mobility and the middling sort: Dublin merchants, 1760-1800', unpublished PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin (July, 2008), pp 99-100.

⁴² PP, 1812 (366) (Ireland), *Papers relating to inland navigations in Ireland*, evidence of James Conolly, pp 171-5, at p. 174. Also see Arthur Atkinson, *The Irish tourist: in a series of picturesque views, travelling incidents and observations statistical, political and moral on the character and aspect of the Irish nation* (Dublin, 1815), p. 246, where the author visits 'Newhaggard, the seat of Mrs. Connolly [sic]'.
⁴³ *Farmer's Magazine*, vol. vi (1805), p. 254; R.W. Dickson (ed.), *Agricultural Magazine*, vol. ii (1808), p. 310.

on as a witness to parliamentary committees inquiring into the corn trade and social conditions.⁴⁴ One such report of 1810 testifies to the esteem and respect in which Conolly was held in the Irish business world: 'We rely much upon the evidence of this Gentleman, because of his intelligence, knowledge and long experience, and his very extensive dealings in the corn trade; his opinions are given with perfect disinterestedness'.⁴⁵

By his own admission, Conolly first commenced as a purchaser of corn for exportation around 1775.⁴⁶ The success of his business may be gauged by the fact that he was sending flour across the Atlantic at the start of the American War of Independence.⁴⁷ The profit opportunity provided by the 1758 bounty act was hugely appealing to him – 'I never had two opinions on the subject of the corn law since it was enacted. I think it was the best law I ever knew provided on such a subject'.⁴⁸ The expedient of a move into flour milling was obvious. As a prosperous corn and flour factor in Dublin, he amassed numerous contacts in the trade and also the capital to invest in a mill of his own – a move not uncommon for those in his line of work, according to Cullen.⁴⁹ That the bounties provided the spur for him to invest in a mill is certain from comments made in 1809: 'Many mills were erected in Ireland in consequence of inland bounty, or bounty paid by the mill, and mills were built also in distant parts, in order to obtain the greatest bounty'.⁵⁰ The site in Ballygowan, Co. Carlow was suitably remote to reap significant benefits from the bounty, and for a man with a perpetual interest in the development of the country's

⁴⁴ For Conolly's dealings with Peel and Foster, see for example Conolly to Peel, 19 Oct. 1816 (Peel papers, BL, Ms 40259, f.224), Conolly to Peel, 20 Jan. 1818 (ibid, Ms 40273, f.119) and Conolly to Foster, 25 Dec. 1813 (Foster Massereene papers, PRONI, D562/15646).

⁴⁵ PP, 1812 (366), *Papers relating to inland navigations in Ireland*, p. 103.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 172.

⁴⁷ PP, 1821 (668), *Report from the select committee to whom the several petitions complaining of the depressed state of the agriculture of the kingdom of Ireland*, p. 312.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 308.

⁴⁹ Cullen, 'Eighteenth-century flour milling in Ireland', p. 55.

⁵⁰ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 436.

commercial waterways, it was on a watercourse undergoing constant improvement.⁵¹ In 1785, Conolly was a director of the company of undertakers of the Grand Canal with John La Touche — himself a keen enthusiast on Irish trade and commerce, who had close links with, and support from the Dublin merchant class.⁵² While conclusive details of the origins of the first mill on La Touche land on the Ballygowan site are unavailable, it is important to note that Conolly led Wakefield to believe it was he who built the first mills there on the western bank of the river.⁵³ Another small mill, belonging to John Esmond existed four hundred metres upstream on the eastern bank of the Barrow (which would later be bought by Alexander).⁵⁴

The earliest contemporary map of Ballygowan is dated 1786, two years subsequent to Alexander's arrival (see Fig. 2.1 below).⁵⁵ It shows that the development of the Barrow navigation at this point of the river's course was well-advanced, and by the end of the eighteenth century, the river was navigable from Monasterevan in Co. Kildare (where it linked up with the Grand Canal Network to Dublin) to its tidal reaches at St. Mullins.⁵⁶ In an effort to rectify the river's uneven gradients, Ballygowan's infrastructure included a lock at Aughnagash, one of the original eight locks on the river.⁵⁷ A feeder canal and an upstream arc-weir, to regulate the water in this bypass canal, were also in existence on the site.⁵⁸ In effect, the river separated into the primary, split-level channel (known locally as 'Strongstream' which formed the headrace into the Esmond mill), and a narrow, regulated

⁵¹ For the development of the Barrow navigation in the 18th century see V.T.H. and D.R. Delaney, *The canals of the south of Ireland* (Newton Abbot, 1966), pp 126-38.

⁵² *Watson's Gentleman's and Citizen's Almanack* (Dublin, 1785), p. 87; Johnston-Liik, *History of the Irish parliament*, vol. vi, p. 67.

⁵³ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 746.

⁵⁴ 'A map of Milford in the county of Carlow, part of the estate of La Touche let to John Alexander Esq.', 1795 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

⁵⁵ 'A survey of Ballygowne, Craaneluske, Tomard and their subdenominations, in the barony of Idrone, Co. Carlow, the estate of John La Touche Esq. by Thomas Sherrard, 1786' [Photostat copy] (Longfield maps, NLI, 15 B. 6 (18)).

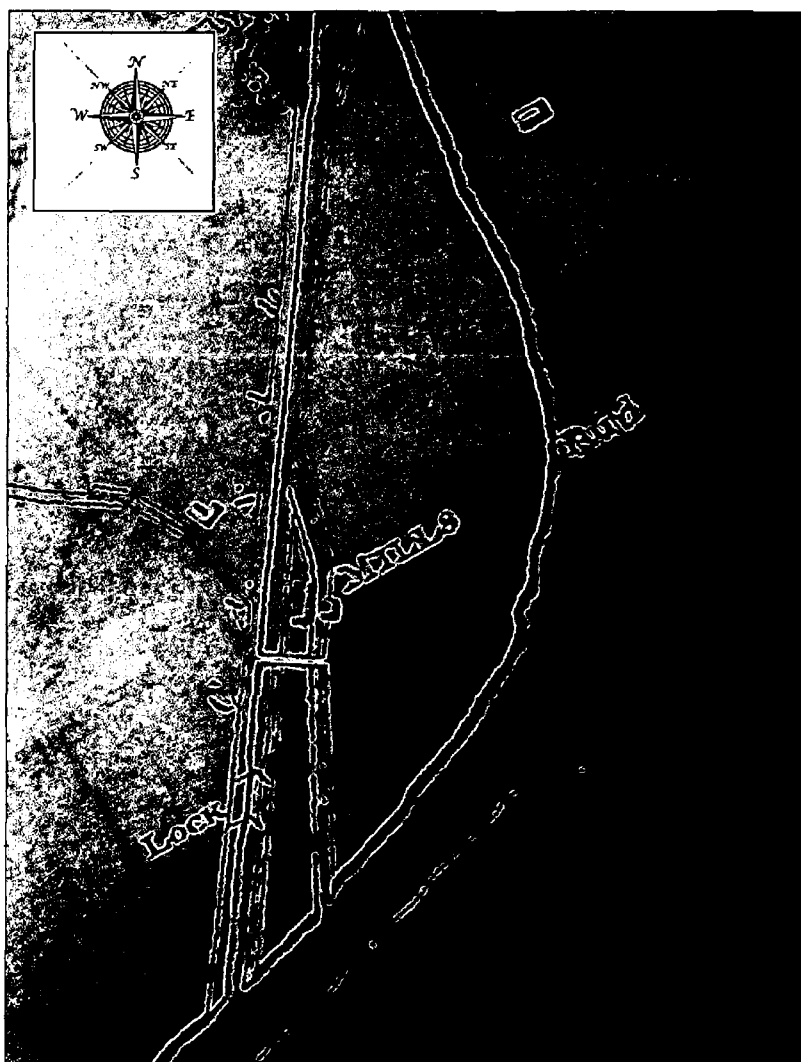
⁵⁶ Colin Rynne, *Industrial Ireland, 1750-1930: an archaeology* (Cork, 2006), p. 356.

⁵⁷ William Chapman, *Estimate of the expences [sic] of completing the navigation of the river Barrow from St. Mullins to Athy* (Dublin, 1789), p. 28.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

strip of canal (which fed into the Conolly mill). This latter watercourse ran as a tributary back into the main river through the lock downstream. There was, however, no bridge across the Barrow at this location at this time.

Fig. 2.1 Map of Ballygowan Mills, 1786⁵⁹

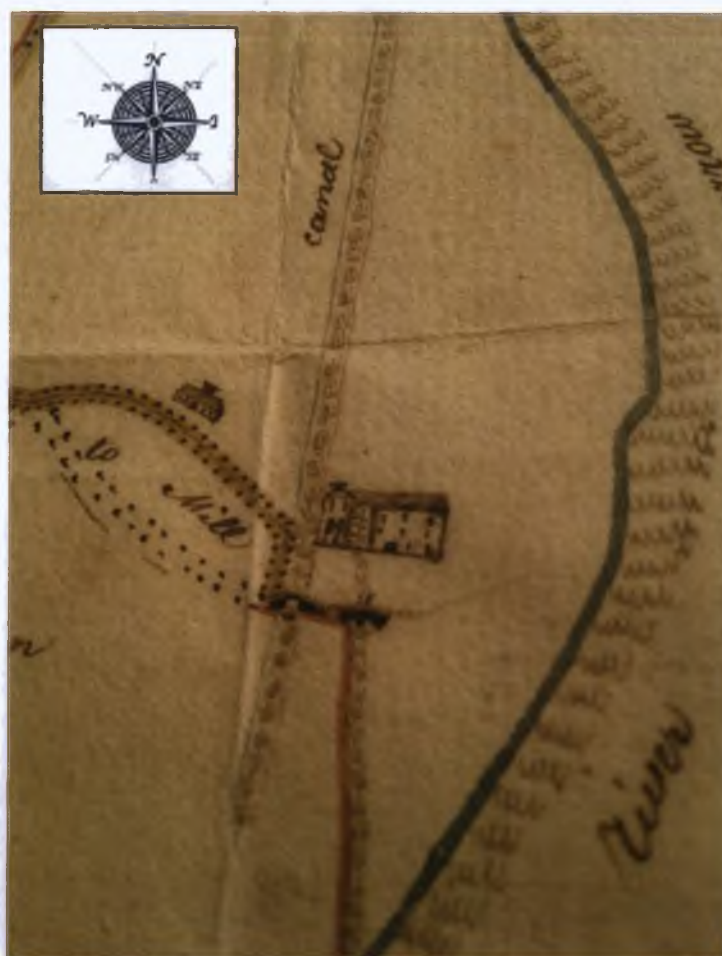


Conolly's premises included two mill buildings beside the canal, from which a short artificial water channel was diverted to power the two waterwheels. A map of the location two years later (see Fig. 2.2 below) includes a crude representation of the mills

⁵⁹ "Photostat" copy of a study of Ballygowne, Craaneluske, Tomard and their subdenominations in the barony of Idrone, Co. Carlow, the estate of John La Touche. By T. Sherrard. Two Folio Sheets, 1786' (Longfield maps, NLI, 15 B. 6 (18)).

themselves, both modest three-storey buildings of two bays and three bays.⁶⁰ The mill-race was of negligible length and was not supported by a storage reservoir (or millpond) to insure an adequate power supply to the water-wheels. Nevertheless, these mills excited John Alexander with their prime location in the heart of a fertile landscape, with impressive water resources and a burgeoning transport infrastructure. The 'mill quarter of Ballygowan' contained 17 acres, and was nominally held from John La Touche by Conolly who sublet to a local man, Thomas Phelan who last renewed his lease for the mills in 1787.⁶¹

Fig. 2.2 Map of Ballygowan Mills, 1788⁶²



⁶⁰ 'A map and survey of Millford [sic] Demesne and mill quarter at the request of Mr. Thomas Phelan, which I find to contain of plantation measure as appears by the reference and survey'd in Dec'r 1788 by James Lalor' (APMH).

⁶¹For Phelan's tenancy, see 'Copy of marriage settlement', 7 Sep. 1801 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917), and John Alexander II to James Alexander, 18 Sep. 1870 (LB2, APMH).

⁶² 'Map and survey of Millford [sic] Demesne and mill quarter at the request of Mr. Thomas Phelan', by James Lalor, Dec. 1788 (APMH).

In joining their team, it appears John Alexander bridged the gap between the two men, matching Conolly in wealth and expertise while working diligently on the ground with miller Phelan, soaking up his local knowledge, contacts and experience. Crucially, however, Alexander brought a vision for aggrandizement to the project, and an ambition to supersize. Putting significant capital on the table from his father, he advocated economies of scale and impressed Conolly with his knowledge, enthusiasm and self-belief. The partnership was perfect in many ways: the blending of the mature and the youthful (Conolly was 41 to Alexander's 20 years); Conolly's presence in, and knowledge and experience of Dublin were complemented by Alexander's diligence and determination to improve back at the site. On 1 August 1784, 'Articles of Copartnership' were signed.⁶³

John Alexander made an immediate mark on the concern by insisting on a new name for the venture – the first step on the road to eventual appropriation by the newcomer. Clearly thinking along grand lines, 'Ballygowan' was perhaps too provincial and nondescript a name for the type of establishment he was planning. The name would have to evoke a certain milieu of prestige and have a genteel appeal which would soften its hard industrial heart. It is tempting to argue that the name 'Milford' was suggested by the 1786 La Touche map of Ballygowan, which bears John Alexander's signature. Here the word 'Mills' beside those buildings is written opposite the word 'Ford', denoting the stepping-stones of Aughnagash, directly east of the Conolly mills. The appeal of 'Milford', both descriptive yet mellifluous, was apparent and it effectively became the Alexander brand-name over the next century. The name was quickly disseminated and the local community was soon obliged to adopt it as evidenced in a letter dated 9 July 1789, from the farm steward of the Faulkner estate at nearby Castletown, Co. Carlow, Phil Kennedy. In writing to his employer, Samuel Faulkner, Kennedy related: 'I have

⁶³ 'Copy of marriage settlement', 7 Sep. 1801 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

sold the wheat to Mr. Phelan at Anagash, he calls it Milford, at 30 shillings a barrel, to take his bill on James Conolly, factor, at thirty one days'.⁶⁴

However, nomenclature was not the only area where John I's involvement made an immediate impact. In 1779, only 3 mills in co. Carlow were sending flour to Dublin and the Conolly concern was not one of them. However, by 1790, 'Millford' mill is listed in a return to the Irish House of Commons as having commenced sending flour to Dublin within the preceding five years.⁶⁵ Alexander quickly made a name for himself among his competitors, pricing them out of the market by offering the highest sums for wheat in the locality, thus ensuring a steady supply of corn to the premises. He was offering farmers a guinea (21 shillings) per barrel of wheat in the summer of 1792; this increased to 30 shillings that October.⁶⁶ This was speculating to accumulate, as the high bounty generously compensated him for the high prices he paid for corn. His resources and proactive tactics quickly made him Carlow's premier miller, remembered among the farming community 60 years later as 'the first to provide a market for an unlimited supply of corn' in the county.⁶⁷ His strategy, which speaks volumes about the credit and capital he had at his disposal, was mirrored in his father's mills on the Falls Road. An advertisement in the *Belfast Newsletter* boldly announced 'John Alexander & Co. are giving the highest prices for wheat, barley and oats, at the Belfast mills'.⁶⁸ Alexander quickly established a reputation for honesty and fairness which brought many clients to his door, for as Phil Kennedy's boss, Samuel Faulkner—a fellow northerner—assured his brother, 'he will youse [sic] you well'.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Phil Kennedy to Samuel Faulkner, 9 Jul. 1789 quoted in Michael Monahan, 'Farming in eighteenth century Carlow' in *Carloviana*, no. 30 (1983), pp 35-40, at p. 37.

⁶⁵ *CJI*, Vol. XIX (Dublin, 1979), appendix, p. cclxxxviii.

⁶⁶ Phil Kennedy to Samuel Faulkner, 26 Aug and 20 Oct. 1792 (Faulkner papers, NLI, p.3500).

⁶⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 9 Nov. 1850.

⁶⁸ *Belfast Newsletter*, 17-20 Nov. 1789.

⁶⁹ Samuel Faulkner to Hugh Faulkner, 13 Apr. 1795 (Faulkner papers, PRONI, MIC21/2).

Thomas Phelan's lease on the mill quarter in Ballygowan expired in 1790, and in September of that year, he and Conolly advertised the 'large and powerful mills of Millford [sic], together with a neat lodge, offices, garden and 17 acres of choice land [...] to be let, or sold, and entered on immediately'.⁷⁰ Up until that point, Alexander had been the young adventurer, a twenty-six year old Belfast whizz-kid testing out strategies and honing his commercial skills in a new environment, with an investor's safety net of not being totally committed to, or dependent on the venture, who could walk away relatively easily if it failed. He had overhauled the business and re-branded it, but he had not appropriated it, legally or emotionally. Alexander's reluctance to take out the lease on the land can be seen in the fact that the advertisement ran for a number of weeks. However, Phelan's decision to leave made him decide to drop permanent anchor in Carlow. The year 1790 is therefore momentous in the history of the mills as it was the date Alexander himself considered to mark the real establishment of *his* Milford Mills, as evidenced by the defining statement he had inscribed on the rear of his portrait in 1840: 'John Alexander. Founded Milford in 1790.'⁷¹ With Phelan gone, Alexander now took on full responsibility for running the premises and played the leading role in the company, *Alexander & Conolly*—the nominal order neatly denoting the management hierarchy of the firm. Like Phil Kennedy from this point on, most of the population regarded and referred to the business as 'Alexander's'. In relation to his property at Milford, Conolly was honest in proclaiming that 'really my partner does the whole business there; I am engaged in Dublin.'⁷²

When he took on the lease, Milford Mill had two water wheels, four pairs of grinding stones 'and every machinery necessary for making the finest flour'.⁷³ It was capable of grinding 10,000 barrels of wheat annually, without night-work, 'with the greatest ease'.

⁷⁰ *Finn's Leinster Journal*, 25 Sep. 1790.

⁷¹ Portrait in oils of John Alexander I of Milford House, by Martin Cregan, 1840.

⁷² PP, 1823 (561) *Report from the select committee on the employment of the poor in Ireland*, p. 65.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

However, in its present state, it could not compete with Carlow's largest mills, the Lodge mills at the Royal Oak, Moneybeg.⁷⁴ Built originally in 1770, they had been continually altered and updated by its owner Captain Richard Mercer of Killinane and its managers, the Weld brothers.⁷⁵ Lauded by Arthur Young as 'one of the most considerable mills in Ireland', it was grinding 15,000 barrels a year in 1776, but was capable of more.⁷⁶ By 1778, Mercer was transporting 14,000 cwt of flour to Dublin, enjoying a bounty of £1,713.⁷⁷ The Clashganny mills were the only other in the county sending flour to the capital at that time and they only managed 100 cwts. On taking the lease of Ballygowan in 1790, John Alexander saw the need for expansion and in less than seven years, his mills at Milford eclipsed those of the Lodge.

ii. The expansion of operations at Milford, 1790-1810

'It is not easy immediately to get houses built, and set going for a particular purpose; it takes some time', John Alexander claimed in 1834, from his own experiences.⁷⁸ After forty years of making improvements at Milford, he knew exactly the costs, effort and challenges involved. In 1790, he set about re-building the mills on a much larger scale, incorporating the technology which would allow Milford to compete with the best mills in the country. L.M. Cullen has argued that 'both in functional lay-out and design, and in scale, the early flour mills in Ireland may be regarded as being among the precursor or pioneer buildings of the Industrial Revolution'.⁷⁹ In many ways, the mills at Milford were the epitome of this phase of building which went into decline from the 1820s.

⁷⁴ For details of the Ballyellen mills, see advertisement in *Freeman's Journal*, 31 Dec. 1806. Arthur Young mistakenly implies that the Lodge mills were in 'Laughlin Bridge', *Tour in Ireland*, vol. i, pp 72-3.

⁷⁵ On the building of the Lodge mill, see Catherine Ann Power, 'The origins and development of Bagenalstown, c.1680-1920' in *Carlow: history and society*, pp 405-456, at pp 433-4.

⁷⁶ Young, *Tour in Ireland*, vol. i, pp 72-3.

⁷⁷ *CJ*, vol. xix (Dublin, 1781), p. 97.

⁷⁸ PP, *Fifteenth report of the commissioners of inquiry into the excise establishment: malt* (London, 1835), p. 214.

⁷⁹ Cullen quoted by Deanna Petherbridge, 'Expressive monuments of industry and order: early industrial architecture in Ireland', in *Architectural Design*, vol. 47, no. 11-12 (1977), pp 742-49, at p. 743.

Technological advances and brisk competition drove millers to seek improvements in their products, which led to processes of grain cleaning and dressing becoming standard in Irish mills of the 1760s. Arthur Young complained that Carlow farmers 'dress their corn in so slovenly a manner, that there is the same necessity of dressing it over again, for which very powerful machines are contrived'.⁸⁰ The new mills required greater production space in terms of grain storage in lofts above the operating floor, but also room for new machinery necessary for the double operation of thoroughly cleaning the cereal grains (drying, shelling and sifting them) preparatory to milling, and subsequently dressing (sieving and grading into different categories of quality) the flour.⁸¹ Machinery required included drying kilns, winnowing fans and mechanical bolters. The degree of increasing mechanisation in Carlow mills is suggested by Young's comment that machinery at the Mercer mill at the Royal Oak saved on labour, and only eight men were employed at the works.⁸² Young commented that 'after the mill was built, Mr. Mercer made many alterations of his own, to render it more simple and effective, which have fully answered his expectations'.

Colin Rynne has pointed out, 'in a very real sense, for eighteenth-century Irish flour mills, the only way was up: these were to become the first industrial structures to accommodate multi-storey power transmission'.⁸³ In 1798, the Lodge mill was 'very large and convenient', and 'a most extensive building, five or six stories high';⁸⁴ Milford flour mill would eventually go even higher. Alexander would further improve by incorporating several kilns into his premises, the absence of which had been regarded by Young as serious weakness in the Lodge establishment. The capital required to build was extensive. The Lock mills in Limerick, the first really elaborate venture in the new phase

⁸⁰ Young, *Tour in Ireland*, vol. i, p. 73.

⁸¹ See Rynne, 'Development of milling technology in Ireland', p. 30.

⁸² Young, *Tour in Ireland*, vol. i, p. 73.

⁸³ Rynne, *Industrial Ireland*, p. 235.

⁸⁴ Young, *Tour in Ireland*, vol. i, p. 73; [David Byrne], *Hibernicus, or memoirs of an Irishman, now in America* (Pittsburgh, 1828), pp 52-3.

of mill-building, cost £6,000 to erect, and the famous mill at Slane cost just under £20,000.⁸⁵ This gives some idea of the capital being spent. No exact figures are available for the sums expended by *Alexander and Conolly* in their first phase of expansion, but by 1795, entirely new premises existed at Milford which put the firm in the vanguard of what Deanna Petherbridge has called ‘the merchant milling revolution’.⁸⁶

By comparing the map of 1786 with another from nine years later, we see a completely new set of buildings (see Fig. 2.3 below). An extensive mill pond was constructed in front of the flour mill, a flood gate was added to regulate the level of water in the lateral canal and a much longer mill-race was built adjacent to the canal. New tail-races allowed for the more effective feeding of water back into the main river. The greatest change was in the size of the mill building itself which appears to be at least four times the size of its previous incarnation. However, the only concrete evidence of the new mill’s capacity is in the returns to the House of Commons of flour sent to Dublin in these years (see Table 2.2 below). Here we see that within six years of John Alexander taking on the lease, Milford Mills had become the most productive in the county by far, exceeding the volume of the Lodge Mills by 1793, and more than doubling their output by 1797. Milford’s monopoly of the flour market effectively began in 1793, when it became Carlow’s largest supplier to the capital. In the eight years from 1789 to the abolition of the Inland Bounty Act in 1797, Milford Mills sent 105,454 cwt of flour to Dublin, receiving the boon figure of £7,294 17s 7d by way of bounties – without mentioning profits on the flour sold there and in other national and local markets. Alexander’s bank balance must have been considerable.

⁸⁵ Rynne, ‘Development of milling technology in Ireland’, p. 31; Cullen, ‘Eighteenth century flour milling in Ireland’, p. 47.

⁸⁶ Petherbridge, ‘Expressive monuments of industry and order’, p. 743.

Fig 2.3 Milford mills of *Alexander & Conolly*, 1795⁸⁷

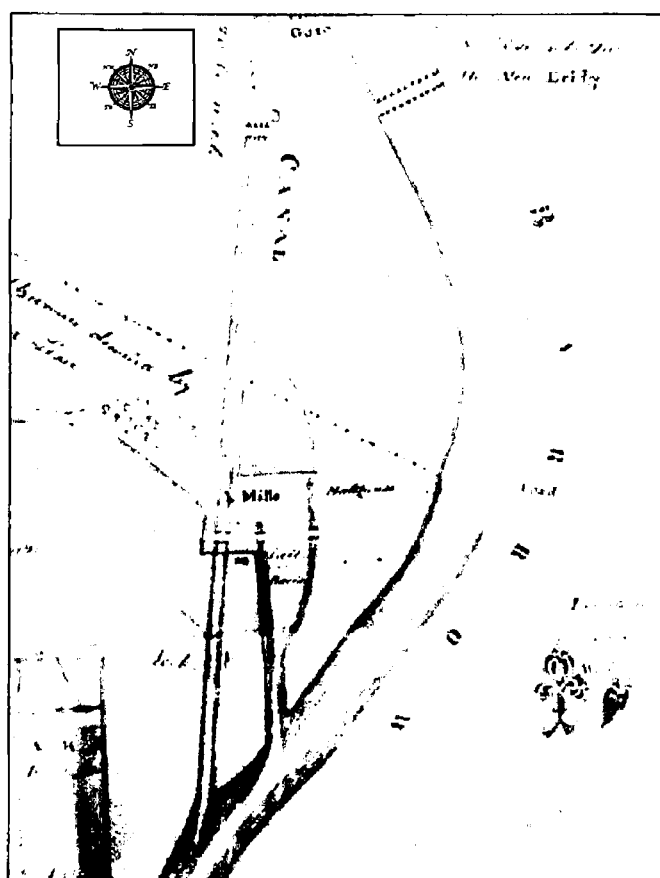


Table 2.2 An account of the Flour sent by Land and canal carriage to the City of Dublin from Milford Mills, 1789-97⁸⁸

Year	Owner of the Flour	Land Amounts: cwt	Land Bounties Paid: £ s d	Canal Amounts: Cwt	Canal Bounties Paid: £ s d	Total Bounties received: £ s d	Rank in Carlow by Volume transported:
1789-90	Thomas Phelan	—	—	3,840	260.17.0	260.17.0	2
1790-1	Thomas Phelan	578	41.8.5	3,980	287.7.6	328.15.11	3
1791-2	John Alexander	946	67.15.11	8,258	591.16.11	659.12.10	2
1792-3	John Alexander	1,562	111.18.10	19,812	1,434.3.0	1546.1.10	1
1793-4	John Alexander	4,824	345.13.11	13,060	935.19.2	1281.12.13	1
1794-5	John Alexander	—	—	13,424	995.9.6	995.9.6	1
1795-6	John Alexander	—	—	19,478	1407.0.3	1407.0.3	1
1796-7	John Alexander	460	32.10.4	15,132	782.16.10	815.6.14	1

⁸⁷ 'A map of Milford in the county of Carlow, part of the estate of La Touche let to John Alexander Esq. Containing as Underneath. Surveyed in Aug't 1795 by Thos. Berne' (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917). With permission from John Alexander.

⁸⁸ *CJI*, vols. xiv-xvii. As vol. xvii is currently missing from NLI, the figures for 1795-7 are taken from Duggan, 'County Carlow, 1791-1801', Appendix B, p. viii.

The mills also engaged in an extensive trade in corn exportation, benefitting from the export bounties of John Foster's 1784 Corn Law which also imposed heavy taxes on its importation.⁸⁹ One report claimed that in 1797, 'Mr Alexander had a very flourishing export trade with the West Indies'.⁹⁰ Benefitting from free access to British markets for cereals by the Corn Interchange Act of 1806 (making Ireland the only country with such an entitlement for the next forty years), the export trade was increasingly important and lucrative for the firm in what Cormac Ó Gráda has labelled 'a golden age' in Irish commerce during the Napoleonic wars.⁹¹ By 1810, Conolly was reporting that their exportation of corn and flour from the port of Dublin had 'considerably increased, except in years of casual dearth or scarcity, in consequence of bad harvests'.⁹² He believed the Corn Interchange Act, which allowed Ireland to monopolise the market to supply Britain's corn deficits, was the key factor in transforming Ireland into 'the granary of Great Britain' as the Halls put it.⁹³ By 1811, Carlow county was justly being referred to in national publications as 'the granary of Dublin'.⁹⁴

The physical extensions in Milford of the early 1790s were not limited to corn mills however. John Alexander was also a believer in the potential of malt, a product of barley which was the key ingredient in the distillery trade (see appendix A). A small number of malthouses had operated in Carlow town in the first quarter of the eighteenth century but an incentive to enlarge malting concerns was introduced in an act of 1797, which refused to license malthouses with cisterns of a capacity below 25 barrels of barley.⁹⁵ There was no danger of this interfering with John Alexander's scheme, however, as he had just completed the construction of a gargantuan malthouse at Milford (the second new

⁸⁹ A.P.W. Malcomson, *John Foster (1740-1820): the politics of improvement and prosperity* (Dublin, 2011), pp 69-71.

⁹⁰ *Irish Times*, 8 Nov. 1862.

⁹¹ Ó Gráda, 'Poverty, population and agriculture, 1801-45' in W.E. Vaughan (ed.), *A new history of Ireland V: Ireland under the union, 1801-70* (Oxford, 1989), pp 108-33, at p. 109 and p. 133.

⁹² PP, 1812 (366), *Papers relating to the inland navigations in Ireland*, p. 172.

⁹³ Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 406; PP, 1812 (366), *Papers relating to the inland navigations in Ireland*, pp 174-5.

⁹⁴ *Irish Magazine* (Jan. 1811), p. 25.

⁹⁵ Thomas King, *Carlow, the manor and town* (Dublin, 1997), p. 49; 37 Geo.iii c.33.

building on the site), on a scale that was unprecedented in the country. Built to the east of the flour mill with its own waterwheel, its cistern measured 460 feet by 86, and its couch measured 478 feet by 120. To put this into context, the next largest malthouse in the county (that belonging to Thomas Proctor in Carlow) had a cistern of only 208 feet by 54, and a couch of 119 feet by 119. The gross capacity of Alexander's cisterns was 138 barrels which dwarfed Proctor's capacity of 53. On a national scale, the only establishment that came close to Alexander's was Thomas Walker's malthouse in Cork, whose cistern measured 385 feet by 86, and whose couch was 426 feet by 127. These figures speak for themselves: by 1796, of the 1,690 registered malthouses in the country (more than 30 of which were in co. Carlow) *Alexander & Conolly* owned the largest and most powerful single malthouse in Ireland.⁹⁶ Alexander's initiative made Carlow the country's major centre for barley growth and engineered a prestigious reputation for local barley crops.⁹⁷ Like in the flour mills, his success was based on economies of scale and generous prices, as well as his personality and reputation for honesty. The scale of his malting success appears to have been the cause of much anxiety and annoyance to his competitors. In seeking the best price for his barley, local landlord Samuel Faulkner was cautious about offending other malsters but instructed his brother to always go to Alexander's: 'You would doe [sic] well not saying to anyone where you are going or what you are going about. If you see Alexander, introduce yourself as my brother [...] for I fear you will find something rotten in the state of Jerabom.'⁹⁸ Alexander's reputation for honesty and fairness made his name a by-word for commercial integrity, a position which remained unblemished up to the mid 1830s. In 1835, the (admittedly partisan) *Carlow Sentinel* celebrated 'his honest and honourable calling', characterising him as the greatest friend of the local farmers: 'Poor hounds! Where else will they receive such

⁹⁶ 'An account of the number of malthouses at present licensed in Ireland, the dimensions of their cisterns and couch frames, and the places and districts where situated' in *JHCKI*, vol. xvi, appendix ccccxix.

⁹⁷ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, p. 439.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

value for their money? [...] They might go elsewhere, no doubt, they might sell to men who would promise to give them as good a price, but who would also, perhaps, *hook a weight to the bottom of the scales*, as we know of being done'.⁹⁹ It also seems that John I was the first miller in the county to dispense with the custom of 'beamage' — a handling fee charged by millers for weighing the grain, whereby 4 lbs worth of corn was deducted from the weight of each barrel brought in by the farmer— and was followed by other 'respectable' houses in this regard.¹⁰⁰

The rate of change in the new century was impressive and *Alexander & Conolly's* success was phenomenal. Everything was in their favour: foreign wars increased demand and prices, improvements in agriculture and technological advances. John I could easily have sat on his laurels but his appetite had only been whetted and Milford had more potential to deliver in terms of power and prestige. From 1810 to 1835, the final great improvements were undertaken at Milford mills which would make them the largest industrial buildings in the country— what L.M. Cullen has termed the 'most impressive' milling establishment of this era.¹⁰¹ Massive structural and infrastructural works were completed which changed the landscape forever and literally put this small, rural site on the map.¹⁰²

iii. Final improvements at Milford, 1810-1832

Before embarking on any further investment, security of tenure was necessary. On 25 April 1796, 'John Alexander the younger' signed a new lease with John La Touche for the mill quarter of Ballygowan. He was to hold the land for the remainder of the original

⁹⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 29 Aug. 1835.

¹⁰⁰ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Jun., 23 Jun., 30 Jun. 1860.

¹⁰¹ Cullen, 'Eighteenth century flour milling in Ireland', p. 49 and n. 62, p. 185.

¹⁰² This small, remote rural site became so successful as a seat of manufacture that it deemed worthy of delineation on the small map of Ireland in A. Fullarton, *The parliamentary gazetteer of Ireland* (London, 1845), vol. ii, inlay.

lease (until 1848), and from that time the lease was to be his solely for a further 999 years, at an annual rent of £7.¹⁰³ Having effectively established ownership of the site for the company, the partners set about investing in the transport and commercial infrastructure at Milford to facilitate further expansion of the business. To enhance hydro power to the waterwheel, a substantial new watercourse was diverted from the canal to a much-enlarged mill pond north of the flour mill by 1795.¹⁰⁴ This feeder canal was significantly widened by 1811 and the mill-pond reached its greatest extent, eventually stretching the entire breadth of the flour-mill and the malthouse (see Fig. 2.4 below). The work, while carried out under the auspices of the Barrow Navigation Company, was billed to *Alexander & Conolly*, who paid the substantial sum of £1,300 to the company secretary, ‘on account of completing Milford canal’.¹⁰⁵ While the partners could not claim that these improvements were a public utility, a bridge across the Barrow was a different story and despite its immense contribution to Milford’s infrastructure, its cost could be presented to the county at large. That Alexander was a central promoter of the venture is suggested by Phil Kennedy’s reference to the construction of ‘the new bridge at Mr Alexander’s’, apparently considering it to be of primary service to the mills.¹⁰⁶ In fact, three bridges were needed, one for the main river (‘Strongstream’), one for the new mill headrace off the canal, and one for the canal itself— this latter bridge still referred to locally as the ‘One Arch’.¹⁰⁷ The main structure (an impressive five-arched, humpbacked bridge designed by William Chapman, an English engineer with the Barrow Navigation Company) was built from local coursed-rubble granite— soon to become the trademark

¹⁰³ ‘Lease for 999 Years from John La Touche Esq to John Alexander Esq’, 25 Apr. 1796 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

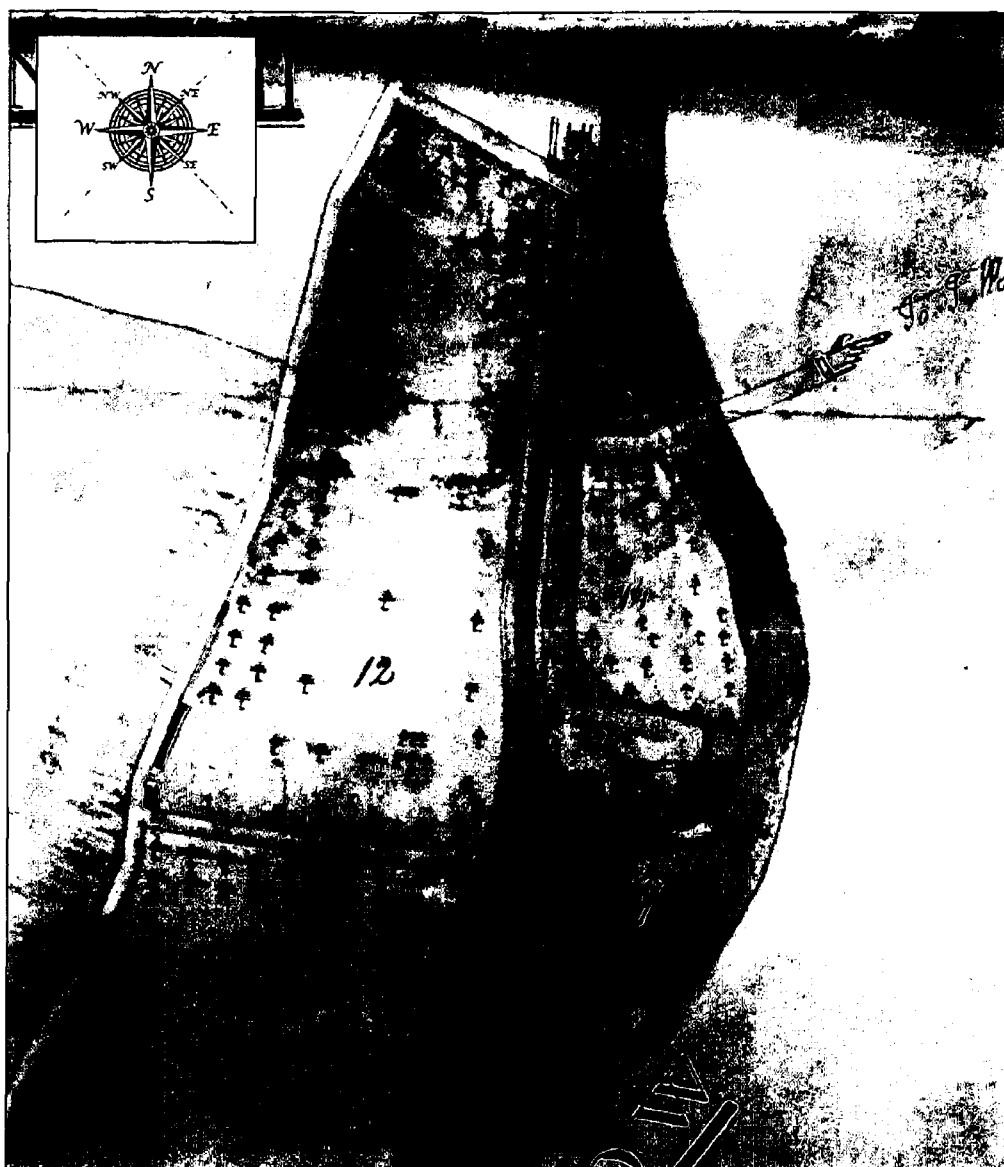
¹⁰⁴ See reference to ‘New mill course’ in William Chapman, ‘Estimate of the Bridge at Aughnagash over the River Barrow, the canal & the Mill Course’, 21 Mar. 1790 (Faulkner Papers, PRONI, MIC21/4). See also the enlarged mill-pond in Thomas Berne’s ‘A Map of Milford in the county of Carlow’, Aug. 1795 (Alexander Papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

¹⁰⁵ PP (1812) (366), *Papers relating to inland navigations on Ireland*, p. 282.

¹⁰⁶ Phil Kennedy to Samuel Faulkner, 20 Jul. 1794 (Faulkner papers, PRONI, MIC21/2).

¹⁰⁷ William Chapman, ‘Estimate of the Bridge at Aughnagash over the River Barrow, the canal & the Mill Course’, 21 Mar. 1790 (Faulkner papers, PRONI, MIC21/4).

Fig. 2.4 Map of Milford mills of *Alexander & Conolly*, 1811¹⁰⁸



architectural feature of the Alexander landed estate — in the summer of 1794 at a cost of £1,352.¹⁰⁹ John Alexander also wanted to increase the company's property portfolio and had his eye on John Esmond's flour mill, perfectly located beside Strongstream bridge in the townland of Clochrisc, which he intended to reinvent as an oatmeal mill. The mill was 'a small insignificant building on a good site', according to Alexander's eldest son,

¹⁰⁸ 'Map of Ballygown and part of the lands of Crawlusky, in the county of Carlow, belonging to John Alexander Esq. Survey'd in April 1811 by Law'r Nowlan' (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917). With permission from John Alexander.

¹⁰⁹ The building of the mill is mentioned in Phil Kennedy to Samuel Faulkner, 20 Jul. 1794 (Faulkner papers, PRONI, MIC21/2). It is shown on Thomas Berne's map of Aug. 1795 as 'The New Bridge' (see Fig. 2.3 above); John Duffy, *Barrow bridges and related aspects*, p. 129.

aged five at the time of purchase, who later recalled that the building was in a sorry state— ‘a poor rack rent place it was then as I distinctly recollect.’¹¹⁰ On 30 March 1807, Alexander signed a deed of conveyance for Strongstream with the landowner, Sir Richard Butler for £1,500, which granted him ownership of the mill site.¹¹¹

A comparison of maps of the site from 1795 and 1811 (see Figs. 2.1 and 2.4 above) shows that a further expansion took place in both the flour mill and the malthouse as well as in the newly-acquired mill of Strongstream. It is difficult to specify the exact dates in which the final improvements took place; they were probably undertaken over a number of years. However, it is safe to say that by 1815, the layout of the Milford site and the extent of the buildings had taken on their final shape. One of the most significant aspects of the improvements at this time was the consideration of architectural aesthetics in the new buildings. As the only surviving building of the Milford establishments, it is easiest to assess the architectural form of Strongstream mill. Built from coursed rubble stone, they utilised the highest standards of construction; during a structural analysis of Strongstream (the surviving oatmeal mill) in 2007, a surveyor expressed astonishment and respect at how plumb the walls of the building were, after almost 200 years.¹¹² The four corners of the buildings were ornamented with flat granite coigns (rendered with dash at a later date). Each of its windows was adorned with brick arches, the majority with granite ledges underneath. However, it is at the summit of its walls that one observes the architectural detail that was to become Milford’s most aesthetically appealing feature. Above its flat roof (covered in a *terceira* composition of chalk, tar and sand), there was a crenellated parapet making a castellated skyline of thick battlements, a design which was also incorporated into the flour mill and malthouse downstream. Although described by one modern architectural commentator as only a ‘modest

¹¹⁰ John Alexander II, ‘Statement into Strongstream and Clochristic, Dec. 1855’ (APMH).

¹¹¹ ‘In the Landed Estates Court Ireland. In the matter of the estate of John Alexander’, 24 Nov. 1869 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

¹¹² My thanks to Billy O’Neill of Milford, lock-keeper with Waterways Ireland, for this anecdote in 2011.

enrichment', the feature was a dramatic and romantic addition, drawing the eye up the great height of the facade to an artistic skyline; 'it has, from a distance, a very pleasing and striking effect', according to the Halls. This can be seen in William Harvey's fanciful but striking sketch of the site in 1841 (see Fig. 2.7 below).¹¹³ Like his choice of name for the venture, Alexander was as intent on making it as easy on the eye as it was on the ear. In effect, the battlements became the defining physical aspect of the Milford mills. It is likely that the castellated ornaments were suggested by Conolly— his home mill at New Haggard, built c. 1760, already possessed this feature.¹¹⁴ Architectural historian Maurice Craig has written that 'during the early and mid-nineteenth century, there was a fashion perhaps peculiar to Ireland, for castellated mills. The Barrow valley is particularly favoured: Moone and Levitstown in Co. Kildare [and] the two enormous mills at Milford, Co. Carlow'.¹¹⁵ However, the Alexander buildings pre-date both of the former examples, as well as the castellated Shackleton mill at Ballitore and that at Barraghcore in Kilkenny— which was built by John Handy, who married John Alexander's sister in 1800.¹¹⁶ Thus it can be argued that *Alexander & Conolly* pioneered this design in the region and can be credited with championing this feature of architectural merit in industrial buildings, while pre-empting the movement to improve the physical appearance of mills in Britain, as publicised by Sir William Fairbairn from 1827.¹¹⁷ By employing

¹¹³ Douglas Scott Richardson, *Gothic revival Architecture in Ireland* (London, 1983), vol. i, p. 114; Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 405.

¹¹⁴ See description of New Haggard mill at <http://www.buildingsofireland.ie/niah/search.jsp?type=record&county=ME®no=14403603>, accessed 20 Aug. 2012.

¹¹⁵ Maurice Craig, *The architecture of Ireland: from the earliest times to 1880* (Dublin, 1982), p. 321.

¹¹⁶ *Leinster Independent*, 3 Feb. 1838; The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage website dates Levitstown mill to c. 1820; <http://www.buildingsofireland.ie/niah/search.jsp?type=record&county=KD®no=11903711>, accessed 28 Nov. 2012. The Moone mill at Ballitore, Co. Kildare was originally built by the Shackleton family in 1792, but was most likely renovated and embellished in the 1830s by Ebenezer Shackleton (1784-1856). Mary Leadbetter, *The Leadbetter papers: a selection from the mss. And correspondence of Mary Leadbetter* (London, 1862), vol. ii, second edition, pp 194-5. See reference to Ebenezer's improvements in Lewis, *Topographical dictionary*, vol. ii, p. 391.

¹¹⁷ Sir William Fairbairn, *Treatise on mills and millwork*, vol. ii (London, 1865), second edition, p. 113.

the word 'gigantic' to describe the Milford works, their position in Petherbridge's hierarchy of the era's most important industrial structures is unequivocal.¹¹⁸

As the man leading the milling revolution, Fairbairn was engaged by John I to overhaul the internal workings of the mills in the late 1820s (following Alexander's separation from Conolly in 1827) and thus make the works at Milford the most technologically-advanced in Ireland. Fairbairn constructed new waterwheels, gears and shafting for the finished Milford buildings at his factory in Manchester.¹¹⁹ The greatest technical innovation at this time was the replacement of wooden water wheels with iron counterparts. Until the second half of the eighteenth century, all Irish water wheels were made of wood, and as late as 1863, all-metal water wheels were still considered too expensive by Irish mill-owners.¹²⁰ That Alexander commissioned two all-iron water wheels previous to this date, from the most in-demand engineer of his generation, speaks volumes not only of the capital he enjoyed, but of his determination to secure optimum quality and productivity, creating a prestigious reputation for his firm. It is claimed that Fairbairn installed the first all-metal water wheel in Ireland in 1829, so his work at Milford lies subsequent to this date; as the work is credited solely to him, it may have happened in 1832, when he established his own independent factory and company.¹²¹ Fairbairn designed two suspension breast wheels for Milford, improving on designs made by Thomas Hewes, and added his innovative ventilated buckets, which greatly improved the entrance and exit of water as it fell onto the wheel.¹²² He also designed a rectangular bell-tower to house the flour mill's powerful and intricate gearing, which was the last

¹¹⁸ Petherbridge, 'Expressive monuments of industry and order', p. 742.

¹¹⁹ Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 407.

¹²⁰ Rynne, *Industrial Ireland*, p. 36.

¹²¹ Fairbairn is credited with works at Milford by the Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 407. On Fairbairn's independent company, see William Pole (ed.), *The Life of Sir William Fairbairn, Bart* (London, 1877), p. 148.

¹²² Rynne, *Industrial Ireland*, p. 37.

structure to be completed on that site (see appendix B12).¹²³ With all structural and mechanical improvements complete by 1835, it is now possible to give a technical overview of the three Milford establishments in the 1840s (see appendices B1-6).

Fig. 2.5 Map of Milford mills of *John Alexander & Co.*, 1840¹²⁴



¹²³ Augustin Rollet, *Mémoire sur la meunerie, la boulangerie et la conservation des grains et des farines* (Paris, 1847), p. 560.

¹²⁴ 'Map of Milford demesne and its environs situate in the parish of Cloydah and Tullowcreen, Barony of Idrone West and county of Carlow for John Alexander Esq., by John Heydon, Civil Engineer, Carlow 1840' (APMH).

The mill at Strongstream had been totally overhauled. Indeed, the present ruin makes clear the two stages of construction as Alexander expanded on Esmond's frame (see Fig. 2.6 below and appendices B7-9). In 1795, it was a small affair adjacent to the new bridge. In its refurbishment it expanded outwards and upwards, measuring approximately 125 wide and soaring to the remarkable height of seven storeys— indicative of the capacity and scale envisioned for the building by Alexander.¹²⁵ The majority of high-rise mills at this time were of five storeys, placing Milford in the vanguard of structural supremacy.¹²⁶ Fairbairn's iron wheel in the Strongstream oatmeal mill was a smaller specimen (18 feet in diameter) than in the flour mill, but it powered ten pairs of millstones.¹²⁷ By 1841, the mill was producing an annual average of 30,000 sacks of oatmeal.¹²⁸

Fig. 2.6 Overhead photograph of Strongstream mill, Milford, Co. Carlow, 2015¹²⁹



¹²⁵ Both Rynne and Cullen are incorrect in describing the mill as a six-storey structure, as seven are clearly discernible at the ruins on site.

¹²⁶ Cullen, 'Eighteenth century flour milling in Ireland', p. 50

¹²⁷ Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 407. Here, the Halls claim there were only nine pairs of stones in the oatmeal mill, but in a letter of 24 Jul. 1880, John Alexander II refers to the Fairbairn wheel in Strongstream powering ten pairs of millstones (LB3, APMH).

¹²⁸ Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 407.

¹²⁹ Image by Skyfly Photography Ltd., co. Carlow. Courtesy of Mr Paul Brennan. This image, showing the internal structure of the building, clearly reveals its smaller incarnation as John Esmond's mill in the 1790s.

Alexander's flour mill garnered the most praise and attention. As regards the improvements there and in the malthouse, the fullest statistical and technical evidence comes from a report of 1843 by a valuation officer, which provides us with an invaluable sketch, inventory and survey of the site.¹³⁰ Martin Coffey visited Milford on 4 May, just three months before John I's death, and his report on the mill and malthouse is essentially a summative assessment of Alexander's physical legacy and contribution to the area.¹³¹ The seven-storey flour mill was 125 feet wide and 46 feet long, rising to a height of 56 feet (14 feet higher than the cornice of Slane mill). One cannot rely on William Harvey's sketch of the building in Hall's *Ireland*, as the size of all structures is noticeably exaggerated: for example, Strongstream's 11 bays are increased to 15 (see Fig. 2.7 below). However, as the only surviving image of the tallest of the Milford buildings, it gives some impression of the flour mill's relative size and domination of the landscape. On their visit to the area in 1841, Mr and Mrs Samuel Carter Hall wrote a glowing account of Milford, and expressed their amazement with the technological prowess and magnitude of Alexander's works, particularly the external wheel at the flour mill. They claimed 'the chief water-wheel made by him [Fairbairn] of iron, cast, hammered, and plate, is, we believe, the largest and most powerful in the kingdom; taking the water on twenty-two feet — its breadth. It is equal to one hundred and twenty horse power.'¹³² The horsepower of the flour mill-wheel constituted 5.6 per cent of the national harnessing of hydro-power in 1839.¹³³ This wheel powered an exceptional 12 pairs of millstones and

¹³⁰ Valuation of Milford mills by Martin Coffey, 4 May 1843 (Valuation Office Collection, NAI, house Book OL 50010).

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 407.

¹³³ Cormac Ó Gráda, 'Industry and communications, 1801-45' in *A new history of Ireland*.v, pp 137-57, at p. 143. Ó Gráda quotes that 2,147 water horsepower was harnessed across Ireland in 1839.

although only eight pairs worked at any one time, one observer was adamant that 'oh yes, you could hear them half a mile off.'¹³⁴

Fig. 2.7 William Harvey's sketch of Milford mills, 1841¹³⁵



Fairbairn's system for cleaning and dressing the grain at Milford was conducted over five floors, the grain being raised to the highest storey by water from the massive millpond which operated ten water-powered elevators (three long and seven short) to distribute materials.¹³⁶ Having been sterilised, the grain was poured into a wire cylinder and ventilated by an interior propeller. From there, it was lightly crushed under some millstones before being re-ventilated and brushed in a variety of cylinders, some

¹³⁴ 'Information of Mr Lorenzo Alexander', 2 Dec. 1850 (Valuation Office Collection, NAI, house Book OL 50010). The Halls claim the mill had thirteen pairs of millstones, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 407; *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Jul. 1836

¹³⁵ By William Harvey, 1840, engraved by Bastin in Mr & Mrs Samuel Carter Hall, *Ireland, its scenery, character &c.* (London, 1841), vol. i, p. 405. Courtesy of Carlow County Library. This view looks to the south-west and shows (l-r) Strongstream mill, Milford malthouse and Milford flour mill. The roof of Milford House can be seen through the trees to the right of the flour mill.

¹³⁶ Valuation of Milford mills by Martin Coffey, 4 May 1843 (Valuation Office Collection, NAI, house Book OL 50010).

revolving 300 times a minute (see appendix B11). This process was reviewed as ‘the simplest, the most complete and the best integrated that I have studied overseas’, according to one French authority.¹³⁷ Keen to incorporate the improvements recommended by Arthur Young, the mill contained internal kilns as well as a discrete but attached building (40 feet long, 30 feet wide and 34 feet high) dedicated to this purpose. Coffey interviewed the miller on duty, and had a look over the accounts and estimated that the mill was capable of grinding 150,000 barrels of wheat annually (a huge increase on the Halls’ opinion that only 60,000 sacks of flour could be produced in a year), although it was actually only grinding 50,000 barrels at the time.¹³⁸ The impact of Fairbairn’s wheel can be deduced by contrasting these figures with James Conolly’s estimation of 20,000 barrels a year in 1821.¹³⁹

The flour mill was connected to the malthouse by a low, long and narrow passageway with doors at either end containing small windows. The malthouse, the most powerful in Ireland as we have seen, was 16 feet lower in height than the flour mill but was almost 100 feet longer at a mammoth 222 feet in its final incarnation, and the same width.¹⁴⁰ This massive building was demolished in the early 1980s, but a number of photographs survive to show its great size (see Fig. 2.8 below and appendix B10).

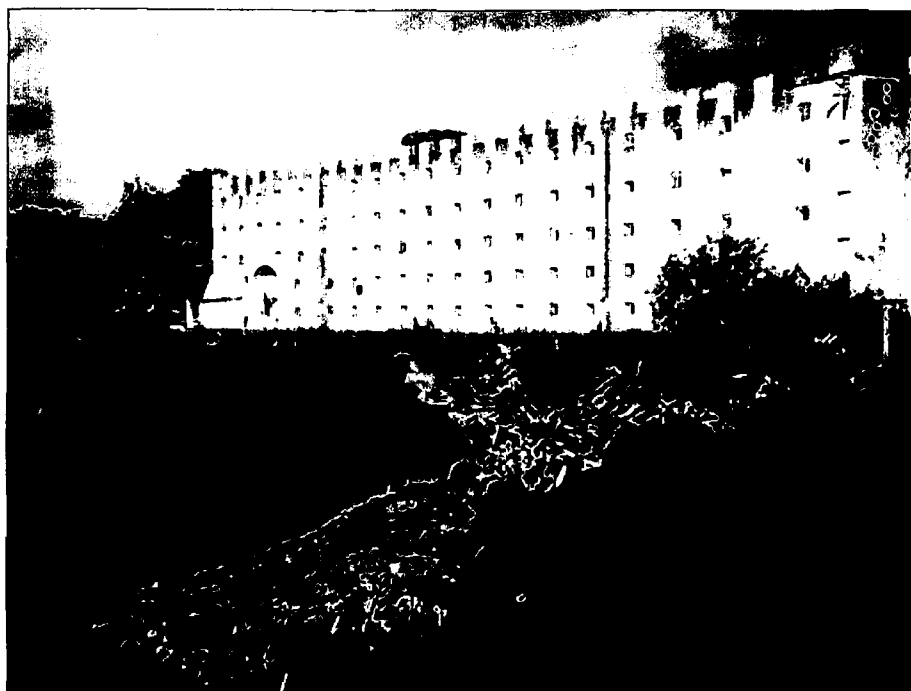
¹³⁷ Rollet, *Memoire sur la meunerie*, p. 79 (translated by Ms Clodagh Heaney).

¹³⁸ A sack of flour appears to have equated with a barrel of flour at this time, at 14¼ stone. For standard barrel weights of different grain commodities in Carlow, see Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. ii, pp 197, 200.

¹³⁹ PP, 1821 (668), *Report from the select committee to whom the several petitions complaining of the depressed state of the agriculture of the kingdom of Ireland*, evidence of James Conolly esq., p. 308.

¹⁴⁰ Valuation of Milford mills by Martin Coffey, 4 May 1843 (Valuation Office Collection, NAI, house Book OL 50010). Therefore, the malthouse was 222 feet wide, 45 feet long and 40 feet high.

Fig. 2.8 Photograph, c.1980, of Milford malthouse, now demolished¹⁴¹



It was a five-storey, nineteen bay building with up to 70 windows in its northern elevation alone. Despite vicissitudes in the malt trade, the plant produced 20,000 barrels of malt yearly in the 1830s – one source even estimating it at 30,000 barrels.¹⁴² By that time, the maltings dominated the site (taking up almost double the space of the flour mill) and consisted of a series of separate malthouses and kilns. Along with the battlemented buildings, the ornate and distinctive canopied chimneys of the malt kilns (photographs of which have survived) added greatly to the skyline of the millyard.

In his sketch of the site (see appendix B6), Coffey shows that the mill quarter in Ballygowan almost constituted a village in itself with a number of clerks' houses, an accounting and records office, a retail shop, millwrights' and carpenters' workshops, a forge, a licensing office to accommodate a permanent on-site excise officer (to satisfy malting regulations), several stores and a cowhouse and piggery for those employees who

¹⁴¹ Photograph courtesy of Mr Bobby Quinn, Milford, Co. Carlow whose private residence now stands on this site.

¹⁴² Jonathan Binns, *the miseries and beauties of Ireland* (London, 1837), vol. ii, p. 231. *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Jul. 1836.

lived on-site.¹⁴³ The mills worked the whole year round, 14 hours a day from March through September, and 13 hours a day in the winter, sometimes reduced to four hours a day in highwater and flood.¹⁴⁴ Work began at 6 in the morning and a reporter for the *Irish Times* in 1862 claimed ‘the business of these mills was so great that the waterwheel knew no rest, excepting the Sabbath.’¹⁴⁵ The scale of the works can also be judged by the numbers employed in the plants. Arthur Young had been impressed with the labour-saving innovations at the Lodge mills in 1775 – then ‘one of the most considerable mills in Ireland’ – which only employed eight workers.¹⁴⁶ At the same time, the mill at Slane was said to employ only 10-12 men.¹⁴⁷ With the benefit of a further fifty years of technological advancement reducing manpower needs, it was estimated in 1822 that John Alexander employed ‘upwards of one hundred persons’ at Milford, the vast majority of whom would have been working at his mills.¹⁴⁸ By the time his *Topographical Dictionary* was published in 1840, Lewis recorded the same figure.¹⁴⁹

The total expense of these improvements must have been massive in contemporary terms and marked Milford out from its contemporaries across the country. The mill at Slane, the largest water-powered flour mill in Europe on its completion in 1766, cost £19,187 to construct.¹⁵⁰ Closer to home, in 1806 Richard Mercer totally rebuilt the Lodge mill at the Royal Oak (matching Milford’s height of seven storeys) after their destruction in 1798, at a cost of £20,000.¹⁵¹ However, the Alexander concerns dwarfed their competitors and John I estimated that he spent in excess of £45,000 on improving Milford and Strongstream mills by 1826, and this was *before* the installation of Fairbairn’s extensive

¹⁴³ In 1835, the excise officer stationed at Milford was William Adams. *Leinster Independent*, 20 Aug. 1836.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Information of Mr Lorenzo Alexander’ (Valuation Office Collection, NAI, house Book OL 50010). See also ‘Recollections of James Flatman, 1838-9’ (APMH).

¹⁴⁵ *Irish Times*, 8 Nov. 1862.

¹⁴⁶ Young, *Tour in Ireland*, vol. i, p. 73.

¹⁴⁷ Karen Harvey, *The Believers of Mount Bellew* (Dublin, 1998), p. 136.

¹⁴⁸ Rev. S.T. Roberts to Lord Lieutenant, 24 Jul. 1822 (NAI, SOC 1822/1717).

¹⁴⁹ Lewis, *Topographical dictionary*, vol. i, p. 381.

¹⁵⁰ Rynne, ‘The development of milling technology in Ireland’, p. 47.

¹⁵¹ Rev Matthew Sleater, *Introductory essay to a new system of civil and ecclesiastical geography, and itinerary of the counties of Ireland* (Dublin, 1806), p. 74.

mechanical improvements.¹⁵² The credibility of this figure is enhanced by its appearance in a private estate rental for that year, unintended for public consumption. This figure constitutes the largest capital investment in an industrial complex in the country at this time. Alexander was well aware of the risk involved in so large an investment and in future years when political or economic vicissitudes threatened his businesses, he expressed anxiety for 'my houses that cost so much money'.¹⁵³

Besides Milford, Alexander inherited his father's property and premises in Belfast on the latter's death in 1821. By that stage, *John Alexander & Co.* on the Falls Road was the leading milling firm in the town.¹⁵⁴ John I also carried out an intensive series of improvements at Belfast Flour Mills to bring them into line with technological and structural changes at Milford. Although structurally less imposing than Milford, the Belfast mill had the largest of the Alexander water wheels. At 35 feet in diameter (almost double that of the wheel at Strongstream mill), it was grinding 75,000 barrels of wheat annually by 1837.¹⁵⁵ In this regard, it was *John Alexander & Co.*'s single most productive building. It was a hugely important premises to John I, for both commercial and personal reasons. It was the first family premises to operate solely as *John Alexander & Co.* and remained the sentimental flagship of the company even if it was exceeded in size and praise by its Milford counterparts.

¹⁵² Milford rental, 1826 (APMH). In this document, Alexander claims that Milford and Strongstream mills, and the building of Milford House had cost a total of £60,000. The figure subtracted for the building of the dwelling is explained below, p. 100.

¹⁵³ PP 1835 (17-19) *Fifteenth report of the commissioners of Inquiry... Malt*, p. 62.

¹⁵⁴ 'Report of the committee of John Alexander & Co.'s demand for the water after leaving their two upper mills', 1806 (PRONI WAT/1/1/D/1).

¹⁵⁵ Binns, *Miseries and beauties of Ireland*, vol. ii, pp 231-2.

iv. Critical commentaries: 1810-1840

By 1840, the premises at Milford —where an outsider had brought optimal vision and expertise to bear on the natural potential of the region— were at their zenith of fame and power. The result was an industrial paragon, ‘a perfect colony of flour-mills’ to borrow a phrase from the contemporary *Handbook for travellers in Ireland*.¹⁵⁶ In his analysis of the milling output of the town of Clonmel in the period after 1815, L.M. Cullen has argued that it ‘completely overshadowed any earlier or contemporary centre and held its place until the collapse of domestic wheat growing in the 1850s’.¹⁵⁷ Certainly, while Milford mills could not compete with the output of an entire town, they were, as a single business, far more successful than any of the Clonmel mills. The *Parliamentary Gazetteer* of 1841 lauded the flour mills along the Barrow as ‘the greatest establishments of their class in Ireland producing an average of 350,000 cwts of flour and 100,000 cwts of oat meal annually’, and *John Alexander & Co.* was the leading company behind this success.¹⁵⁸ By comparing these figures with the contemporaneous statistics offered by valuator Martin Coffey in 1843 and the Halls, it can be seen that Milford mills were responsible for 25 per cent of the entire flour output of the Barrow’s numerous mills and a massive 53 per cent of its oatmeal production in the early 1840s.¹⁵⁹ Other local mills may have produced more flour in some years, e.g. the Lodge mill as run by Samuel Crosthwaite produced 60,000 cwts of flour in 1835–6—15,000 more than Milford mill in that year, and was undoubtedly Milford’s greatest competitor.¹⁶⁰ However, it was its size and production *capacity*, often unrealised, which made Milford the most important and valuable milling complex in Ireland. In furthering the case that Milford was indeed an

¹⁵⁶ [Unknown], *Handbook for travellers in Ireland* (London, 1864), p. 243.

¹⁵⁷ Cullen, ‘Eighteenth century flour milling in Ireland’, p. 58.

¹⁵⁸ Quoted by Richard S. Harrison, ‘Irish Quakers in flour milling’ in Bielenberg (ed.), *Irish flour milling*, pp 88–105, at p. 94.

¹⁵⁹ These figures were arrived at by converting and comparing the different unit weights for cwt, a barrel of flour and a barrel of oats as given by Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. ii, pp 197–200.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted by Anonymous, ‘The capabilities of Ireland’ in *The Dublin university magazine* (Dublin, 1837), vol. ix, pp 46–57, at p. 54.

exceptional premises, it can be stated that it was physically the largest milling complex in Ireland with three immense buildings spread out over 10 acres.¹⁶¹ Martin Coffey inspected many Carlow mills in 1843: he valued the Lodge Mills at £68 and the Milford complex at £336.¹⁶² In 1840, the Halls placed Crosthwaite's premises in second place behind Milford in its ranking of Carlow's 'principal mills' and in 1845, just a year before the corn laws were repealed, Crosthwaite himself publicly acknowledged John Alexander II —although a younger man—as the 'senior manufacturer' of the two.¹⁶³ By the time of Griffith's valuation in 1852, the Milford mills and malthouse were valued at £420 in that seminal publication, the highest figure given for any industrial premises in the county.¹⁶⁴

Although W.E. Hogg includes a brief statistical survey of Milford flour mill and malthouse in his recent comprehensive catalogue, *The old mills of Ireland*, the author does not critically analyse or compare the listings.¹⁶⁵ Therefore, to make the case for Milford's supremacy and the standing of John Alexander as the foremost of Ireland's 4000 millers in 1841,¹⁶⁶ one must refer to the commentary from contemporary journalists, agriculturists and travel writers who remarked very favourably on the premises. By 1840, when the Halls arrived to investigate, they had previous knowledge of the Milford establishment as 'one of the most extensive and celebrated in Ireland.'¹⁶⁷ In an essay reviewing the state of Carlow's agriculture in 1834, one writer claimed that of the thirty-plus mills in a four mile radius of Carlow town, 'the principal one (and it is a noble range of handsome buildings), as to size, machinery and beauty of situation, is that of Milford

¹⁶¹ Andy Bielenberg, *Ireland and the industrial revolution: the impact of the industrial revolution on Irish industry, 1801-1922* (Abingdon, 2009), p. 60. Strongstream mill occupied approximately two acres, while the flour mill and malthouses were on an eight acre site.

¹⁶² Valuation of Milford mills by Martin Coffey, 4 May 1843 (Valuation Office Collection, NAI, house book OL 50010).

¹⁶³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 27 Sep. 1845.

¹⁶⁴ *General valuation of rateable property in Ireland... Dublin, 1849-64*, hereinafter 'Griffith's Valuation', available at <http://www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation/index.xml>, accessed 16 Feb. 2013. Primary valuation of tenements, county of Carlow, p. 41 and 61.

¹⁶⁵ W.E. Hogg, *Old mills of Ireland* ([Dublin?], 2012), 4 vols. Milford is described in vol. i, pp 41-2.

¹⁶⁶ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland, before and after the Famine. Explorations in economic history, 1800-1925*, second edition (Manchester, 1993), p. 36.

¹⁶⁷ Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 405.

(Mr Alexander's), on one of the most beautiful parts of the Barrow.¹⁶⁸ However, Milford's prowess stretched beyond its own county onto a national plane and received its greatest publicity to date in 1836 when it was visited by the Belfast MP, (later Sir) James Emerson Tennent.¹⁶⁹ Like Young 60 years previously, Emerson Tennent was bowled over by the Slane mills, and was convinced that they were

the most beautiful, as well as the largest, I had seen in Ireland. I had not then seen Milford; — the Slane mills, superb as they are, cannot compare with Milford, in point either of situation or architecture, and are not more than one third the extent. They consist of three immense buildings, one for malting barley, the others for grinding wheat and corn: and it is impossible to calculate the good which such a vast establishment must do to the adjacent country, by thus affording encouragement and a market for the three most important descriptions of agricultural produce.

It was a glowing review, made even more significant by the author's categorical assertion that Milford mills were 'unrivalled' in the country. Similarly in 1840, an anonymous correspondent for the *Quarterly Journal of Agriculture*, while reporting on affairs in Cork contrasted the two 'large' mills in Bandon with the 'leviathan flour-mills in Ireland', adding that Milford mills were 'perhaps the noblest establishment of this kind, as regards beauty of locality, combined with extensiveness of operation'.¹⁷⁰

Other commentators made the case that Milford was *internationally* significant. The Halls waxed lyrical about the efficiencies of its hydraulic machinery. They marvelled at the quantities produced by natural force — 'without lighting a candle', as one of the mill workers expressed it to them.¹⁷¹ They believed lessons could be learned from Milford by other industries in England: 'Here is an invitation to the cotton spinners of Manchester!' they proclaimed. The author of the *Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland* in 1844 lauded Alexander's flour mill as 'an exquisite specimen' worthy of international attention, and

¹⁶⁸ [Anonymous], 'On the agriculture of the county of Carlow', in *Quarterly journal of agriculture* (London, 1835), vol. v, pp 178-197, at p. 189.

¹⁶⁹ James Emerson Tennent, *Letters to the north, from a traveller in the south* (Belfast, 1837). The Milford references are on pp 17-8, 21-2.

¹⁷⁰ [Anonymous], 'On the agriculture of the county of Cork' in *Quarterly journal of agriculture* (London, 1840), vol. x, pp 153-171 and pp 508-528, at pp 527-8.

¹⁷¹ Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 406.

described the area as a stand-out location in Carlow and Ireland, ‘celebrated for flour-mill establishments whose great extent and accompanying improvements are fitted to astonish Englishmen.’¹⁷² The following year, it noted ‘how the walls are pierced with as many windows as the first class cotton-factories of Manchester and Glasgow’, and Cormac Ó Gráda claims that the Milford works rivalled the largest cotton mills in Lancashire and emulated those of Manchester.¹⁷³ The power and improvements at Milford also attracted the attention of the Frenchman Augustin Rollet, director of marine supplies, who compiled a report on milling that was published under the auspices of the French Minister for the Marine and Colonies in 1847. In surveying mills in France, England, Ireland, Belgium, Holland and other countries, Rollet was unequivocal in his praise of ‘le beau Moulin de M. Alexander, à Mill-ford, près Carlow’, and was struck by the ‘great perfection’ in the mill’s assembly and operations.¹⁷⁴

Inheriting the Belfast mill probably made Alexander anxious to buy out his ageing partner in Carlow and dissolve their fruitful partnership. As early as 1816, then aged 75, James Conolly had expressed his wish to retire and had appointed his son John to act in his interests.¹⁷⁵ By 1827, Conolly (then living in Nantes in France) had sold all his interests in Milford to Alexander for the grand sum of £10,702, with the apparently innocuous condition that some few annuities be paid to his children—a stipulation which was to have disastrous consequences in years to come.¹⁷⁶ Relations appear to have remained amicable between the two principals, but the relationships between their heirs was to become strained to the point of lawsuits by the 1860s. For such reasons, Conolly’s name was airbrushed out of the story and does not appear in any of the published secondary accounts of the mills. When they were visited by the Halls in 1841, the Alexanders were

¹⁷² A. Fullarton, *Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland* (London, 1844), pp 312, 469.

¹⁷³ Cormac Ó Gráda, ‘Industry and communications, 1801-45’, in *A new history of Ireland v*, pp 137-57, at p. 143; Ó Gráda, *Ireland before and after the famine*, p. 37.

¹⁷⁴ Augustin Rollet, *Mémoire sur la meunerie*, pp 73, 189, 560.

¹⁷⁵ ‘Abstract of title’, p. 21d (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, ‘Release of Carlow estates, James Conolly esq to John Alexander esq and John Conolly esq’, 28 Aug. 1827. Also, see below, pp 397-9.

happy to ignore the historical origins of their business and inform the writers, quite disingenuously, that ‘the mill was originally established in 1790 and was commenced on a large scale’.¹⁷⁷

From 1827 on therefore, all of the premises in Carlow and Belfast were John Alexander’s alone. The result was the generation of vast and exceptional wealth for John I at this point.¹⁷⁸ One indication of Milford’s success is the almost complete absence of advertisements for its products in the Carlow press during the period in question, in marked contrast to the Belfast Flour Mills, where notices appeared regularly in the *Belfast Newsletter* advertising flour for sale or appealing for grain.¹⁷⁹ Prices rose hugely between 1820 and 1840. John I estimated that the average price of a barrel of oats increased from 15s 2d in 1814-21 to an average of 30s by 1840.¹⁸⁰ The Halls estimated that the Milford flour and oatmeal mills alone generated a gross income for Alexander of £195,000 a year, a phenomenal sum when one considers further income from the malthouse, the Belfast mills and his agricultural rents.¹⁸¹ If this and other sources are to be credited, it appears that John I enjoyed a phenomenal gross annual income c.1840 well in excess of £450,000 (see Table 2.3) which clearly indicates the immense profitability of the firm at this time, even after taking the costs of raw materials, labour and haulage into account.

¹⁷⁷ Halls’ *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 406.

¹⁷⁸ Binns, *Miseries and beauties of Ireland*, vol. ii, pp 231-2.

¹⁷⁹ The only notice pertaining to Milford mills in the surviving Carlow newspapers between 1800 and 1830 is for a sale of surplus barley seed in *Carlow Morning Post*, 13 Apr. 1818.

¹⁸⁰ John Alexander’s report as a commissioner for the Tithe Composition Act in the parish of Wells, 17 Oct. 1823, available at the National Archives website, http://titheapplotmentbooks.nationalarchives.ie/reels/tab//004625730/004625730_00054.pdf, accessed 16 Apr. 2014; Hall’s *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 407.

¹⁸¹ Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 407.

Table 2.3 Estimated gross income of John Alexander I, c. 1840

<i>Source</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>£</i>
Milford flour mill	50,000 sacks at 60s ¹⁸²	£150,000
Strongstream oatmeal mill	30,000 sacks at 30s ¹⁸³	£ 45,000
Milford malthouse	30,000 barrels at 22s ¹⁸⁴	£33,000
Belfast Flour Mill	75,000 barrels at 60s ¹⁸⁵	£225,000
Milford estate	Rental income ¹⁸⁶	£2,507
Property in Belfast	Rental income ¹⁸⁷	£1,854
Property in Dublin	Rental income ¹⁸⁸	£700
Total		£458,061

Alexander's enormous wealth was readily acknowledged on a local and national level. In 1837, a barrister acting for him was able to joke that a substantial fine for an alleged breach of malting regulations would have no impact whatsoever on his considerable purse: 'Gentlemen, Mr Alexander is conscious that 200/ or 300/ is of no importance to him, for, by a long life of honour, and of honourable commercial dealing, he has realised a fine fortune'.¹⁸⁹ With this wealth, Alexander was able to access the status, powers and privileges normally reserved for those born into the landed and titled gentry and to create a solid platform for his family among the elite of Carlow society.

¹⁸² This quantity of flour is given both in Hall's *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 407 and by Martin Coffey's 1843 valuation, Valuation House Book collection (NAI, OL 50010).

¹⁸³ Hall's *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 407.

¹⁸⁴ Jonathan Binns, *The miseries and beauties of Ireland* (London, 1837), vol. ii, p. 231. John Alexander I gave the cost of a barrel of malt in Dublin in December 1834 as 22s. PP 1835 (17-19) *Fifteenth report of the commissioners of inquiry into the excise establishment: malt*, p. 214.

¹⁸⁵ Binns, *Miseries and beauties of Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 231.

¹⁸⁶ Milford rental, 1840 (APMH).

¹⁸⁷ Combined rental of the Carlow, Belfast and Dublin properties of John Alexander esq., 1827 (APMH). Separate rentals for the Belfast and Dublin properties in 1840 have not survived, but these properties were still held by John Alexander I at that time.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Jul. 1837.

Chapter 3

Entering the Carlow gentry

‘By his trade, he raised himself in a few years from the ranks of the people’.¹

Tenants of John Alexander I, 1836

i. The Carlow gentry, c. 1790

In 1862, John Alexander I was remembered as a landed gentleman of ‘fame, fortune and influence’ by the *Irish Times*.² Almost eighty years after his arrival in Carlow, his family was firmly entrenched in the upper echelons of Carlow’s landed gentry, having overcome many contemporary prejudices, and socio-political handicaps. The obstructions to his elevation were numerous: his mercantile occupation (a traditional obstacle to social elevation) was the defining features of his public identity; he was without any ancient roots in the county; and he was the landlord of a very modest estate of under 2,000 acres. Nevertheless, he came to enjoy a public profile and a socio-political reputation on a par with the greatest landed magnates of the county by 1835. Observing their unique status in the county, the *Carlow Sentinel* described his family as ‘princely merchants [...] whose high mercantile character and independent property in the county [were] acquired by the honourable pursuits of industry’.³ Emerging from humble if comfortable trading ranks, the Alexanders enjoyed a steady and remarkable rise to share in the privileges and expectations of the county’s landed elite. It is important to chart the stages and factors in

¹ *A statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow* (London, 1836), p. 34.

² *Irish Times*, 8 Nov. 1862.

³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 8 Jan. 1853.

this ascent which were central to the family's survival in the county for the following two centuries.

The hallmarks of aristocracy as a political system ran deep in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Carlow. The county had the reputation of being comprehensively anglicised, well within the borders of the colloquial 'pale' and bearing the physical marks of a long and ingrained colonial history; its reputation as a mini colony in the popular imagination is a prominent feature of its historiography.⁴ It was a view which owed much to the fact that Carlow had once been the geographical and administrative centre of the English campaign and was regarded by the government in the mid-fifteenth century as 'oon of the keyes of the said lande' because of its proximity to Dublin as the original centre for colonial expansion, and the fact that the road to the settlements in Munster passed through this terrain.⁵ English settlers arrived in significant numbers and in 1361, the importance of Carlow was recognised when the exchequer and the common bench were removed from Dublin and established there until 1394, effectively making the town the seat of government and recognisable capital of the lordship.⁶ However, perhaps the greatest influence on establishing Carlow as a bastion of colonial and Protestant control was Oliver Cromwell's Resettlement Act of 1652 whereby the modern county (along with Dublin, Kildare and Cork) was reserved to reward those English adventurers who had carried out his Irish campaign, displacing the old Irish and Anglo-Norman landholders.⁷

⁴ See for example, James J. Comerford, *My Kilkenny IRA days, 1916-22*, second edition (Kilkenny, 1980), pp 559-60.

⁵ Quoted from a document dated 1435 by John P. Prendergast, 'The plantation of the barony of Idrone, in the county of Carlow' in *Journal of the Kilkenny and south-east of Ireland archaeological society* (Dublin, 1859), vol. ii, p. 405; Thomas McGrath, 'Foreword' in *Carlow: history and society*, p. xxv.

⁶ Linda Doran, 'Medieval settlement hierarchy in Carlow and the "Carlow corridor", 1200-1250', in *Carlow: history and society*, pp 173-212, at p. 179; A.J. Otway Ruthven, *A history of medieval Ireland* (New York, 1968), pp 160, 286-7, 369; Seán Duffy, *Ireland in the middle ages* (Dublin, 1997), pp 153-4.

⁷ William Nolan, 'County Carlow 1641-1660: geography, landownership and society' in *Carlow: history and society*, pp 355-404, at p. 401.

In 1660, Carlow was the fourth largest town in Leinster (excluding Dublin), and only Drogheda exceeded its 48 per cent total of English inhabitants.⁸

By the time of John Alexander's arrival, the county had settled into loyal, predominantly Protestant ownership. In establishing himself there, he entered an area and atmosphere which was heavily governed, informed and influenced by its wealthy local gentry. Jimmy O'Toole has reported that as many as 60 'big houses' dominated Carlow's architectural, social and political landscape in the nineteenth century, and argues that Carlow was 'the most gentrified county' in the country.⁹ This fact is supported by Bence Jones's comprehensive *Guide to Country Houses* where, despite many notable omissions, 45 country houses are listed for Carlow, comprising a more than proportional 2.26 per cent of the survey's total, given the size of the county.¹⁰ At more than double Carlow's area, Co. Kilkenny accounts for only 3.01 per cent of this total. More recently, Campbell and Royle have hammered home the point by claiming that Carlow 'has a greater number of country houses and demesnes per hectare than any other rural Irish county'.¹¹ For many contemporary commentators, Carlow was remarkable for its proliferation of resident gentry families which had an obvious impact on the landscape and social order. On his travels in August 1775, Thomas Campbell described the county as a British centre in Ireland: 'Everything wore the appearance of a good English village.'¹² Similarly in 1801, Sir Charles Coote was profuse in his admiration of Carlow, 'being thickly inhabited by gentry and opulent traders, its population is very great, and perhaps no town in Ireland is better surrounded with fine demesnes, which are all resided on by a resident and spirited

⁸ Thomas King, *Carlow, the manor and town* (Dublin, 1997), pp 22-3.

⁹ O'Toole, *Carlow gentry*, p. xiii. For the use of the 'big house' in Carlow parlance, see Byrne, *Hibernicus*, p. 10.

¹⁰ 45 Carlow properties out of a total of 1,991. Mark Bence Jones, *Burke's guide to Irish country houses. Volume I, Ireland*. Revised edition. (London, 1988).

¹¹ R. Timothy Campbell and Stephen A. Royle, 'The country house and its demesne in co. Carlow' in *Carlow: history and society*, pp 723-750, at p. 723.

¹² Thomas Campbell, *A philosophical survey of the south of Ireland, in a series of letters to John Watkinson*, MD. (London, 1777), p. 96.

gentry.¹³ Similarly for Edward Wakefield in 1809, one of his first impressions of the county was that ‘there are here a great number of gentleman’s seats’ and he commented that ‘it is tenanted by more wealthy people than almost any other county in the island.’¹⁴ However, as a proportion of the population (estimated between 58,000- 60,000 in 1801), the Protestant contingent in the county was very small.¹⁵ Wakefield supposed that the ratio of Catholics to Protestants was ten to one, and that ‘there are not many families in Carlow of any other than the Roman Catholic persuasion.’¹⁶ Carlow was essentially a town of Catholic merchants where the Protestant population appeared unusually small.¹⁷ Relations between the two religions in Carlow were healthy and amicable in the decade before the 1798 rebellion and the economic prosperity of the county tended to cement this harmony and preserve the social and political *status quo*.¹⁸ In many ways the county consisted of a series of petty kingdoms where the local landlords ruled supremely. Indeed, there is evidence that at least three Carlow families enjoyed royal sobriquets in the late eighteenth century and the tenant and labouring classes in Carlow manifested a noticeable and traditional quasi-feudal deference towards its gentry.¹⁹ Farrell’s memoir embodies his inherited respect for the county’s historical masters, what he terms ‘the good old sort of Protestants’—apparently, those landlords who held large estates for generations in the county.²⁰ Another contemporary, David Byrne grew up in Leighlinbridge in the 1780s, the son of a Catholic leaseholder of a considerable property who was regarded as a landlord in his own right. He articulated social class in terms of ‘people of condition’ and

¹³ Sir Charles Coote, *General view of the agriculture and manufactures of the Queen’s county with observations on the means of their improvement* (Dublin, 1801), p. 179.

¹⁴ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, pp 39, 248.

¹⁵ Duggan, ‘County Carlow, 1791-1801’, appendix D, pp. xiv-xvii.

¹⁶ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. ii, pp 598-9.

¹⁷ Duggan, ‘County Carlow, 1791-1801’, p. 42-3; Wakefield, *Tour through Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 598.

¹⁸ Farrell, *Carlow in ’98*, p. 49.

¹⁹ The Bagenals, Burtons and Kavanaghs. William Joseph O’Neill Daunt, *Eighty five years of Irish history 1800-1885* (London, 1886), vol. i, pp 8-9. Similarly, William Burton of Burton Hall was called ‘the King of the county Carlow’ by Farrell, *Carlow in ’98*, p. 23. For the Kavanagh’s royal nicknames, see below, pp 87-8.

²⁰ Farrell, *Carlow in ’98*, p. 4.

‘the lower classes’ or ‘the peasantry’, placing himself in the former, noting the almost overwhelming deference of the local people to even a son of the minor gentry: ‘So much court was paid to me by the surrounding peasantry, and the servants, that were it not for the wholesale restraint I was kept under by my dear departed parents and friends, my disposition would have been spoiled.’²¹ It is perhaps worthy of note that the highly superstitious lower classes in Carlow referred to the local leprechaun population as the ‘little gentry’— a group worthy of deference and respect, capable of improving morale, yet possessed of a sinister power.²² From this, can we deduce that the Carlow people respected their ‘big gentry’ as equally influential, mysterious, ‘other’ and ominous? The need for the local people to be wary of placating ‘the quality’ can be seen in the contemporary saying ‘Beware of the B’s [...] the B’s of Carlow carry a sting’— a reference to the great number of gentry families whose surname began with that letter.²³

So ingrained was this culture of deference to the local gentry, that it posed a major obstacle to political reform according to the local liberal press. In 1833, the *Carlow Morning Post* lamented that

Perhaps no county in Ireland has been so long governed by an Aristocratic faction as the county Carlow: and most certainly not one in which the people so long yielded to their domineering masters with such servile submission. The result, therefore, has been, that the aristocracy looked upon their tyrannical sway as an hereditary possession; while the people, on the other hand, being accustomed from their very infancy to serve, willingly and tamely embraced their slavery.²⁴

However, the fact that liberal newspapers in the region continued to make distinctions between the county’s old and new elites (preferring the former) illustrates just how deep the attachment to the gentry went in the county.²⁵

²¹ Byrne, *Hibernicus*, p. 57.

²² ‘Doings at Carlow’ in *The Dublin and London magazine* 1825 (London, n.d.), p. 212.

²³ Hall’s *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 408. Such families included the Butlers, Bruens, Brownes, Burtons, Bruens etc.

²⁴ *Carlow Morning Post*, 28 Jan. 1833.

²⁵ See for example the distinction made between the old (Butlers, Burtons and Rochforts) and new (Newtons, Brewsters and Alexanders) ‘aristocracy’ of Carlow in *Leinster Independent*, 20 May 1837.

John Alexander arrived as part of an injection of new blood into Carlow in the late eighteenth century which was due to both historical and economic factors. One of the consequences of the Cromwellian settlement was that estates there were not entailed to the same degree as in other counties which allowed for the easier transfer of land.

Wakefield believed it was 'worthy of remark, that the fee has been more transferred here than in any other part of the country.'²⁶ There were over 170 landowners in Carlow in the 1830s and although guilty of exaggeration, William Farrell expressed his view in 1841 that 'of all the inhabitants that had property forty years ago, there is rarely a vestige of them to be found.'²⁷ The county became noted for the number of placename changes it underwent—Milford being a prominent example.²⁸ In many ways, the county became crowded with contending élites as a new wave of landowners effected a shake-up in the county hierarchy and a re-think as to who or what the leading gentry of the county were, and/or should be. To put order on a crowded field, commentators were quick to establish what they believed were the grounds for claiming the status of a gentleman.

In his anatomy of Irish Protestants from 1649 to 1770, Toby Barnard claims that 'applicants for admission to the quality asked in vain for the requirements'.²⁹ Similarly, S.J. Connolly has pointed out that 'social position was determined by complex criteria of wealth, parentage and life-style that social historians still struggle to define satisfactorily'.³⁰ Nevertheless, Barnard works with an elastic model to refer to gradations in the social hierarchy: from the peerage (titled noblemen) down to baronets, squires (gentlemen possessed of a landed estate) and gentlemen.³¹ One's status in society seemed

²⁶ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 248.

²⁷ P.J. Kavanagh, 'The political scene: Carlow county and borough, 1831-41', unpublished MA thesis, UCD (1974), p. 63; Farrell manuscript, 26 Mar. 1841 (NLI, Ms 19820).

²⁸ Percy Poole, 'The Burton family' in *Carloviana* (1953), pp 10-13, at p. 11.

²⁹ Toby Barnard, *A new anatomy of Ireland: the Irish Protestants, 1649-1770* (New Haven and London, 2003), p. 43.

³⁰ S.J. Connolly, *Religion, law and power: the making of protestant Ireland, 1660-1760*, (Oxford, 1992), p. 59. For a discussion of 'ranks' within the Irish gentry, see pp 59- 65.

³¹ Barnard, *New anatomy of Ireland*, p. 14; see also pp 41-79. Several interesting contemporary classifications are explored in Valerie Pakenham's *The big house in Ireland* (London, 2000), pp 64-75.

to be a matter of 'quality', dependent on one's moral, intellectual, financial and genealogical merit. At the lowest level, a 'gentleman' referred more or less to a lifestyle, someone with a comfortable income who displayed gentility, politeness, civility. He might work in one of the noble professions as a clergyman, lawyer or agent. However, a gentleman was not always entitled to use the 'Esq' denomination after his name. This rank was reserved for a level above, where landed wealth and greater social respectability either through wealth, refinement or family pedigree, professed a degree of nobility, moral integrity and confirmation of ability. However, the distinction was vague and often ignored, many gentlemen referring to themselves as squires, and many country squires (large tenant farmers in their ranks) showing a marked deficit in manners, education and refinement, a fact which rankled Arthur Young.³² It appears to be such men whom Young criticised as 'the little country gentlemen, or rather vermin of the kingdom'.³³ The risk of falling into ignorant provincialism was something Carlow's principal gentry were very aware of.³⁴

In the early nineteenth century, Carlow society shared in these confusions. In 1822, the *Carlow Morning Post* reported a court case where a landlord took umbrage that 'the plaintiff [his tenant] was styled Esquire, whereas at best, he was only a simple gentleman!'.³⁵ A couple of miles from Milford, Arthur Faulkner referred to one individual with notions above his station as 'a talkative jackanapes of a half and half gentleman'.³⁶ Wakefield made a distinction between 'the principal gentry' of the county and 'country squires', noted for their disreputable, pleasure-seeking lifestyles.³⁷ With regard to the vocabulary used in Carlow to discuss its ruling élite, the term 'gentry', although nebulous and undefined, was employed as a generic term to refer to the total body of minor and

³² Barnard, *New anatomy of Ireland*, p. 53; Young, *Tour in Ireland*, vol. ii, pp 110-113.

³³ Young, *Tour in Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 127.

³⁴ See for example, Robert Butler to Walter Kavanagh of Borris House, c. 16 Dec. 1781 (Kavanagh papers, Borris House, B/2). With thanks to A.P.W. Malcomson for alerting me to this source.

³⁵ *Carlow Morning Post*, 8 Jul. 1822.

³⁶ Mrs J. Monahan, 'Sir Arthur Brooke Faulkner', *Carloviana* (1976/77), p. 35.

³⁷ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 773.

major landowners in the county, failing, as it did, to distinguish between the gradations of 'quality' within.³⁸ It served as an umbrella for all of the ruling (almost exclusively Protestant) county elite, those owners of estates, from the smallest to the largest, which conferred on the holder a position of financial, political and social power in the county. The use of the word 'aristocracy' was redundant as a social rank in the Carlow context as the county was without any resident nobleman or peer at the time of John Alexander's arrival in 1784; the highest rank was that of baronet, held only by three men, Sir Richard Butler of Garryhendon, Sir Charles Burton of Pollacton and Sir Richard Wolseley of Mount Wolseley. Some of the largest estates in the county were owned by the absentee earls of Courtown and Bessborough, but they played a largely negligible role in the political and social life of the county.³⁹ The term 'squirearchy' was applied (often sardonically) to that body of smaller landowners, or upwardly mobile landowners or landholders, while the term 'ascendancy' was used to refer to the greatest landed magnates of the county and those landowners with an antique pedigree in the county who may or may not have fallen on hard times. Beyond this, it was and remains impossible to establish any rigid terminology to categorise social rank in the county, as the most powerful and wealthy landlords were linked to lesser landowners by marriage and the diversion of their younger sons from the paternal estate into smaller powerbases of their own, usually acquired through 'the gentleman's professions of the army, the law or the church', as S.J. Connolly has pointed out.⁴⁰

Self-professed Tory and Protestant, John Ryan chose to end his 1833 account of the English colony in the county with a short review of the county's gentry.⁴¹ For him, respectability and a place in the upper echelons of the county hierarchy was directly

³⁸ For use of the term 'quality' in Carlow see Byrne, *Hibernicus*, p. 75.

³⁹ Campbell and Royle, 'The country house and its demesne in county Carlow', p. 726.

⁴⁰ S.J. Connolly, *Religion, law and power*, p. 62.

⁴¹ John Ryan, *The history and antiquities of the county of Carlow* (Dublin, 1833), pp 356-75.

determined by landownership and a genealogical pedigree therein.⁴² He equated gentlemen with squires, believing the distinction to be an archaic one, and quoted a definition of a gentleman as ‘a person of good family who has long borne arms, the grant of which adds gentility to a man’s family’ which extended to those in the military and doctors of law, medicine and divinity. Despite the author’s claim that ‘it is a vulgar error, that a specific quantity of property is the qualification of an *Esquire*; as many persons are entitled to the rank from civil or military offices’, it is clear from his chapter title, and from his selection of 26 Carlow families, that he believed a landed portfolio was essential to the elevation of a family to gentry status. While it is difficult to establish concrete classifications, an analysis of the leading gentry in Carlow across the nineteenth century can establish a four-fold criteria necessary for elevation and ranking in this field, namely (in descending order of power):

1. The possession of landed assets
2. Wealth, including non-landed assets
3. Genealogical pedigree
4. Public and political office.

The right to assert oneself as a gentleman or ‘Esquire’ depended on holding a combination of these factors, and it was the interplay between them that determined relative positions of authority.

Of these, the most powerful factor was land ownership. It was the single greatest indicator of a person’s position in society and its ownership conferred an almost automatic entitlement to universal respectability.⁴³ In her study of social mobility among Dublin merchants in 1760-1800, Lisa Marie Griffith has argued that ‘while the civic and political institutions offered opportunity for men of commerce to enhance their status by elevating

⁴² ‘Some account of the respectable families who have long been resident in the county of Carlow, and who possess property in it’ in *ibid*, p. 356.

⁴³ Barnard, *New anatomy of Ireland*, pp 65-9; S.J. Connolly, *Religion, law and power*, p. 59.

them above their fellow tradesmen, education and land were the most successful paths up the social ladder'.⁴⁴ Land ownership usually went hand in hand with the second factor, wealth, and constituted a benign circle: wealth invited landownership, and landownership generated wealth. In this sense, it was almost inevitable that John Alexander would decide to invest some of his fortune in Carlow land; in fact, it was the logical next step in his programme of settlement in the county. In basic terms, size mattered as the greater the chunk of Carlow a family owned, the greater the rental income a family enjoyed and the greater sway they held over their tenantry. This in turn granted a concomitant right to expect a say in the county's social and political governance.

Land ownership almost guaranteed that a family enjoyed the second and fourth factors, wealth and political control; the links were directly proportional. Land without ancillary wealth usually meant a family on a downward spiral (like the Bagenals of Dunleckney, or Whaleys of Castletown), while assets outside of rent-rolls gave a family an extra leg-up and were fundamental in establishing the Bruens and the Alexanders in Carlow. Wealth, and the use of it to purchase land was the quickest and most assured means of getting a foot on the ladder that ensuring gentry privileges and standing, and Byrne records the contemporary drive in Carlow to acquire 'a fortune sufficient to commence [a] gentleman'.⁴⁵ In this way, the great wealth of the *arrivistes* (wealthy and ambitious newcomers to the county) was regarded suspiciously by some of the established Carlow gentry and its power was feared to some degree, as evidenced by the local saying 'Set a beggar on horseback and he will ride to the d—l.'⁴⁶ Wealth eliminated the need for pedigree and was stronger than it in concrete terms. This led to a new designation among commentators, that of the *parvenu*—an upstart, of questionable or unknown heritage,

⁴⁴ Griffith, 'Social mobility and the middling sort', p. 1 and pp 189-92.

⁴⁵ Byrne, *Hibernicus*, p. 89

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 90.

unworthy of the situation he had managed to purchase. The Alexanders would be accused of this in time.⁴⁷

If a family managed to add some degree of political control to their land and wealth (like the Bruens of Oak Park), their power was assured, even if their pedigree was contested. Political and public office guaranteed a greater public profile and deference from a wider population. The greatest of the gentry families included parliamentary representation for the county or Carlow borough in their portfolios, as well as service as high sheriff and on the grand jury. Smaller landlords (like Vigors of Burgage) could attain influential political office (like Nicholas Aylward Vigors as MP in 1832)⁴⁸ but their profile generally diminished when they lost their seat. Substantial landowners who eschewed interest or lacked ability in higher political office (such as the Ducketts of Duckett's Grove), surely noticed their lack of clout in comparison with other landowners.⁴⁹ The assumption of public office also strengthened a Carlow landlord by satisfying the expectation that an overlord would be learned, capable and visionary. Byrne records 'among the low Irish a vulgar proverb to this effect —“Gentility without ability is like a pudding without fat” [...], an indigent gentleman or lady in Ireland being equally shunned by the higher and lower classes'.⁵⁰

In corporeal terms, pedigree was the most tenuous of the factors, but had a paradoxical strength in the popular imagination of all classes, whereby folk memory and quasi-feudal loyalty working at a deep emotional level could guarantee a family political and social power, even if their stocks in land or wealth were wanting. Carlovians reserved an

⁴⁷ *Leinster Independent*, 28 Nov. 1835. Here, Alexander is referred to as an 'up-start miller, who by the most fortuitous circumstance, has secured for himself the possession of an estate'.

⁴⁸ P.J. Kavanagh, 'Nicholas Aylward Vigors MP, 1786-1840' in *Carloviana* (1982), pp 15-19.

⁴⁹ William Duckett (1822-1908) was typical of his family in being a large landed proprietor but 'being of a retiring disposition did not take any very active part in public affairs beyond being a regular attendant as a grand juror', *Carlow Sentinel*, 27 Jun. 1908.

⁵⁰ Byrne, *Hibernicus*, p. 77.

unmistakeable respect for ‘the man of lineage’ as a local newspaper put it.⁵¹ An established pedigree, going back generations or centuries created a sense of constancy and reliability in the minds of gentlemen as well as the tenant and labouring classes, a link with ancient times which seemed to establish the nobility and moral rectitude of the family concerned and made them fit sources of political, social and sometimes religious guidance. Such families were credited with an innate and ancient dignity and sensibility which differentiated them from the *parvenu* and *arriviste* landowners, deemed to be superficial, classless and uneducated. As Barnard has pointed out, the display of heraldry and genealogies was stimulated by ‘utility as much as vanity’.⁵² A deficiency in this area was a matter to be remedied, according to Henrietta Hickey of Steuart’s Lodge, Leighlinbridge, in 1862:

Not many county families in Carlow and other counties have sustainable pedigrees. They like to think they have but close examination of their pedigree chart may reveal a questionable ‘bastard’ relationship to a well-connected family on the British mainland. Many the commoner with money purchased property in Ireland in poor times for land prices, or was granted land for some service or other. Their first inclination after settling in Ireland is to claim a blood tie with a titles or aristocratic family bearing a similar surname, all the better to lord it over their ‘gentry’ neighbours.⁵³

Seemingly aware of this, Ryan presented his survey of the county’s first families in 1833 in an effort to advertise the county’s pedigree, ‘that this county (though it has no resident nobleman) possesses among its gentry some of the highest blood in the kingdom.’⁵⁴ He refused to countenance newcomers, instead paying them brief lip-service in a short list of ‘late settlers’, hardly the less disparaging for his allusion to their respectability.⁵⁵

It was a matter —albeit referring to different personnel — on which reforming and conservative interests in the county seemed to agree. In what seems to be an attempt to

⁵¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 27 Jun. 1835.

⁵² Barnard, *New anatomy of Ireland*, p. 45.

⁵³ Henrietta Maria Hickey (Née Steuart), ‘Not we from kings but kings from us’, manuscript courtesy of Michael Purcell (PPP, Carlow). Also available at

http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~irlcar2/Letter_22.htm, accessed 30 Oct. 2013.

⁵⁴ Ryan, *History and antiquities of Carlow*, p. 356.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

protect itself from charges of hypocrisy, Carlow's liberal newspaper attempted to rationalise the county's attachment to

what we call the ancient ARISTOCRACY of our county [...] those honest old fellows, to whom we were naturalized, because our great grandfathers had been in the habit of *voting* for theirs —and by right or wrong, we were attached to them by ties of blood, or friendship, or something else, equally powerful, which induced us to overlook even their errors.⁵⁶

It was the existence of this 'something else' that weakens Maura Duggan's contention that 'new purchasers of Carlow estates were normally absorbed into the county fairly quickly. A second generation of the same family emphatically "belonged"'.⁵⁷ However, this sweeping generalisation is problematic in many ways. Certainly a family could be said to belong (in the sense of feeling secure) if its pockets or rent-rolls were long enough, but without an accepted pedigree (particularly in folk memory), the status of a gentry family would be regularly questioned in the first half of the nineteenth century in hushed tones and more publicly in times of political strife. Land and wealth might make a cushion but the seat of power could be undermined by ridicule and rumour. Such newcomer families were probably immovable but not unassailable. It may have made little difference in the forms and customs of everyday living, but question marks over pedigree were powerful agents of assault and deconstruction in the political, social and religious upheavals of the following decades. In this regard, P.J. Kavanagh notes of the Carlow gentry: 'there seems to be a tendency for landlords who descended from Cromwellians or Williamites to be more Tory inclined than those who came in Elizabeth's or James's time. The former would naturally be more conscious of radical differences and of their precarious ascendancy.'⁵⁸

Beyond the primary four factors, residency in the county was a must; if another was to be added, it would be Protestantism, for there was only one Catholic family which was

⁵⁶ *Carlow Morning Post*, 28 May 1818.

⁵⁷ Duggan, 'County Carlow: 1791-1801', p. 13.

⁵⁸ Kavanagh, 'The political scene', p. 81.

regarded as gentry in the county, the Blackneys of Ballyellen who were a singular exception in Ryan's survey.⁵⁹ One of the consequences of the 1798 rebellion at a local level was the injection of sectarianism into everyday life and the increased division of social ranks along religious lines. In simple terms, all Protestants were respectable and all Catholics were beneath gentility. By the 1830s, the notion of 'gentry' in Carlow had become emphatically synonymous with a militant, conservative Protestantism, ruling over a Catholic tenantry. It was the Alexanders' enthusiastic and clumsy embrace of such a worldview in the second generation that accelerated their rise in stature, as we shall see.

ii. The leading gentry families, 1790-1820

By 1790, there were a number of families in Carlow who could rightly claim to be the county's kingpins, with different variations of the four major criteria to their credit.⁶⁰ At the pinnacle was Henry Bruen (1741-1795) of Oak Park estate, a newcomer to Carlow who first purchased property in the county in 1785, the year after John Alexander's arrival there.⁶¹ The heir of a Cromwellian adventurer who had originally settled in Roscommon, he initially pursued a humble career in the military.⁶² He became a deputy quartermaster general at New York during the American war of independence and purchased the rank of major in the 15th Regiment of Foot in July 1777.⁶³ His position made Bruen a master of vast quantities of goods and merchandise and was an office which proved to be hugely lucrative.⁶⁴ A recent study has revealed the shocking extent of

⁵⁹ Ryan, *History and antiquities of Carlow*, p. 375.

⁶⁰ The following survey of the Carlow gentry c.1800, unless otherwise referenced, is based on genealogical data in Burke's *Landed gentry of Ireland* (1912); O'Toole's *The Carlow gentry* (1993); Duggan, 'County Carlow: 1791-1801', pp 19-36; and Kavanagh, 'The political scene', pp 63-81.

⁶¹ Will of Henry Bruen I (NAK, PROB 11/1271/133). See also, Thomas King, 'Carlow town and its hinterland in the eighteenth century' in *Carlow; history and society*, pp 457-80, at p. 468.

⁶² For biographical details see Johnston-Liik, *History of the Irish parliament*, vol. iii, pp 297-8.

⁶³ Worthington Chauncey Ford, *British officers serving in the American war of revolution, 1774-1783* (Brooklyn, 1897), p. 36.

⁶⁴ 'Proceedings of a board of general officers of the British army at New York, 1781' in *Collections of the New York historical society for the year 1916* (New York, 1916).

Bruen's fraud and the massive amounts of government money which he and his colleagues misappropriated, and which was investigated during an official inquiry into the use of public funds in 1781.⁶⁵ Bruen was not reprimanded in any way even though it was reported that he brought an incredible fortune in the region of £100,000 to Ireland—another source gives a figure as high as £400,000.⁶⁶ According to Flexner, 'no sooner did the quartermaster profits start cascading into Bruen's pockets than he began to demonstrate an obsessive urge to insert himself among the Irish gentry by establishing a huge landed estate'.⁶⁷

With such wealth, all obstacles to power in Carlow were effortlessly swept away. Newly rich, Bruen purchased the modest Painestown estate of the Cooke family outside Carlow town in 1785 and thousands of acres of the old Bagenal property.⁶⁸ His heir was among the top three landowners in the county by 1809 and the family had the largest estate in Carlow (at 20,089 acres) by 1841, spread across 13 parishes.⁶⁹ In 1785, Bruen settled himself into the mansion house at Painestown and renamed his estate Oak Park. With land and wealth came political power, and Bruen first secured election for Carlow county in 1790.⁷⁰ Although Carlow society was in awe of his wealth, the rumours surrounding its source certainly precluded a reputation for moral rectitude—a powerful commodity in the eyes of the local population. From the safety of Pittsburgh, well outside the realm of influence of Carlow's most powerful public figure, landlord and politician, David Byrne from Leighlinbridge was free to claim that 'the notorious colonel [...] amassed an immense estate by his practices as British commissary, during the revolutionary war in America, where he robbed the farmers indiscriminately of provisions and forage, and

⁶⁵ James Thomas Flexner, *States Dyckman: American loyalist* (Boston, 1980), pp 7, 66, 74, 95.

⁶⁶ Forrest to Hely-Hutchinson, 10 Dec. 1784 (PRONI, T3459/C/2/133); Johnston-Liik quotes a figure of £400,000, *History of the Irish parliament*, vol. iii, p. 297.

⁶⁷ Flexner, *States Dyckman*, p. 94.

⁶⁸ Will of Henry Bruen I (NAK, PROB 11/1271/133).

⁶⁹ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 247; Jimmy O'Toole, *The Carlow gentry*, p. 53; Cathleen Delaney, 'Oak Park House and the Bruen family' in *Carloviana* (2001), pp 20-23, at p. 20.

⁷⁰ Robert Malcomson, *The Carlow parliamentary roll: comprising lists of the knights of the shire and members for the borough of Carlow* (Dublin, 1872), p. 25.

charged the amount to his own government.’⁷¹ Duggan claims that ‘wealthy, popular, liberal, resourceful, Bruen very quickly entrenched himself [...] his status in the county was not that of a *parvenu*’.⁷² However, her narrow timeline prevented a longer analysis of Bruen fortunes, because his apparent lack of pedigree was certainly regarded as a weakness in the early decades of the nineteenth century. During the election campaign for the county in 1818, Henry Bruen II was classified among ‘what we may call *new comers* into our county’, which was construed as a great disadvantage.⁷³ Significantly, Ryan does not include the Bruens, the county’s biggest landlords, in his survey of Carlow’s first families in 1833, categorising them instead with ‘the late settlers’. As the decades progressed, the Bruen family’s political opponents questioned, sneered at and ridiculed the pedigree of ‘a man of such ignoble descent’.⁷⁴ Research was conducted into his ancestors, and it was alleged that his mother had been a cook for Lord Lorton while his father had traded in corn.⁷⁵ Overall, the Bruens’ greatest weakness remained the contention that ‘the ambition of one man’ to rise above his modest birth had subjected hundreds of Carlovians to their tyranny.⁷⁶

In direct contrast, the Kavanaghs of Borris in the south of the county were the most respected and beloved gentry family in the county, and possessed the largest estate before Bruen’s arrival. If the Bruens advertised the importance of landed wealth to ascendancy in Carlow, then the Kavanaghs epitomised the power of pedigree. Their special position of strength was largely based on their lineal descent from the MacMurrough Kavanaghs, Gaelic and Catholic kings of Leinster.⁷⁷ The history of the county was inextricably linked with that of the family and they held titles to their lands which pre-dated the original

⁷¹ Byrne, *Hibernicus*, p. 89.

⁷² Duggan, ‘County Carlow: 1791-1901’, p. 29.

⁷³ *Carlow Morning Post*, 28 May 1818.

⁷⁴ *Freeman’s Journal*, 2 Dec. 1840.

⁷⁵ *Leinster Independent*, 22 Dec. 1838; *The Tablet*, 5 Dec. 1840.

⁷⁶ *Freeman’s Journal*, 2 Dec. 1840.

⁷⁷ O’Toole, *Carlow gentry*, pp 130-8.

conquest.⁷⁸ The head of the family was referred to colloquially as ‘the monarch’ —an indication of the depth of quasi-feudal attachment between ‘the common people’ and their overlord.⁷⁹

The issue of the family’s religious persuasion was always central to their authority, and their Catholic roots (Borris House had its own Catholic chapel) ensured loyalty from the Borris tenantry long after the family had embraced Protestantism. Bryan Kavanagh had managed to retain the family’s estate with his deathbed conversion to the established Church in 1641, ‘in what appears to have been little more than a convenience on paper’, according to O’Toole.⁸⁰ Over the next two centuries, the family displayed what Duggan has describes as ‘a curious ambivalence with regard to religion at this period.’⁸¹ By the time of Wakefield’s visit to Borris in 1809, the author came away convinced of Walter Kavanagh’s Catholicism despite the latter’s recantation, describing him as a Roman Catholic patron of a Catholic electorate.⁸² The new heir Thomas Kavanagh (1767-1837) formally recanted prior to his election as MP for Kilkenny in July 1797.⁸³ With his marriage to the evangelical Protestant Lady Harriet Le Poer Trench (daughter of the earl of Clancarty) in 1825, the family’s move towards Protestantism was complete and Kavanagh displayed all the zeal of the convert. His ‘papist’ days, fondly remembered by his tenants, remained a sore-spot for Thomas Kavanagh in his bid to enjoy all the power and privileges of the Protestant ascendancy. From then on, Borris became renowned as ‘a staunch Protestant house’ as the American journalist William Henry Hurlbert described it during a visit there in the 1880s.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, even during the intense electoral hostilities between landlord and tenant of the 1830s, Fr John Walsh Jnr of Borris, an

⁷⁸ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 243.

⁷⁹ For the use of the sobriquet, see Duggan, ‘Carlow: 1791-1801’, p. 21, and Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 598.

⁸⁰ O’Toole, *Carlow gentry*, p. 130; for details of the chapel in 1798 see Byrne, *Hibernicus*, pp 66-7.

⁸¹ Duggan, ‘County Carlow: 1791-1801’, p. 20.

⁸² Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. ii, pp 598-9.

⁸³ Byrne, *Hibernicus*, p. 65.

⁸⁴ William Henry Hurlbert, *Ireland under coercion: the diary of an American* (Edinburgh, 1888), vol. ii, p. 174.

inveterate political opponent of Thomas Kavanagh, claimed that 'there is no name that would be more endeared to Leinster men than the name of Kavanagh, if the head of that house would only coincide with the feelings of the people'.⁸⁵ In such ways, the Kavanaghs make a bold statement for the enabling power of pedigree in defining the hallmarks of the Carlow gentry.

The Rochfort family had a similarly long (if not as elevated) pedigree as the Kavanaghs stretching back to the original conquest.⁸⁶ At the end of the seventeenth century, the Hon. Robert Rochfort was speaker in the Irish House of Commons and he and his son John (1690-1771) purchased the lands of Clogrennane in Carlow from James, Duke of Ormonde c.1697.⁸⁷ Building Clogrennane Lodge in the shadow of a ruined Norman castle, John Rochfort went on to sit in the Irish parliament for 47 years. His son John (1735-1812) inherited considerable estates across several counties including Galway, Dublin, Westmeath and Wexford, as well as the entailed estate at Clogrennane. However, as early as 1789, newspaper advertisements announced the sale of Rochfort property 'for the payment of the debts of John Rochfort esq', and the financial power of Henry Bruen was something well beyond his reach.⁸⁸ Although Wakefield estimated that the family enjoyed an annual rental of between £5,000 and £7,000 in 1812, their holdings decreased steadily in the nineteenth century to 3,392 acres in 1883, across three counties.⁸⁹ Such a fall in wealth certainly undermined the family's reputation, even within gentry circles. The Rochforts were victims of sneering anecdotes in the county which impugned their pedigree, with Henrietta Hickey recording the view that 'one could tell from their

⁸⁵ *Carlow Morning Post*, 9 Aug. 1832.

⁸⁶ For the Rochforts in the eighteenth century, see this author, 'The "slashing parson" of 1798: the life and death of Rev Robert Rochfort of Clogrennane, Co. Carlow, 1775-1811' in *Carloviana* (2012), pp 117-139, at pp 118-120.

⁸⁷ 'Articles of agreement concluded and agreed upon between Sir Richard Butler [...] & John Rochfort of the city of Dublin, esq' [n.d.] (Foster Massereene papers, PRONI, D562/1169).

⁸⁸ *Finn's Leinster Journal*, 10 Feb. 1790.

⁸⁹ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 247; John Bateman, *The great landowners of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1883), p. 383.

appearance and manner that they were of ill-breeding.'⁹⁰ Neither their estate or their other assets were sufficient enough to guarantee supremacy in the local landed hierarchy, a fact recognised by several contemporaries who observed that they 'had not that overwhelming family influence in this county'.⁹¹ Nevertheless, in the late 1790s, John Staunton Rochfort (who was to be a close friend and the nearest gentry neighbour of John Alexander) was an MP and commanded respect from all levels of society.

On a downward spiral in wealth and influence were the Butlers of Ballintemple (although possessing great prestige as one of only three baronets in the county), the Burtons of Burton Hall, and the Bagenals of Dunleckney Manor who enjoyed control over political office in the county throughout the eighteenth century. With the sale of most of the Bagenal estate in the final quarter of the century (32,000 acres), the family's political influence died, as did that of the Burtons when they sold their interest in the Carlow borough in 1799.⁹² Nevertheless, they retained estates in the county and with other lesser landowners such as the Ducketts of Duckett's Grove, Leckys of Ballykealey, the Brownes of Browne's Hill and the Bunburys of Lisnavagh, they continued to populate grand juries and feature in political debates and the fashionable columns of the newspapers.

So by 1795, what were the defining characteristics of the leading gentry families, apart from their landed estates? For the Bruens, it was political power facilitated by enormous wealth. For the Kavanaghs, it was their pedigree and their traditional enjoyment of deference from the Carlow people. For the Rochforts, it was their religion which was to branch into overt Orangeism by the end of the decade. It was a mixed bunch into which John Alexander wandered. Devoid of a noble pedigree, a background in politics or a sense of militant Protestantism, he nevertheless secured his elevation into their midst to the degree that by 1835, these four families were arguably at the pinnacle of the Carlow

⁹⁰ Hickey, 'Not we from kings but kings from us', courtesy of Michael Purcell (PPP, Carlow). Available at http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~irlcar2/Letter_22.htm, accessed 30 Oct. 2013.

⁹¹ *Carlow Morning Post*, 12 Aug. 1830.

⁹² O'Toole, *Carlow gentry*, p. 15; Duggan, 'County Carlow: 1791-1801', p. 222.

gentry in the local and national consciousness. By the time of his election as MP in 1853, John Alexander II arguably possessed all four of the criteria, privately acknowledging that his pedigree was his weakest asset.⁹³ His family's ascent probably had most in common with that of the Bruens and testified to the enabling power of money in social and political circles. However, this ascent was far slower and much more unexpected than Bruen's. Bruen was an *arriviste*; Alexander was *nouveau riche*. While Bruen's ascent in Carlow was largely a geographical change, John Alexander's involved a shift in sociological classification, from merchant to squire, which makes the rise of his family a singularly interesting and unique progression in the county.

iii. Opening doors: the building of Milford House and marriage

Upward social mobility in contemporary society was possible but it generally required something remarkable in terms of ability or assets—Speaker William Conolly of Castletown (who had rented land to the Alexanders in Donegal) epitomised such elevations in the eighteenth century.⁹⁴ The servant in Carlow town alluded to above was informed in blunt terms by his master of the impossibility of artisans, traders or labourers ever attaining that status in Carlow: ‘Pshaw, you blockhead, says he, Gentlemen! No, to be sure. How should *ploughmen* or *mechanics* come to be Gentlemen?’⁹⁵ Traditionally, the merchant or trader, although he might be regarded as a gentleman, belonged to a separate, lower social strata than those labelling themselves ‘Esquire’, and S.J. Connolly has written of ‘the ambiguous status of the man of non-landed wealth’.⁹⁶ In gentry circles (with the noted exception of the leading Catholic families) traders had the reputation of an

⁹³ John Alexander II to Rev Rogers, 21 Dec. 1875 (LB2, APMH).

⁹⁴ Patrick Walsh, *The making of the Irish Protestant ascendancy: the life of William Conolly, 1662-1729* (Woodbridge, 2010).

⁹⁵ *Carlow Morning Post*, 19 Feb. 1818.

⁹⁶ Barnard, *New anatomy of Ireland*, p. 42; Connolly, *Religion, law and power*, p. 63.

innate inferiority.⁹⁷ Griffith argues that merchants were a disparate group (not yet recognisable as a 'middle class'), well below the gentry and professions yet above the labouring class.⁹⁸ Although Ryan claims in his assessment 'that if a gentleman be bound apprentice to a merchant or other trader, he hath not thereby lost his gentility', his exclusion of the Alexanders from the list (the holders of an estate in the region of 2,000 acres and resident in the county for nearly fifty years at the time of his book's publication) betrays his prejudice against newcomer families into the gentry's ranks, particularly ones engaged so heavily in trade.⁹⁹ It appears an association with trade was only respectable when it was condescended to by an established gentlemen; an established merchant could ascend no further than affected gentility.

The equation of a trading identity with a degree of vulgarity would appear to make an ascent to the upper echelons of gentility unlikely if not remarkable. Campbell and Royle have argued that 'several Dublin merchants' bought land in Carlow for the purposes of investment and social enhancement in the first half of the eighteenth century: 'the success of many of these outsiders in acquiring estates is illustrated by the fact that by the turn of the nineteenth century several had joined the Butlers, Kavanaghs and Bagenals at the apex of the landowning hierarchy'.¹⁰⁰ Arguably, however, it was only the Burtons of Burton Hall and the La Touches of Upton who managed to establish themselves in the upper ranks and they were both banking families, who also enjoyed a respected profile in national politics.¹⁰¹ Banking was regarded as a separate and greatly superior enterprise to trade. In an off-hand comment in 1805, John Staunton Rochfort seemed to employ an ascending social hierarchy in terms of 'Merchant, Banker, Lady or Gentleman', and an

⁹⁷ For the Irish Catholic gentry in commerce in the late eighteenth century, see Karen Bellew, *The Bellevs of Mount Bellew* (Dublin, 1998), pp 142-4.

⁹⁸ Griffith, 'Social mobility and the middling sort', pp 3-4.

⁹⁹ Ryan, *History and antiquities of the county of Carlow*, p. 356.

¹⁰⁰ Campbell and Royle, 'Country house and its demesne in county Carlow', p. 732.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, pp 732-3.

act of the Irish parliament in 1756 had prohibited merchants from engaging in banking.¹⁰² In no way can the Alexanders and La Touches be linked together as an argument for the sway of the entrepreneur in Carlow's landed society. The La Touches were regarded as 'the untitled aristocracy';¹⁰³ in direct contrast, newcomer John Alexander must have arrived powdered in flour dust in the eyes of many social commentators. Therefore, it can be argued that the Alexanders were, in fact, unique in being the *only* family in O'Toole's survey of twenty-nine landowning families in the county, to have accessed gentry status through industry or trade.¹⁰⁴

On his earliest appearance in Carlow, Alexander was designated 'Gent.' and although the son of an important merchant and agent, he certainly did not enter society with the status of even the poorest of the local gentry.¹⁰⁵ A group of Catholic freeholders in 1835 recalled how he 'came amongst us about forty years since, and having realised considerable wealth, became a landed proprietor [...] whose industry has raised him in a very short time from comparative obscurity to affluent circumstances.'¹⁰⁶ The following year, his own tenants elaborated on his humble origins in Ballygowan, recollecting a time when he was 'without a single acre in the county [...], that he came amongst your petitioners as a miller, in partnership with a Mr Connolly [sic], a Catholic gentleman of great wealth; that by his trade he raised himself, in a few years, from the ranks of the people'.¹⁰⁷ Here, Alexander is categorised as belonging to and 'amongst' a trading, working class; the common understanding at Milford was that his father was 'a handicraftsman in the cold North'.¹⁰⁸ Alexander's involvement with the predominantly Catholic enterprise of milling (as dominated locally by Conolly and Thomas Phelan at

¹⁰² Rochfort to John Foster, 19 Feb. 1805 (Foster Massereene papers, PRONI, D207/33/10); A.P.W. Malcomson, *The pursuit of the heiress: aristocratic marriage in Ireland, 1740-1840* (Belfast 2006), p. 46.

¹⁰³ Malcomson, *Pursuit of the heiress*, p. 46.

¹⁰⁴ O'Toole, *Carlow gentry*.

¹⁰⁵ 'Copy of marriage settlement between John Alexander esq. and Christian Nickson', 7 Sep. 1801 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

¹⁰⁶ *Leinster Independent*, 12 Dec. 1835.

¹⁰⁷ *A statement of persecutions...*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁸ *Carlow Post*, 26 May 1855.

Ballygowan, James Blackney at Ballyellen, Michael McGrath at Clashganny etc.) would have further signalled a lower sociological status as a merchant, and the contemporary view of him in gentry circles as a Protestant who was breaking caste.¹⁰⁹ Certainly, when the profits to be made in milling became apparent, Protestant moves into milling became common, but Alexander was something of a pioneer in this regard. In this way, from his first appearance in the county, he had already slotted himself into the box marked 'anomaly'.

In the second generation, these origins were ignored or remoulded by John Alexander II. With his pedigree of tanners, agents and millers, it is little wonder he latched on to the hope of a genealogical connection with the earls of Menstrie. He wanted any references to a life in business removed from any printed accounts of the family; on one occasion, he refused to purchase a genealogical chart of the wider Alexander clan unless the word 'merchant' was eliminated from the description of his branch.¹¹⁰ He claimed, 'my ancestors, tho' engaged sometimes in commercial pursuits, had, all of them, their country residences and held high positions in their counties', which stretched the truth considerably in terms of their country seats and the offices they held.¹¹¹ His father's plebeian status was reinforced by his residence for 15 years in a single-storey, three-roomed thatched cottage in Ballygowan, across the canal from the mills, before the construction of Milford House was ever contemplated.¹¹²

A substantial millhouse typically followed in the wake of a country mill's construction, but the planning of Milford House appears to be more directly linked to Alexander's desire to marry than to a discrete programme of gentrification. By 1799, at the age of 35, he was a man of means, and marriage was very much part of his vision of settlement in

¹⁰⁹ For Catholic millers in Carlow, see Duggan, 'County Carlow: 1791-1801', appendix B.

¹¹⁰ See for example, John Alexander to E. De Moleyns, 10 Aug. 1872 (LB2, APMH); John Alexander to Foster, 2 May 1877 (LB3, APMH).

¹¹¹ John Alexander II to Mr Foster, 2 May 1877 (LB3, APMH).

¹¹² Letter book index of John Alexander I, 1800 (APMH).

Carlow. His mill cottage held no attraction for any prospective bride of taste, refinement or 'quality'. He was not averse to spending money on material comforts, as long as they were modest and tasteful. In fact, he expressed the view in later life that the natural purpose and motivation for his success in business was the provision of material comfort and happiness for his loved ones.¹¹³ However, Alexander was surely aware of the social ramifications of erecting any type of new dwelling. It was widely understood that his father's first cousin, Viscount James Alexander began the construction of a family seat at Caledon in 1779 as a statement, 'evidently intent on enhancing his aristocratic credentials through judicious use of his recently won fortune', as Seán O'Reilly puts it.¹¹⁴ If the mills were the architectural embodiment of John I's merchant status, then his building of a substantial country house inevitably marked the first stage on his assumption of a gentry mantle. As the largest private dwelling in the vicinity (apart from Clogrennane Lodge), the measurements of Alexander's planned house could not but cultivate a definite air of gentility—the very act of construction in itself was an announcement of means, respectability and ascent.

Milford House's status as a trophy home (however modest) for a merchant separated him from other successful millers in Carlow, copper-fastened his greater social prestige and was a subtle advertisement of his vast resources. His nearest competitor, Samuel Crosthwaite lived in the very modest (probably single storey, given its measurements) 'miller's house' on the site of the Lodge mills up to 1837, and while Simeon Clarke of the Burrin mills in Carlow town resided in impressive Hanover House ('one of the best houses in Carlow'), this move did not occur until the late 1820s and it was on a rental basis, subject to £120 a year.¹¹⁵ In such light, the building of Milford House was

¹¹³ John Alexander I to John Alexander II, 19 Jan. 1830 (APMH).

¹¹⁴ Seán O'Reilly, *Irish houses and gardens: from the archives of Country Life* (London, 1998), p. 101.

¹¹⁵ Hogg, *Old mills of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 9; Lewis, *Topographical dictionary*, vol. i, p. 585; PP 1839 (414), *Minutes of evidence and proceedings taken before the select committee on the Carlow borough election petition*, pp 562-4.

inevitably an act of social elevation. The house would also proclaim Alexander's cultural heritage and his inner 'planter', and he was surely aware of its potential to serve as a racial differentiator. As Barnard has commented, 'to build at all had once sufficed, at least in the imaginations of the English, to differentiate civil immigrants from rude aborigines'.¹¹⁶ John I's move from a vernacular cottage to a Georgian big house would have generated much local comment and probably, a change in how people viewed him; indeed, the simplicity and understatement of the finished house appears to reflect his concerns in this regard. He clearly did not wish to elevate himself too far above the local population, preferring to retain the 'down-to-earth, approachable, paternalist manner which was characteristic' of him, as A.P.W. Malcomson has written of John Foster's (Speaker of the Irish House of Commons) similar disinclination to invest his modest home with off-putting ostentation.¹¹⁷

However, while it came to be the physical and symbolic centre of a landed estate, its origins differed from most other gentry homes in the county. It can be looked on as a symbol of Carlow's new gentry: among the 22 per cent of Carlow big houses in the eighteenth century which were not embellishments or reconstructions of earlier structures.¹¹⁸ While clearly moved by social, architectural and aesthetic considerations, the finished product shows that John Alexander remained true to his original impulse: to build a well-appointed and comfortable mill-house as a reward for his prosperity, which was convenient to his place of business. Funded as it was by flour and malt (as opposed to rental income), simple in its design and appointments and built a decade before his purchase of a landed estate, it was made to serve its owners' needs on their subsequent agenda of social aggrandizement. In this manner, Milford House became a landlord's seat by default rather than by design.

¹¹⁶ Toby Barnard, *Making the grand figure: lives and possession in Ireland, 1641-1700* (New Haven, 2004), p. 25.

¹¹⁷ Malcomson, *John Foster (1740-1820)*, p. 22.

¹¹⁸ Campbell and Royle, 'The country house and its demesne in county Carlow', p. 729.

It was built in 1799, at the beginning of a major boom of remodelling and rebuilding of country seats in Carlow which lasted from 1800 to 1860. Richard Morrison was employed to design Pollacton House for Sir Charles Burton in 1803 and later remodelled Borris House for Walter Kavanagh c.1813.¹¹⁹ William Farrell's plan for Clogrennane House (a nominal and architectural upgrade from Clogrennane Lodge) was executed for the Rochforts c.1816.¹²⁰ Thomas Cobden transformed Duckett's Grove into a Gothic fantasy in the early 1820s and Henry Bruen II employed William Morrison to overhaul Oak Park House the following decade.¹²¹ Alexander announced his intention to steer clear of the competition which motivated many of his landowning neighbours by deciding to act as his own architect.¹²² He chose his site in La Touche's field, immediately west of the canal which formed part of the 19 acres which he held by the mill lease of 1796.¹²³ The house was built facing westwards on a slight eminence, just thirty feet from the public road, with its back to the river and the mills. With hundreds of acres to choose from, in more elevated, removed and sheltered positions, Alexander chose to build his home in the midst of a growing milling community, within sight and earshot of the industry that had funded it. It was originally a single block of two storeys above a basement, 61 feet long, 45 feet wide and 26 feet above ground.¹²⁴ Along with local blackstone and mortar, John Alexander's use of American pitch pine in the roof and brick in the building (a rarity for country houses at this time) epitomises his inclination to use the best modern materials, and suggests something of the extra expense he sanctioned and

¹¹⁹ Edmund Joyce, *Borris House, Co. Carlow and elite regency patronage* (Dublin, 2013), p.8

¹²⁰ Farrell's plans for Clogrennane House are in his album in the Houghton Library, Harvard University, f MS Typ 788 (2). With thanks to James Capobianco for forwarding electronic scans to the author, 12 Feb. 2012.

¹²¹ See Thomas McDonnell, 'Thomas A. Cobden, 1794-1842: an architect in Co. Carlow', in *Carlow: history and society*, pp 613-40, at pp 630-1; Delaney, 'Oak Park House and the Bruen family', p. 20.

¹²² Interview with John Alexander V, 18 Mar. 2000; Reference to 'house expenses' in Letter-Book index of John Alexander I, dated 1 Apr. 1800 (APMH). Sadly, none of the letters survive. 'Plan of a house, Co. Carlow, Alexander (J)', 1800, document listed in Mealy's catalogue, *Rare book sale, Tuesday December 14th 2010*, p. 468. Original document inspected by the author on 12 Dec. 2010.

¹²³ 'A map and survey of Millford [sic] Demesne and Mill Quarter [...] in Dec'r 1788' (APMH).

¹²⁴ Survey of Milford House in Martin Coffey's valuation, 4 May 1843 (Valuation office collection, NAI, house book OL 50010); 'Survey of Milford House, Milford, Co. Carlow' by Beckett & Harrington Architects & Civil Engineers, 27 Oct. 1971 (APMH).

tells much about his determination to employ the river to bring the wider world to his doorstep.¹²⁵ It had a five bay front, a four bay garden rear, a two-bay southern side and the front facade was dominated by a single-storey Ionic portico of four granite pillars, from which a short flight of granite steps ran down to a short drive and gate onto the public road from Carlow to Leighlinbridge.¹²⁶ The porch was the facade's only inclusion of decoration for its own sake and should be understood as a modest and singular nod from John I to the architecture of status, rather than an instance of bourgeois pretension.

Inside, the ground floor had ceilings which rose to a height of 13½ feet and comprised a spacious rectangular hallway, off of which opened the stairs and the three main reception rooms; a library lay immediately to the right of the entrance hall. The first floor contained a 'lobby' and six bedrooms with a ceiling height of 11 feet. In Alexander's plan for another house in Carlow in 1800,¹²⁷ he labelled a pantry, scullery, dairy, butler's room, housekeeper's room, servants' hall and sleeping accommodation on the basement level, and we can safely assume that Milford House enjoyed the same provisions— a good indication of the pedigree of household he envisioned for himself at Milford (see appendix C). The earliest illustration of the house dates from April 1812 and although it only occupies one square centimetre of a survey of Milford Demesne by Richard Griffith (of later *Primary Valuation* fame), it nevertheless gives a clear impression of the original structure and its position in the contemporary landscape (see Fig. 3.1 below).¹²⁸ The finished product was simple but substantial, functional yet impressive. It was no larger and was perhaps less externally elaborate than the finished residence of Mr. Jebb on the

¹²⁵ Building materials mentioned in 'Specification for the rewiring of the electrical services installation at Milford House, Milford, Co. Carlow, by B.J. Featherstone', Nov. 1971 (APMH). On the use of brick, see Pakenham, *Big house in Ireland*, p. 12; Barnard, *Making the grand figure*, p. 54; Maurice Craig, *Classic Irish houses of the middle size* (London, 1976), pp 15-16; John Alexander II, 13 Jan. 1871 (LB2, APMH); John Alexander II to Messrs. Ritchie & sons, 17 Apr. 1871 (LB2, APMH).

¹²⁶ 'A map of part of the lands of Ballinabranagh and Ballygown [...] Surveyed for John Alexander Esq. in April 1812 by Rich'd Griffith' (APMH).

¹²⁷ 'Plan of a house, Co. Carlow, Alexander (J)', 1800. Document advertised in Mealy's catalogue, *Rare book sale, Tuesday December 14th 2010*, p. 468.

¹²⁸ Griffith's map, Apr. 1812 (APMH).

mill site at Slane, which was extended and remodelled in the same year as Milford House was built.¹²⁹ Even with the modest extensions which were soon to come, Milford House did not possess the imposing pediments of Oak Park House, Browne's Hill House or Clogrennane House, the stone crests, towers and battlements of Borris House, or the statuary of Burton Hall and Duckett's Grove. If it symbolised anything, it was Alexander's financial independence but also his restraint and wariness of material excess. Interestingly, Milford's outer walls were devoid of coigns (a feature which even the mills possessed) or rusticated doors and windows. The entire ground floor interior was decked out in small black fireplaces of Kilkenny marble (considered hugely unfashionable by John I's children) and plasterwork was limited to cornicing.¹³⁰ Such material frugality was a deliberate feature of the house rather than one imposed by budgetary limitations.

Fig. 3.1 Richard Griffith's sketch of Milford House, 1812¹³¹



¹²⁹ Livia Hurley and Richard McLoughlin, *Slane mill complex: architectural conservation area. Statement of character* (Meath, 2009), pp 8, 15.

¹³⁰ John Alexander II, 14 Feb. 1883 (LB3, APMH).

¹³¹ 'A map of part of the lands of Ballinabranaugh and Ballygown [...] Surveyed for John Alexander Esq. in April 1812 by Rich'd Griffith' (APMH). The yellow markings indicate the position of the public road from Carlow to Leighlinbridge at that time. The original position of the gates to the house can also be seen.

However, despite its comparatively small size, the house represented a significant investment. Family lore claims that the construction cost half as much as the building of nearby Clogrennane House. That house was reputed to have cost £32,000 and imposed an insuperable financial burden on the Rochforts for the rest of the nineteenth century.¹³² This evidence would price the building of Milford House and its later wing in the region of £15,000. It is almost certain that the house did not cost this much but it could be argued that its expense approached a quarter of John I's capital investment of £60,000 in Milford, which he claimed was the total cost for the flour mill, malthouse, Strongstream mill and Milford House by 1826.¹³³ Here is further evidence that the house was not in itself an announcement of a move into the league of the gentry. Alexander was in a remarkably strong position, able but not required to build an elaborate mansion, unlike the Rochforts who felt obliged to protect their status with a physical statement on a scale they could ill-afford. Positive reviews of his design were a bonus, rather than an objective for John I. In 1815, Arthur Atkinson admired the Alexander home as a tasteful construction in his list of 'stupendous objects' in the local landscape.¹³⁴ Despite his conviction of the superiority of his own seat, Henry Bruen II still described Milford as 'a handsome residence' when he visited in 1835.¹³⁵ In any case, John Alexander would have been delighted with Mark Bence Jones's assessment (in a work where the author rarely offers subjective opinions on a building's appeal) of his home as a 'dignified and well-proportioned' country house.¹³⁶

It was this image of considerable means tempered by refined modesty which he wanted to project as a potential bridegroom around 1800 when he ventured to make himself known to the family of Christian Nickson of Chapel Izod House, in neighbouring Kilkenny. The

¹³² Mary O'Hanlon, 'The stately homes of Carlow' in *Carloviana* (1959), pp 23-5, at p. 23.

¹³³ Milford rental, 1826 (APMH).

¹³⁴ Atkinson, *Irish tourist*, pp 368-9, 372-3.

¹³⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 12 Mar. 1836.

¹³⁶ Bence Jones, *Guide to country houses: Ireland*, p. 206.

Izods were a well-established Cromwellian county family, long entitled to bear arms, which had been established in Kilkenny since 1600 and had purchased the fee farm grant of the lands at Grovebeg from the Duke of Ormonde in 1711.¹³⁷ Childless William Izod's (1707-89) heiress was his niece Elizabeth, who married Lorenzo Nickson of Munny, co. Wicklow in 1773. The family was well connected: Nickson's sister was Christian Hely-Hutchinson, created 1st Baroness Donoughmore in 1783, wife of John Hely-Hutchinson (who served as an MP and was provost of Trinity College, Dublin between 1774 and 1794).¹³⁸ Lorenzo and Elizabeth Nickson Izod's fourth daughter was born in 1777 and was named Christian in honour of her paternal aunt, Lady Donoughmore.¹³⁹ With six daughters to provide for, Nickson was undoubtedly enthused when he was sent word in 1799 that Mr Alexander from Carlow sought an introduction at Chapel Izod with a view to courting one of them.¹⁴⁰ The need to be introduced was Alexander's first social hurdle, for according to David Byrne, there was a distinct resistance by the established gentry in the locality to wealthy traders and merchants aspiring to their rank:

Every one who has been in the country parts of Ireland, knows in what contempt, even wealthy persons, who live by their industry, are held, even by the poorest of the gentry, or patrician order, who will not admit of their visits, except on business— and then they are seldom if ever asked to take a seat, and on no account ever invited into the apartments occupied by the family, the interior of a nobleman's house being rarely seen by vulgar eyes.¹⁴¹

Alexander secured the introduction through his friendship with the Steuarts of Steuart's Lodge in Leighlinbridge— a military family and owners of a modest estate (of about

¹³⁷ *Burke's Landed gentry of Ireland* (1858), p. 618; *ibid* (1912), p. 347.

¹³⁸ Malcomson, *Pursuit of the heiress*, pp 106-7. See for example Lorenzo Nickson's letters from Chapel Izod to provost John Hely-Hutchinson on aspects of his deceased sister's finances in July and August 1792 (PRONI, T3459/C/2/200 and T3459/C/2/201).

¹³⁹ Dates calculated from her grave slab in Clody cemetery, Clogrennane, Co. Carlow.

¹⁴⁰ Hickey, 'Not us from kings but kings from us', part 1 (PPP, Carlow). John I later acted as a trustee on Henrietta Hickey's husband's side in her marriage settlement of 1813. John Alexander II, 15 Aug. 1878 (LB3, APMH).

¹⁴¹ Byrne, *Hibernicus*, p. 74. This was not only a Carlow phenomenon. See Griffith, 'Social mobility and the middling sort', pp 150-54.

2,000 acres).¹⁴² They shared a Scottish and Presbyterian ancestry with John Alexander and by 1800, he was a regular visitor to their home.¹⁴³ Mrs Mary Steuart was a first cousin of John Alexander's intended, Christian Izod Nickson.

If Alexander was not known to Lorenzo Nickson (and it is likely that the success of the mills would have made him so), the Steuarts would have vouched for his ambitious nature, his intelligence and solidity. However, their character references could only go so far. Nickson would have been far more keenly interested in the details of Alexander's wealth, given his large family and the fact that his small estate was apparently in financial trouble.¹⁴⁴ As in so many other instances, the door towards gentility was opened by the enabling power of Alexander's assets. Apart from being rich, John I had the advantage of being a completely independent man. He had not been married before, had no dependent children, was not waiting to inherit his fortune and was unburdened by settlement charges from previous generations. Alexander was a welcome caller and was corresponding with both Lorenzo and Abraham Nickson by 1800, father and cousin respectively of the bride.¹⁴⁵

However, Alexander's lack of pedigree and the source of his wealth were significant social drawbacks as marriages between the gentry and merchant community were rare at this point, and were usually only sanctioned when the entrepreneur had made sufficient efforts to hide the clay his feet were made of.¹⁴⁶ By contrast, Alexander's mercantile roots were very apparent: he was planning the expansion of his mills and his selected trustee was his business partner, James Conolly.¹⁴⁷ Despite John I's connection with the earl of Caledon (his father and the earl were first cousins), his obscure pedigree had to be

¹⁴² O'Toole, *Carlow gentry*, p. 109.

¹⁴³ Hickey, 'Not us from kings but kings from us', part 1 (PPP, Carlow).

¹⁴⁴ *Leinster Journal*, 27 Dec. 1806.

¹⁴⁵ Letter-book index of John Alexander I, 1800 (APMH).

¹⁴⁶ See Malcomson, *Pursuit of the heiress*, pp 44-6.

¹⁴⁷ 'Copy of the marriage settlement of John Alexander esq. and Christian Nickson', 7 Sep. 1801 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC4917).

factored into any negotiations. Although Nickson was eager to settle a daughter, he was determined to press the advantage of his family's superior social status in the details of her marriage settlement of 7 September 1801—a document which makes clear that the marriage was seen as a 'condescension', as it was known, by the Nicksons to a union with an inferior party even though both father and bridegroom were styled squires in its terms.¹⁴⁸ Christian Nickson's allotted marriage portion was far below what might have been reasonably expected by contemporary norms. The daughter of an earl typically came with £10,000 at this time, and significantly, this was the sum allotted by Henry Bruen in his will of 1795 for the portions of each of his three young daughters.¹⁴⁹ Half of this sum was deemed small but acceptable by lesser families.¹⁵⁰ Given these figures, the fact that Lorenzo Nickson gave only £1,500 with his daughter, immediately alerts us that selfish, social, even opportunistic calculations were at play in the arrangement. In addition, Alexander was made to compensate Nickson for his inferior social class by way of 'the penal sum of £9,000', half of which was payable by bond to Nickson (at the rate of £270 a year from the business at Milford until the principal was reached), and a further collateral sum of £4,500 being payable after his death if the first sum had not been satisfied. The necessity for a bond was in itself an acknowledgement of Alexander's non-landed status, as unlike Nickson, he had no estate to charge the money on. Clearly, it was the father-in-law who was getting the bargain rather than the bridegroom. Overall, it is clear that the marriage was not a calculated one on Alexander's part and the arrangement was ill-proportioned and grossly unfavourable to him in financial terms.¹⁵¹

So why did Alexander consent to pay above the odds for his bride to such an extent? The notion that he was resolute on an association with the gentry is unlikely and uncharacteristic; it would be the best part of a decade before he contemplated becoming a

¹⁴⁸ For the use of this term, see Malcomson, *Pursuit of the heiress*, p. 44.

¹⁴⁹ Will of Henry Bruen I (NAK, PROB 11/1271/133).

¹⁵⁰ Malcomson, *Pursuit of the heiress*, p. 9

¹⁵¹ With sincere thanks to Dr. A.P.W. Malcomson for his kind discussions and insights into this settlement.

landlord in his own right. It seems more likely that the bride herself had the greatest appeal for Alexander and he was prepared to endure the settlement which, although unfair, he could at least afford. It is safe to say that, vision or not, it was a successful marriage of affection as well as mutual advancement. Christian Nickson's financial security was assured while John Alexander was now married to the first cousin of an earl (a family connection which facilitated the presentation of some of his children to Queen Victoria in 1849).¹⁵² His children would henceforth enjoy close connections with a former provost of Trinity College, and landed gentry in Carlow, Kilkenny, Tyrone and beyond. The couple was married by special licence (a status symbol in itself, the charged fee placed it beyond the resources of most and gave the marriage wider publicity, requiring the permission of an Archbishop) in her local church at Kells on Tuesday 8 September 1801.¹⁵³ John Alexander Snr travelled from Belfast to celebrate the occasion, and brought with him a gift of a pearl necklace and brooch for the new Mrs Alexander.¹⁵⁴ The following summer saw the birth of a son and heir at Milford House.

iv. From merchant to squire: the purchase of a landed estate, 1807-10

Bielenberg has argued that the Alexanders 'achieved gentry status by industry as opposed to land ownership', echoing O'Toole's contention that 'their business enterprises were of more importance than land ownership'.¹⁵⁵ However, both statements neglect to appreciate how fundamental the purchase and retention of landed property was to the Alexander's elevation; Griffith has explored it in detail as 'the most identifiable manner'

¹⁵² See below, p. 339.

¹⁵³ *Finn's Leinster Journal*, 16 Sep. 1801.

¹⁵⁴ 'Copy of the last will and testament of Lucia Alexander. 16 October 1865' (APMH).

¹⁵⁵ Andy Bielenberg, 'The Industrial elite in Ireland from the Industrial Revolution to the First World War' in Fintan Lane (ed.), *Politics, society and the middle class in modern Ireland (Hampshire, 2010)*, pp 148-75, at p. 157; O'Toole, *Carlow gentry*, p. 4.

in which men of commerce ascended the social ladder.¹⁵⁶ Without such an investment, John Alexander and his heirs would not have achieved the same heights of social and political power as a gentry family of renown. By the third generation, when their milling fortune had largely expired, the family retained their gentry status by innovative and vigorous schemes to harness the potential of their landed estate. It was the purchase of a small number of townlands which enabled the family to step up from the industrial elite to the lower ranks of the county's gentry, whose ascendancy and power the Alexanders came to epitomise in the 1830s and 40s.

By 1807, John I had been present in the area for 23 years as a landless businessman who had been enabled to build a very fine house from the proceeds of his successful mills; it is little wonder that his status as a landlord was considered as an add-on by many of his later tenants. Griffith has shown that while the purchase of a substantial landed estate (over 200 acres) may have been a common aspiration among Dublin merchants of this period, less than one fifth of her 29 subjects actually managed it.¹⁵⁷ The move into the landed class was not an all-consuming and calculated social move for Alexander and he hardly typified Adam Smith's assertion that 'merchants are commonly ambitious of becoming country gentlemen'.¹⁵⁸ Rather, as his wealth increased and as a second generation was born at Milford, he continued to look at his adopted environment for investment potential: the future prospects of his children as native Carlovians made continued prosperity, respectability and a right to a say in how things were done increasingly desirable commodities. An investment in land also made sound financial sense and was essentially an extension of his primary talents in the commercial field: 'it offered less of a return than commercial speculation, nevertheless rent guaranteed a return and it could be passed to

¹⁵⁶ Griffith, 'Social mobility and the middling sort', p. 2.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 218.

¹⁵⁸ Quoted in *ibid*, p. 190.

the next generation or mortgaged if necessary'.¹⁵⁹ Land tenure had played a central role in the Alexanders' identity since their arrival in Ireland— in his immediate experience, John I had grown up watching his father's management of an estate in Belfast, and John Snr held land from Lord Donegall as soon as he entered his employment in 1769—¹⁶⁰ and was not, therefore, a completely new venture for John of Milford.

In many ways, the history of the ownership of the Alexander lands at Milford typifies the transfer of land from the old aristocracy to the *nouveau riche* in Carlow in the eighteenth century. Alexander's wealth allowed him to oust or replace other wealthy immigrants to Carlow (such as the Chamneys and La Touches) on land originally held by aristocrats (the Dukes of Ormonde and the baronet Butlers).¹⁶¹ However, his first attempt to buy land in the county was inauspicious and embarrassing as he was 'openly and shamefully defrauded', according to his son.¹⁶² Here, as in his marriage settlement, John I encountered something more of the subliminal opposition to his rise amongst the established gentry in the locality and his pocket was again to be the victim. On this occasion, it came from a party who felt most entitled to his local ascendancy: the most nominally senior resident landowner in Carlow.

When he purchased the Strongstream mill holding from Sir Richard Butler (1761-1817) of Garryhondon in 1807, Alexander understood that he had also purchased the adjoining thirty acres of land in Clochristic, for which he paid £1,500.¹⁶³ However, Butler's lawyers soon inquired if he was interested in leasing 25 of these acres. Perplexed,

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 10.

¹⁶⁰ See John Alexander of Belfast's leases from Lord Donegall, dating from 1769 to 1814 (Donegal estate papers, PRONI, D509/354, D509/905, D509/907, D652/403, D509/1030, D509/117, D509/2837, D509/1623, D509/1796, D811/463, D509/1905); John Alexander of Belfast to the Countess of Antrim, 27 Apr. 1815 (PRONI, D2977/3A/4/49/3G).

¹⁶¹ 'Rent roll of the estates of the Duke of Ormonde [in counties Carlow, Dublin ...]' (Ormonde papers, NLI, Ms 23,789).

¹⁶² John Alexander II, 'Mem. Purchase of Strongsteam mills and land', 12 Dec. 1855 (APMH). All other quotes from John Alexander II on this affair are taken from the same source.

¹⁶³ 'In the Landed Estates Court, Ireland. In the matter of the estate of John Alexander', 26 Nov. 1869 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

Alexander reminded them of the purchase deal only to be informed bluntly that he had completely misunderstood the transaction and that the Butler estate had only been opened to the extent of five acres. Butler, 7th baronet of Clogrennane, was renowned for his proprietorial persona in Carlow's landed and political circles. The nephew of Pierce Butler (signatory of the American constitution), he continued a tradition whereby every succeeding baronet since 1692 had represented the county in parliament, a position he jealously guarded as a matter of entitlement.¹⁶⁴ Even after he lost his seat by the Act of Union, he still regarded himself as the kingpin of Carlow politics and was considered arrogant by some contemporaries, even among his gentry associates.¹⁶⁵ However, Duggan has argued that his 'place as representative for the county was only assured so long as no resident gentleman with a more powerful personality or a better stocked purse opposed him'.¹⁶⁶ It is clear that Sir Richard feared the rise of Henry Bruen II and was powerless to oppose him, given his own weakening finances and the dwindling extent of his estate (which had fallen to 6,500 acres from an initial 30,000 by the nineteenth century).¹⁶⁷ In 1796, he was obliged to sell 900 acres 'for payment of family incumbrances' and a decade later, he was obliged to sell land in Clochrisc— including the Strongstream mill site.¹⁶⁸ Under such straitened circumstances, he would have no qualms in shafting an upstart miller, who was fair game for a commercial rip-off. Wealthy, but social small fry, Alexander deserved no favours in his attempt to scale, even usurp a position on the landed ladder.

The notion that John Alexander could have been mistaken in this land deal is unfathomable given his methodical and extensive business career, and £1,500 was indeed

¹⁶⁴ O'Toole, *Carlow gentry*, p. 76; see also 'Beau Myrtle' quoted in Malcomson, *Carlow parliamentary roll*, p. 26.

¹⁶⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 4 Dec. 1812.

¹⁶⁶ Duggan, 'County Carlow: 1791-1801', p. 29.

¹⁶⁷ See Butler's failed attempt to secure Bruen's support for his son in the general election of 1807, Butler to Robert French, 11 May 1807 (Bruen papers, NLI, Ms 48,338/8), and French's reply, 16 May 1807 (*ibid*); O'Toole, *Carlow gentry*, pp 79-81.

¹⁶⁸ *Finn's Leinster Journal*, 27 Feb. 1796; 'Exemplification of recovery suffered by Sir Richard Butler Bart. And son of lands in the county of Carlow', 1807 (APMH).

an excessive amount to pay for an old mill and 5 acres. At the time his son (John II) prepared the aforementioned memorandum in 1855, he was an MP and was wary of insulting the Butlers who still held significant social and political clout, but his sense of anger at the embarrassment and injustice experienced by his father is palpable. While John I laid the charge of villainy at the lawyers' door, his son wondered whether the underhandedness was a directive from above, although this was couched in very careful terms:

This was the roguish manner in which the attornies [sic] carried out the bargain. I am not aware if the landlord was aware of it or connived at the proceeding, but [...] my father being thus completely outwitted and seeing the impossibility of carrying out in its integrity the original contract (so dexterously was the piece of swindling conducted), was forced to yield to necessity.

While John Alexander was no pushover and complained of ill-usage, he refused to expose his business acumen and reputation to ridicule by contesting the case further. Rather than retreat from landownership, Alexander refused to fall at the first hurdle and chose to become a yearly tenant of the contested 25 acres. He also went on to lease another 167 acres in Clochrisc from the Butlers later that same year for £2,329.¹⁶⁹ Relations were no better with the new Butler heir and 8th baronet, Sir Thomas (1783-1861) who succeeded in 1817, described as a man of 'illiberality' and 'unworthy meanness' by John II.¹⁷⁰ Matters became openly hostile in 1825 when John Alexander's lease on the contested 25 acres was undermined when Butler's brother expressed an interest in building a residence on it.¹⁷¹ Butler was looking after his own; his class as much as his immediate family. For the Alexanders, such episodes became a cautionary tale of the dangers of greed and foul play to be handed from father to son. As John II noted, 'my father was a silent man and never said a hard word against anyone. He has told me this story more than once as I now write it.'

¹⁶⁹ 'In the Landed Estates Court, Ireland. In the matter of the estate of John Alexander', 26 Nov. 1869 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917). This land was subject to an annual head rent of £120 12s.

¹⁷⁰ John Alexander II, 'Mem. Purchase of Strongstream mills and land', 12 Dec. 1855 (APMH).

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Complications in Clochristic proved no deterrent and may even have energised Alexander's competitive nature. In 1810, he expressed an interest in some land in Ballinabranna (also owned by the Butlers), the neighbouring townland to Ballygowan, and was told of rumours that an impending sale of the interest in the whole of the lucrative property was imminent.¹⁷² John Alexander took stock and made the leap into extensive landholding and so furthered his goals of settlement and family provision by acquiring the chief hallmark of the landed gentry — an extensive and prestigious estate. The major factor in the purchase of Ballinabranna was the huge appeal it posed to his keen investment radar: it was a fertile, well-drained and extensive (in excess of 460 acres) property, rising westwards to a height known locally as 'the Mountain'. With the reputation of being the finest land in the locality and some of the best in the county, Ballinabranna was hotly sought after by many buyers.¹⁷³ It was let by a 'lease of lives renewable for ever' by Sir Richard Butler to a Wicklow man, Edward Chamney in 1747.¹⁷⁴ When the debts of his descendent Henry Chamney made the sale of the property necessary, Alexander communicated his interest in the entire lot to the agent handling the sale. William Atkinson (who seems to have known Alexander quite well) duly replied on 26 September 1810:

Ballinabranna is really a most desirable property [...]. So many are now wanting this property that the sale will very soon be closed. I send you a sketch of a rent-roll on the other side and I will at a word say to you that fifteen thousand pounds will be taken from you for it —[...] a sum triple of this sum was offered last week and the money in bank to pay for it. [...] Should you not like the offer I make you, I beg of you to put my letter in the fire. I don't in the least fear its bringing more if put to auction.¹⁷⁵

An auction was not needed. Alexander signed an indenture with Chamney in June of the following year for the stated sum and became landlord of the Ballinabranna property at an

¹⁷² William Atkinson to John Alexander I, 26 Dec. 1810 (APMH).

¹⁷³ Conry, 'The personality of Carlow: landscape and people' in *Carlow: history and society*, p. 11.

¹⁷⁴ 'Abstract of title: estate of John Alexander, county Carlow', 1912, pp 2-5 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917); *Dublin Journal*, 8-12 Jan. 1751.

¹⁷⁵ William Atkinson to John Alexander, 26 Dec. 1810 (APMH).

annual rent of £99 5s. By 1855, the Alexanders possessed a perpetual lease on the holding and it formed the core of their landed estate.¹⁷⁶

Alexander's attention now turned to the greater townland of Ballygowan, along with bordering Tomard and Craanluskey (originally part of the estate of James, Duke of Ormonde).¹⁷⁷ Coming to a total of 686 acres, they had been purchased by David La Touche, the successful Dublin banker who chose to invest his vast profits in the accumulation of country estates in Carlow and Kildare.¹⁷⁸ As described above, Alexander was leasing five acres at the mill site and 19 acres across the canal in Milford demesne from John La Touche (1732-1800) subject to a yearly rent of £7, by 1800.¹⁷⁹ By the time of La Touche's death in 1810, Alexander was quickly becoming as wealthy as his landlord and took out a lease on the three townlands in January 1812 for 300 years.¹⁸⁰ One gains a further insight into the depth of his capital on consideration of the £10,000 paid for the land. An old claim on the land soon surfaced which obliged Alexander to dig even deeper (to the tune of a further £11,400), but he had acquired the fee simple of the lands by March of 1825.¹⁸¹ As with many of his previous financial dealings, the huge capital involved was drawn from *Alexander & Conolly* funds which entitled James Conolly to half a share in the purchase. To free himself from this, Alexander bought Conolly's share (excluding the mill site) in November of 1825 for £10,702. In total, he had spent £21,402 of his own money on the three townlands.¹⁸² Milford House now sat at

¹⁷⁶ Indenture between Henry Chamney and John Alexander, 14 Jun. 1811; Indenture between Sir Thomas Butler and John Alexander II, 7 Sep. 1855 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917). In 1857, the lands of Ballinabranna were subject to a head rent of £93 17s 8d payable to Sir Thomas Butler. 'Account of the estate of John Alexander Esq. in the city of Dublin and county of Carlow, 1857' (APMH).

¹⁷⁷ 'Abstract of title: estate of John Alexander, county Carlow', 1912 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

¹⁷⁸ Michael McGinley, *The La Touche family in Ireland* (Dublin, 2004), p. 204.

¹⁷⁹ 'Abstract of title: estate of John Alexander, county Carlow', 1912, p. 21a, and 'Copy of marriage Settlement of John Alexander and Christian Izod Nickson' (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

¹⁸⁰ 'Conveyance of David La Touche and others to John Alexander, January 21st 1812' (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

¹⁸¹ 'Abstract of title: estate of John Alexander, county Carlow', 1912, pp 16-18 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

¹⁸² *ibid*, pp 20-1.

the eastern end of a small but significant estate, projecting westwards, with all the purchased townlands being conveniently adjacent to each other (see appendix D).

By 1827, John Alexander was completely his own master having bought out Conolly's shares in the mills and the land. This was not a cheap undertaking, however, and he had spent in the region of £40,000 on the purchase of his estate in Carlow.¹⁸³ Added to the final estimate for the cost of his structural investments in the mills and Milford House, John I had spent in excess of £100,000 on his various schemes. This caused some financial strain and called for the borrowing of at least £5,000 from John Holmes Houston of the Belfast Bank.¹⁸⁴ It also necessitated the sale of his family's ancestral property in Ballyclose in Limavady, which he had succeeded to by default in 1824.¹⁸⁵ However, sentimentality made the sale an uncomfortable one, and it was 'an unfortunate moment' according to John II in hindsight who was eager to preserve all semblance of antiquity in his family's landed portfolio.¹⁸⁶ At this time, John I also disposed of his interest in six properties in Belfast, five of which were held from Lord Donegall.¹⁸⁷ Carlow was now the future, and his land required significant input and investment if it was to pay the level of dividends expected of it. By 1830, Alexander's landed estate (largely resourced by the milling income) had become one of the most renowned, peaceful and prosperous in Carlow, and Milford had become an important industrial, agrarian, civic and social centre. The Alexanders basked in the glow of their creations and their position amongst the gentry was strengthened by their successes and the praise and admiration of external observers.

¹⁸³ This figure is arrived at from the purchase prices mentioned above for Strongstream's 5 acres (£1,500), Clochrisc (£2,329), Ballinabranna (£15,000) and the combined lots of Craanluskey, Tomard and Ballygowan (£21,402).

¹⁸⁴ Ballinabranna rental, 1826 (APMH).

¹⁸⁵ *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 Mar. 1820 and 8 May 1827. See Rogers, *House of Alexander*, vol. ii, p. 101; John Alexander II, 21 Dec. 1875 (LB2, APMH).

¹⁸⁶ John Alexander II, 21 Dec. 1875 (LB2, APMH).

¹⁸⁷ *Belfast Newsletter*, 8 May 1827.

Chapter 4

Milford as an industrial, agricultural and social centre, 1800-40

‘More a paradise than a place of business’.¹

Irish Times, 8 November 1862

i. The early development of Milford estate, 1810-30

John Alexander had now the two most crucial ingredients of gentry status (land and wealth), boosted by his Protestantism, his obvious intelligence and immense capabilities. By 1826, he owned Craanluskey, Tomard and Ballygowan (along with his demesne and all the mills and malthouse) in fee simple, with lives renewable for ever on Ballinabranna and Clochrisc.² From 1810 onwards, the Alexanders were a gentry family, *de facto* and *de jure*, albeit on a lower level given the relatively small size of their estate and their status as newcomers to the county. However, John I’s moulding of his property into an attractive and harmonious centre of production was remarkable in many ways and elevated its renown above most neighbouring estates.

From his earliest days as a landowner, it is clear that he approached his estate as an extension of his business and a key link in the supply chain for the mills. It was an investment that required attention and improvement and he spent significant time and effort on attempts to research and understand it. In 1812, he commissioned an extensive series of maps and surveys of his new property from the most respected personnel in the locality, both professional and amateur, including Richard Griffith, John Croake and

¹ *Irish Times*, 8 Nov. 1862.

² See John I’s statement in the Milford rental, 1826 (APMH).

Lawrence Nowlan.³ The entire estate was catalogued and provided a body of evidence on which Alexander could make methodical judgements about necessary improvements and to calculate rents. The surviving papers, although incomplete, suggest that John I desired to have a detailed statistical account of his property at his disposal in terms of acreage and land quality, with profiles of individual tenants, their farms and rents.

From 1810 to 1830, tenancies on Alexander's property varied in size and number.⁴ The first complete rental for the Milford estate dates from 1826, where 80 tenancies are listed. This number reached a peak of 97 in 1834, and had fallen to 90 by 1840. The vast majority of tenants were male; in 1826, only four of the 80 named tenants were women. The repetition of surnames across the estate from 1810 to 1840 (Whelan, Nowlan, Horohan, Murphy) suggests the existence of extensive Catholic family networks in the Milford area. In contrast, the few Protestant tenants (perhaps as few as seven of the 80 tenancies in 1826, and only four of 96 tenants ten years later) appeared in much smaller, normally single-family groupings (e.g. William Bolton, William Trinity, Michael Grannells).⁵ Alexander inherited a very idiosyncratic system of leasing which he honoured until 1830 when a formal, uniform system of leasing was introduced on much of the estate to enable some of his tenantry to access the franchise.⁶ In 1812, Wakefield commented on the new and widespread practice of leasing land in Carlow for 'twenty one years and one life'.⁷ This was true for several Ballinabranna tenants before Alexander purchased the land in 1810 (leases ranging from 18 to 28 years and one life), but some were tenants at will.⁸ Holdings varied greatly in size, from just over an acre to farms in excess of 100. While the Milford rentals offer no insight into the prevalence (or otherwise) of illicit subdivision, it can be safely assumed that it was not a common

³ Only two surviving surveys predate John I's purchases (APMH).

⁴ Statistics compiled from the Milford estates rentals, 1824-40 (APMH).

⁵ Many of the Alexander tenants stated their religious denomination in the applications for national schools in Ballinabranna in 1834-36 (NAI, ED1/1/34/12B).

⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 2 Apr. 1836. See Chapter 6 below.

⁷ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 247.

⁸ W. Atkinson to John Alexander I, 26 Dec. 1810 (APMH).

practice given that only one case is recorded in the estate papers during the period in question.⁹ There were also very few middlemen as in 1831, Alexander reported that farms in his parish were ‘generally held under the head landlord’.¹⁰

By 1831 (the first year in which a surviving rental records the acreage and rents of each tenant), the largest farms were held by James Kehoe in Clochristic (142 acres) and Andrew Sleaven in Ballinabranna (90 acres), both of whom were Catholic.¹¹ About a quarter of the total tenancies would have been deemed ‘a large farm’, given the common belief in Carlow that any holding in excess of 20 acres merited this description (see Table 4.1).¹² In general, however, holdings were much smaller, with only 14 per cent of tenants renting in excess of 30 acres, and over one fifth of tenants held less than five acres.

Table 4.1 Size of tenancies on the Milford estate, 1831¹³

Size	No. Of tenants	% of tenants
0-5 acres	19	21%
6-10 acres	24	27.5%
11-20 acres	24	27.5%
21-30 acres	9	10%
31-40 acres	6	7%
41-50 acres	1	1%
51-60 acres	2	2%
61-70 acres	1	1%
71-100 acres	2	2%
100 acres +	1	1%
TOTAL	89 tenants	100%

Rent charges per acre also varied hugely across the estate, which allows for only the broadest generalisations. For example, rents in the townland of Ballygowan varied from

⁹ In a survey c.1840, John Conwill recorded that the 4 acre farm of Martin Kelly of Tomard (as listed in the 1840 rental) included a subdivision of 1a 10p to Pat Kelly, presumably a son (APMH).

¹⁰ PP, 1836 (35-42), *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Supplement to appendix (F) for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 43.

¹¹ Milford rental, 1831 (APMH). There is also a survey of Kehoe’s holdings in a map book, 1826 (APMH).

¹² Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 248.

¹³ Milford estate, 1831 (APMH).

18s to £2 10s per acre in 1839.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, rents were highest in Ballinabranna where the best land was located and it seems that those who leased larger farms benefitted from a lower rental per acre, to some degree (see Table 4.2). It would seem that management and rental decisions were made on an individual and informed basis according to the soil quality, topography and location of the holding. Family links appear to have been a factor in the calculation of charges as can be seen by the uniformity of rent-per-acre among some groups of relatives: in 1829, the farms of Paddy, Denis and Mick Horohan in Craanluskey were each charged at 18 shillings per acre, and in 1831 the four holdings of Pat, John, James and the Widow Costigan in Tomard bore the exact same rent of 26 shillings per acre each.

Table 4.2 Comparative Rent charges per acre on small and large holdings on the Milford estate, 1824-31¹⁵

Year	Townland	Tenant	Acreage <i>a r p</i>	Rental <i>£ s d</i>	Rent per acre in shillings
1824	Ballinabranna	Andrew Sleaven	48 2 31	121 14 8	51 s
1824	Ballinabranna	Widow Keating	14 2 5	22 0 0	31 s
1831	Ballygowan	Pat Hughes	68 2 30	127 0 9	37 s
1831	Ballygowan	George Byrne	11 3 14	26 1 6	47 s
1831	Clochristic	James Kehoe	142 0 0	272 12 9	38 s
1831	Clochristic	Thomas Donohoe	8 2 6	17 10 9	44 s
1831	Tomard	Mickey Dillon	24 1 22	8 12 9	7s
1831	Tomard	Mic Whelan	5 3 20	7 12 9	30 s
1831	Craanluskey	Pat Kehoe	54 1 10	114 1 10	42 s
1831	Craanluskey	John Bryan	6 2 5	5 16 9	19 s

What seems abundantly clear is that in the vast majority of cases, John Alexander charged less rent than was deemed common or reasonable in Carlow, a fact which was later employed for political purposes to demonstrate his benevolence.¹⁶ Between 1775 and

¹⁴ Ordnance survey field name books, 1839 (NAI, OS 88 Carlow 52).

¹⁵ Milford rentals, 1824, 1831 (APMH).

¹⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 2 Apr. 1836.

1815, rents in Carlow rose considerably from the 15 shillings average quoted by Arthur Young.¹⁷ In 1812, Sir Richard Butler and Robert Cornwall of Myshall Lodge believed the county average was three guineas (63 shillings) per acre, and Wakefield reported it at 50 shillings.¹⁸ In 1818, J.C. Curwen found 60 shillings per acre a low rent in the county: 'How few districts are there in England where the rents are so high!'¹⁹ The vast majority of Alexander tenants paid well below these amounts. By 1831, John I informed the Poor Inquiry that rents in his parish varied from 20 to 50 shillings per acre, the average being 30 shillings.²⁰ Five years later, three 'respectable' witnesses to a select committee of the House of Commons judged that most of the tenancies on his estate were worth one half more than the rent Alexander charged, and in several cases, more than double the rent.²¹ In Henry Bruen's opinion, the lands of Milford were generally set at 'a very moderate rent'.²² It is clear that he was far from a rack-renting landlord and that he was conscious of introducing fair charges and maintaining solvent tenancies.

An examination of Alexander's relationship with the Sleaven family in Ballinabranna during this period proves Alexander's intimacy and familiarity with his tenants, tells us something about his letting arrangements as well as highlighting the inextricable link in his mind between his mills and his landed estate. Andrew and Patrick Sleaven were Catholic brothers who held substantial farms in Ballinabranna before Alexander purchased the property. In 1810, Patrick paid an annual rent of £322 and his brother paid the smaller sum of £93.²³ John I was very familiar with the Sleavens by this time and it appears that they were particularly favoured by their new landlord. After the death of John I, it was

¹⁷ Young, *Tour of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 70.

¹⁸ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, pp 246-8.

¹⁹ Curwen, *Observations on the state of Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 73.

²⁰ PP, 1836 (35-42), *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Supplement to appendix (F) for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 43.

²¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 2 Apr. 1836.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ W. Atkinson to John Alexander I, 26 Dec. 1810 (APMH).

claimed that the holding of Andrew's farm was determined by a more complex and reciprocal arrangement than the annual payment of rent:

A variety of dealings had from time to time existed between the late Mr Alexander and [Andrew Sleaven] from the year 1800 up to the death of Mr Alexander in 1843. Large advances in cash, flour and oatmeal &c., had during that period been made to [Sleaven] from the establishment at Milford, and in return [Sleaven] sent in his wheat, corn &c. Accounts had been most regularly and systematically kept and furnished annually to [Sleaven], who had for such a length of time acquiesced in and approved of them.²⁴

This arrangement (which strongly supports the view of the estate as a feeder for the mills) continued for a number of years after John II's succession to his father's estate. While both brothers were skilled grain farmers, Patrick had accrued arrears of £489 by 1824 — almost half of the entire sum due in Ballinabranna — as a result of a depression which followed the disastrous harvest of three years earlier.²⁵ By 1825, both brothers appeared to have recovered solvency, paying their rents in full, but Patrick's arrears continued to grow. In the 1827 rental, a reference is made to the sum having been paid but it was later reported that Alexander had forgiven the sum, by then in the region of £700.²⁶ Two years later, when Patrick indicated his desire to emigrate with his young family, he was reputedly given £100 by Alexander 'to procure a means of livelihood in America. His son being detained by fever, Mr Alexander procured the attendance of a nurse, and after his recovery, he gave him £26 to join his father in America'.²⁷

Substantial efforts to improve the estate were also undertaken in order to establish it as a significant food producer and a major supplier of corn for Milford mills. The land had first to be fertilised and John I was a regular customer at the Rochforts' renowned lime kilns at Clogrennane long before he became a major landowner.²⁸ Alexander subsequently developed his own small limestone quarry in Ballinabranna and 'worked it

²⁴ *Carlow Sentinel*, 17 Mar. 1849.

²⁵ Milford rental, 1824 (APMH).

²⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Apr. 1836.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ 'Lime on Credit account and amt. brought forward', 1806 (Rochfort papers, NLI, Ms 8682).

very extensively and at great expense for the benefit of the tenantry upon that townland'.²⁹ Alexander supplied lime to his tenants (along with seed corn), the price of which was factored into their rents.³⁰ It was estimated that in the region of fifty men were employed at the Milford limeworks, which brought Alexander's regular workforce to over 150 (inclusive of mill and malthouse employees, exclusive of agricultural labourers) by 1840.³¹ Grain crops were heavily promoted by the landlord including barley, the newcomer to Carlow soil. In 1834, John I was pleased to report to government that 'there has been considerable improvement in all our corn lately, the cultivation and care being improved'.³² The Halls remarked that Alexander invariably purchased his corn from his tenants, 'farmers or the peasantry, many of whom grow only some eight to ten barrels, and sell it in order to purchase materials more necessary to satisfy their own wants — rarely or never grinding it for their own use'.³³ They, and other local producers, were guaranteed a lucrative market for their grain crops in their immediate neighbourhood which was a huge incentive to move towards tillage. In 1823, Patrick Sleaven made an incredible profit of £140 15s 9d on corn grown on his farm in Ballinabranna.³⁴ Rev William Hickey, curate of Dunleckney, friend of John Alexander and prolific author (as 'Martin Doyle') on agricultural improvements, reported hugely impressive developments at Milford in his book *Hints for the small farmers of Ireland* in 1830, claiming that 'a few years ago, there was an average of 18 barrels [of wheat] per acre, *on the whole property*'.³⁵

²⁹ 'Ballinabranagh Quarry Case, for the opinion and advice of Fra's Fitzgerald Esq., Q.C.', Feb. 1852 (APMH).

³⁰ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 420; see comments made by Alexander's clerk in Milford rental, 1826 (APMH).

³¹ Binns, *Miseries and beauties*, vol. ii, p. 231.

³² PP 1835 (17) (18) (19) *Fifteenth report of the commissioners of Inquiry into the excise establishment... Malt*, pp 215-6.

³³ Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 406.

³⁴ Ballinabranna rental, 1824 (APMH).

³⁵ Martin Doyle [Rev. William Hickey], *Hints for the small farmers of Ireland* (Dublin, 1830), fourth edition, p. 97.

As well as reclaiming several acres of wetlands on his property, Alexander planned and constructed several new roads through the estate, both privately-funded and those paid for by the county authorities.³⁶ References to new roads are made in surveys of Ballygowan in 1812, Ballinabranna in 1816 and Craanluskey in 1825.³⁷ By the 1830s, Alexander estimated that 20 men were employed in his parish at road-building, and were paid 10d a day in cash.³⁸ John I's reputation for honesty and fair-mindedness, and as a role-model in road-building for the greater public good, can be seen in the Carlow grand jury's decision to hold the road sessions for the barony of Idrone West on the Milford estate in 1834-7. He provided a cottage for this purpose in Ballinabranna (subject to an annual rent of £5), where sessions were held quarterly, attended by local magistrates and cesspayers.³⁹

Planting was perhaps the most salient improvement on the estate, which marked out Alexander as an enlightened and sophisticated landowner.⁴⁰ Given his initial impression of Ballygowan's barrenness, it is hardly surprising that planting was a major feature of John I's transformation of the area into a verdant centre of activity.⁴¹ Five acres were 'taken from [5] tenants of Tomard' for planting in July of 1828 and by 1835, two further acres of 'new plantation' existed in Craanluskey. A substantial plantation of 32 acres existed at Bawnree in Ballygowan by 1840.⁴² Alexander's small demesne was also liberally planted at this time and a five acre nursery was set up there. By 1840, labourers (teenage boys in the surviving accounts) were employed in weeding and transplanting

³⁶ 29 acres reclaimed in 'Craanluskey bog and reclaimed land', n.d., in map book (APMH).

³⁷ Map Book (APMH).

³⁸ PP, 1836 (35-42), *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Supplement to appendix (F) for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 43.

³⁹ See Virginia Crossman, *Local government in nineteenth century Ireland* (Belfast, 1994), pp 28-37; Lewis, *Topographical dictionary*, vol. i, p. 381, and see references to 'Session house' in Ballinabranna rentals, 1834-7 (APMH).

⁴⁰ On Clogrennane's woods, see Binns, *Miseries and beauties of Ireland*, vol. ii, pp 229-30. For Oak Park's forests, see Atkinson, *Irish tourist*, p. 368.

⁴¹ For the importance of trees to a gentleman's demesne, see Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 531, and Pakenham, *Big house in Ireland*, pp 22-31.

⁴² 'Map of Milford demesne and its environs situate in the parishes of Cloydah and Tullowcreen, barony of Idrone West and county of Carlow for John Alexander esquire by John Heydon, civil engineer, Carlow 1840' (APMH).

trees from the nursery beside the walled garden, as well as pruning and felling firs which threatened young timber across the estate.⁴³

Alexander encountered his first crisis as a landlord in 1817 during a significant agricultural depression which resulted in chronic food and money shortages. This challenged him emotionally and intellectually and tested his socio-economic policies. Shocked by the human suffering he witnessed in Carlow in general and at Milford in particular, he feared that anarchy would follow in its wake and desolate his life's work, as he wrote to an acquaintance in June 1817:

This letter may appear incoherent. I have got little sleep these many nights thinking of the dreadful state of the country. [...] Money is scarcer than food & many are actually in a state of starvation. I much fear a general uprising of the People. This would be the destruction of all, not that there is any organisation, but a general want of the means to purchase food. I am retailing oatmeal in small quantities here [i.e. at Milford] and in Carlow. The demands are great for it but I fear the want of means as there is little work for the lower orders.⁴⁴

The harvest of 1821, however, was an even greater calamity (following two years of bountiful harvests) and brought Alexander face to face with an agricultural crisis on an unprecedented scale in his experience.⁴⁵ Produce from farms and gardens was decimated, rents went unpaid and hunger became a prominent issue. His response to the ensuing depression says much about his paternalist policies.⁴⁶ Alexander responded quickly and liberally and besides Col. Rochfort and Lady Ormonde (of Kilkenny Castle), he was the most active gentleman in delivering relief in the district; 'his hands were ever extended in the cause of charity'.⁴⁷ While many local landlords conceded a 20 to 30 per cent reduction if the tenants paid up their arrears, this was an impossibility for many.⁴⁸ At

⁴³ Survey of July 1828, map book (APMH); 'Recollections of John B. Flatman, 1838-39' (APMH). Flatman was employed with a fellow teenager, Isaac Foster, in this work.

⁴⁴ John Alexander to William Saurin, 4 Jun. 1817 (Peel papers, BL, Ms 40211, f. 341).

⁴⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 2 Oct. 1820.

⁴⁶ See S.J. Connolly, 'Union Government, 1812-23' in *A new history of Ireland*, vol. v, pp 48-73, at pp 66, 72.

⁴⁷ Rev Samuel T. Roberts to Lord Lieutenant Wellesley, 24 Jul. 1822 (NAI, CSORP 1822 1717); *Carlow Sentinel*, 18 Oct. 1834.

⁴⁸ *Carlow Morning Post*, 31 Dec. 1821, 23 May 1822.

Milford, John Alexander handled an agrarian problem with a merchant's instincts. It was, he was sure, a temporary crisis that required substantial but temporary relief measures, and not a reconstruction of estate policies. Looking to productivity and profitability in the long term, he did not reduce rents *en masse*, opting instead to review cases on an individual basis. His preference was to allow arrears to build up without penalty or sanction and he provided employment and assistance to those in distress. Then when the harvest recovered, tenants were expected to re-assume their full obligations. It provided a sense of financial constancy on the estate, set a goal to head towards and speaks volumes of the high expectations he had for his property and his tenantry. As landlord, it seems John I had adopted the 'nursing' approach advocated by his father on the Donegall properties around Belfast fifty years earlier. Between 1818 and 1824, only two tenants were offered an abatement in rent.⁴⁹

The economic consequences of the poor harvest were still being felt in Milford in 1824, where the Alexander rentals recorded arrears of £1,002 in Ballinabranna alone.⁵⁰

However, comments by a clerk in that year's rental prove that a policy decision was made to cancel a good quantity of the debt at that point so as to restore a degree of equanimity and solvency to the estate. Gregory Neill, who was in arrears of £46 'out of the loss of his crop [in] the disastrous harvest of 1821', had his arrears 'forgiven'. Similarly, the sum of £200 owed by M. and E. Hughes was 'considered quite hopeless and [I] have struck it off'. In total, 14 such debts across the estate were erased to the tune of £625. The success of this policy (forgiving arrears but not reducing the rent) can be seen in the case of George Byrne who had accrued arrears of £34 in Ballygowan in 1821 but still managed to pay his rent in full three years in a row up to 1824.⁵¹ Unsurprisingly, his debt was forgiven. Similarly, the clerk recorded that the failure of Charles Fitzpatrick to meet

⁴⁹ *Leinster Independent*, 26 May 1838; Milford rental 1824, which notes Gregory Neill's abatement as 'the only abatement since 1818' (APMH).

⁵⁰ Ballinabranna rental, 1824 (APMH).

⁵¹ Milford rental, 1824 (APMH).

his rent in 1824 was ‘the only instance where an arrear being due, I have not received more than a year’s rent’.

It was a successful policy which ensured that such hardships were transient and Milford estate became a very prosperous place during this period (see Table 4.3 and appendix E). The total rental rose steadily year on year, as did the monies received into the estate office, reflecting improvements in husbandry and harvests. While the level of arrears also rose (reaching an all-time high of 48 per cent in 1842, a figure never again repeated or even approximated in the history of the estate), the Alexanders often received more than the total rent due and never received less than 89 per cent up to 1840. In that year, John Alexander enjoyed a gross income from his estate in excess of £2,400 — a figure which would easily have covered his entire annual wage bill for his employees.⁵²

Table 4.3 Income and arrears on the Milford Estate, 1826-42⁵³

Year	Total Acreage <i>a r p</i>	Total no. Of Tenancies	Total Rental <i>£ s d</i>	Total Monies received <i>£ s d</i>	% of rental received	Arrears due next year as % of rental <i>£ s d</i>
1826	—	80	1735. 17. 3	1660.9.2	95.7 %	4.3%
1831	1435 2 18	89	1956. 9. 11	2043. 3. 2	104.5 %	9.1%
1835	1492 1 30	97	2056. 2. 9	2029. 4. 10	98.7 %	12.5 %
1840	1572 2 10	90	2407. 0. 9	2139. 17. 4	88.9%	41.6 %
1842	1592 1 10	91	2384. 10. 8	2355. 3. 2	98.8%	48.4%

The Milford tenantry regarded the period before 1830 as one of peace, prosperity and harmony between landlord and tenant. A total of 280 civil bills for ejectment in Co. Carlow were entered for trial between 1827 and 1833 but the necessity for an eviction at Milford never arose in this period. John I reported in 1831: ‘No small farms added to

⁵² Milford rental, 1840 (APMH); for the estimate about the annual wage bill for Milford mills and estate, see below, pp 139-40.

⁵³ Milford rentals, 1826, 1831, 1835, 1840 (APMH).

others, and no tenants dispossessed.⁵⁴ His management style and reasonable, sympathetic nature helped to endear the new landlord to the local population; he was 'ever ready to grant anything, in reason, or out of reason, to make his tenants comfortable', according to one report.⁵⁵ His tenantry professed a bond of special familiarity with John Alexander and 'rejoiced' in his prosperity.⁵⁶ These excellent relations can be traced to the fact that he had known many of his tenants for years as his neighbours, suppliers or customers at the mills. He had been a correspondent of men like Andrew Sleaven of Ballinabranna and Thomas Donohoe of Clochrisc (two of his most substantial tenants) long before he ever became their landlord.⁵⁷ Overall, his tenantry felt comfortable with a known quantity. This atmosphere of convivial interaction and community spirit can be seen in an anecdote recalled by John Alexander II, referring to the planting of a boundary hedge in a field in Tomard in August of 1823, where father and son got their hands dirty with the local people in pursuit of a common good:

My father and Mr Fitzmaurice [land agent for the adjoining property of Lord Downes] rode to the mountain while I followed with 4 or 5 men carrying long boatpoles and some flags or handkerchiefs on the top of the poles. [...] There were a great many people present among whom were several of the inhabitants of the place to whom the proceedings were interesting— among whom old Paddy Fitzpatrick, Bill Bolton, two or three of the Horohans, Pat Neill, long John Costigan, Mic Fitzpatrick. [...] One pole was set up on the road on the summit, the other at the edge of the Dineen [river], and the straight line between them was run by means of intermediate poles. [...] Thus a long day was brought to a close and all of us returned home well pleased with our work.⁵⁸

John II's use of the possessive adjective suggests a degree of familiarity, camaraderie and neighbourly intimacy between landlord and tenant, and a freedom from the social barriers which were inevitable and sacrosanct at Borris, Clogrennane, Garryhundon and Oak Park. As a member of the gentry, John I's paternalism was remarkable at this point. The

⁵⁴ PP, 1836 (35-42), *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Supplement to appendix (F) for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 43.

⁵⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 15 Aug. 1835.

⁵⁶ *A statement of persecutions...*, p. 35.

⁵⁷ Letterbook index of John Alexander I, 1800 (APMH).

⁵⁸ John Alexander II, 'Tomard bounds fence, 1856' (APMH).

anecdote was written in a moment of unconscious nostalgia by John II in 1856, who failed to comment on how hugely things had changed by that time on the estate. A mere ten years after this simple incident took place, it would have been unimaginable at Milford. Although the House of Commons was told in 1836 that John I was ‘a gentleman of the highest respectability, and much loved and esteemed in his neighbourhood’, it was in sharp contrast to his family’s rapidly declining reputation on home soil.⁵⁹

ii. Improving Milford House and demesne, 1810-40

As the years progressed, Milford House became central to his identity as a landlord. As an improver and ever the student of best practice, John I decided to re-arrange the environment around his house to create a more private and dignified setting, adding a touch of the picturesque but also a sense of the prestige and dignity which the landed system expected of a proprietor. By 1813, a single-storey wing had been added to the house.⁶⁰ This unadorned extension was a pragmatic enlargement of a family home rather than any serious embellishment. The house front was now 81 feet long which made for a substantial ‘big house’, even if John Alexander II considered the wing ‘unsightly’ and in need of overhauling by the 1870s (see Fig. 4.1 below).⁶¹ By 1810, Alexander’s household was marked by increasing markers of gentility. There were at least three servants in Milford House, along with a butler, Michael Parker.⁶² Christian Alexander set to work on refining the interior, although little information about this process survives. Nevertheless, when Martin Coffey crossed the threshold in May of 1843, he claimed that ‘the house, wing and addition to same, though built upwards of thirty years ago, are in

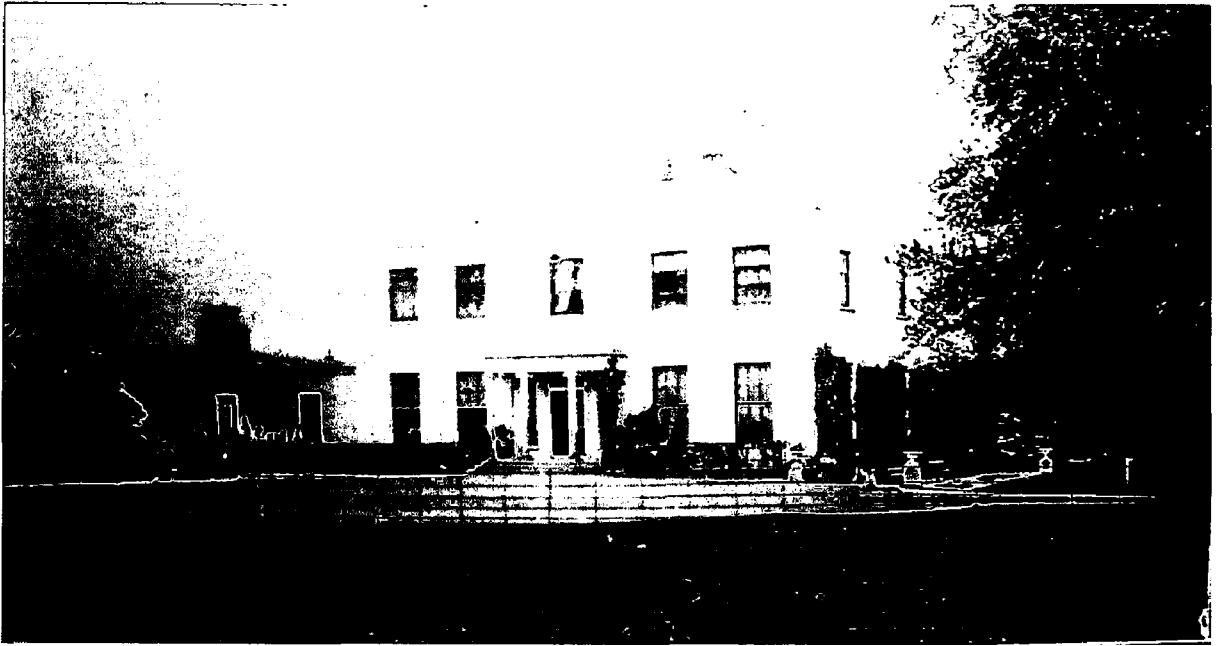
⁵⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 2 Apr. 1836.

⁶⁰ Valuation of Milford mills by Martin Coffey, 4 May 1843 (Valuation office collection, NAI, Valuation Office, House Book OL 50010). Coffey judged that the house and added wing were ‘built upwards of thirty years ago’. The extension does not appear in Richard Griffith’s illustration of the house in April 1812.

⁶¹ John Alexander II to John McCurdy, 5 Dec. 1873 (LB2, APMH).

⁶² ‘Able men in the aftermath of 1798: townland of Milford’, c.1810, included in Martin Nevin, *The sprig in the window: 1798 in the Leighlin area* (Leighlinbridge, 1998), p. 36.

Fig. 4.1 Photograph of Milford House (with 'new' wing), c.1893⁶³



the very best order. The apartments are spacious and finished in the first style.’⁶⁴ The assembly of a library in the house from 1800 to 1840 offers some insights into John I’s personality (including religious, travel, legal, literary and history texts), but the pristine condition of several volumes from the early nineteenth-century suggest that many were purchased as shelf-fillers and to fulfil a role as status symbols.⁶⁵ From the surviving elements of the collection, it can be said that the house probably contained in the region of 500 books by 1830.⁶⁶ While many volumes were inherited from Belfast, the core of the house’s collection was purchased by John I.

Family portraits were not commissioned until the 1830s, but the Portis collection (several miniatures and 6 large paintings in total, some of which were painted by Robert Hunter,

⁶³ Hall album, Alexander photograph collection (APMH). The iron railings denote where the original public road from Carlow to Leighlinbridge passed by Milford House before the re-ordering of the demesne, c.1813.

⁶⁴ Valuation of Milford mills by Martin Coffey, 4 May 1843 (Valuation office collection, NAI, Valuation Office, House Book OL 50010).

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Bowen considered books among ‘the proper fittings of a gentleman’s house’ in *Bowen’s Court* (Cork, 1998), p. 132. See also, Harvey, *the Bellews of Mount Bellew*, pp 77-9.

⁶⁶ This figure has been arrived at by counting all the surviving books which predate 1840, and extrapolating for multi-volumed publications, where all the volumes have not survived.

one of the leading portrait painters in eighteenth-century Ireland)⁶⁷ were inherited from John Alexander snr after his death. Furniture, plate and silverware, ‘with many other effects, found their way to Milford’ from Belfast at the same time as the portraits.⁶⁸ Such inherited artefacts enhanced the veneer of antiquity and genealogical longevity around the Carlow house and were highly prized, especially those which bore the Alexander crest—which the Milford branch was not legitimately entitled to use. ‘I am not able to say what arms my family bear but shall endeavour to find out’, John II diffidently informed a researcher in 1877.⁶⁹ Unlike the Alexanders of Enagh in Derry (also descended from the original John Alexander of Eredy) and many other gentry families in Carlow (the Rochforts, Kavanaghs, Butlers, Ducketts, Bruens etc.) the Milford Alexanders were never officially granted heraldic bearings by the Ulster King of Arms, herald of all Ireland.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, John I (and subsequently John II) regularly used two large wax seals he inherited from his father, bearing the arms of the Enagh branch with hand-and-dagger motif, crescent, harp and motto (*‘per mare per terras’*).⁷¹

At the same time as changes were made to the structure and interior of the dwelling, it was decided to surround Milford House with its own private parkland and push the surrounding countryside a little further away. The road by the front door of the dwelling carried significant traffic between Carlow town and Leighlinbridge and travellers were all but able to see inside the Alexanders’ windows. This arrangement was undoubtedly considered unsavoury by Christian Alexander, used to the privacy of Chapel Izod’s withdrawn demesne. To accommodate this, a new curving road was built around a

⁶⁷ Professor Anne Crookshank, ‘Robert Hunter’ in *Irish arts review yearbook* (1989-90), pp 169-185, at p. 179.

⁶⁸ John Alexander II to Rev Charles Rogers, 22 Jun. 1874 (LB2, APMH).

⁶⁹ John Alexander II to Foster, 21 May 1877 (LB3, APMH).

⁷⁰ See Seán O’Shea, ‘Armorial bearings of county Carlow’ in *Carloviana* (2005), pp 13-15. The list of grants of arms to Alexander families in Ireland by the Ulster King of Arms / Genealogical Office Dublin does not record a grant to the Alexanders of Milford. See Virginia Wade McAnlis, *The Consolidated index to the records of the genealogical office, Dublin, Ireland, chapters A-B-C* available online at <http://www.nli.ie/en/heraldry-catalogues-and-databases.aspx>, accessed 6 Jan. 2014.

⁷¹ John Alexander II to Rev Charles Rogers, 22 Jun. 1874 (LB2, APMH); John II used the hand-and-dagger motif on his own wax seal and on his carriage in the 1870s.

section of the old straight one, which pushed the thoroughfare 300 metres from the house's portico. The change is immediately evident on consultation of maps pre- and post-1812, where a significant arc appears on an otherwise perfectly straight section of road. The family had withdrawn physically and symbolically.⁷² A section of the old road was re-fashioned as an avenue to the house and a simple, single-storey gate lodge was built. A high wall further consolidated the division between the new road and the demesne, which had thus been enlarged by 13 acres, bringing the walled demesne to a total size of 30 acres, although John I considered his total demesne (in which he included some of the mill lands) to be over 80 acres.⁷³ Although it was small in comparison with Bruen's 800 acre demesne, and Rochfort's of nearly 250 acres, it shared many of the same features and gave the same messages to onlookers.⁷⁴

John I planned its layout with typical ambition and foresight and in 1841, Martin Coffey found 'pleasure grounds and gardens handsomely laid out' over 19 acres, including a series of lawns, wooded areas, walks and flower gardens which were tended to by dedicated gardeners.⁷⁵ A wide range of flowers was sown, and by 1838, bouquets of Milford dahlias and 'stove exotics' were winning prizes at Carlow Horticultural Society exhibitions, beating the produce of Col. Henry Bruen's flower garden to first place.⁷⁶ Alexander also constructed a walled garden (with walls over ten feet tall) which enclosed one and a half acres, the entire perimeter of which was sheltered by a screen of conifers.

⁷² 'Map of Ballygown and part of the lands of Craanlusk in the county of Carlow, belonging to John Alexander esq., survey'd in April 1811 by Lawr. Nowlan' (Alexander papers, RBILC, EC 4917); 'A map of part of the lands of Ballinabranagh and Ballygown [...] Surveyed for John Alexander Esq. in April 1812 by Rich'd Griffith' (APMH).

⁷³ Ibid. Richard Griffith's survey of the enlarged demesne refers to the 'wall of new road'; Milford rental, 1827 (APMH).

⁷⁴ The size of Milford demesne is mentioned in a note by John I in Milford rental, 1826 (APMH). For Bruen's, see Atkinson, *The Irish tourist*, p. 368. Col. Rochfort's demesne is described in the tithe applotment books for Cloydagh parish, 1825 at NAI, http://titheapplotmentbooks.nationalarchives.ie/reels/tab//004587424/004587424_00369.pdf, accessed 20 Feb. 2014.

⁷⁵ Valuation of Milford mills by Martin Coffey, 4 May 1843 (Valuation office collection, NAI, Valuation Office, House Book OL 50010).

⁷⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 28 Apr., 22 Aug. 1838.

Alexander's eye for detail and his intention to make Milford beautiful as well as productive also extended beyond the demesne walls and similar practical and aesthetic improvements were envisaged for the estate's built environment.

iii. The new community at Milford: social, working and living conditions, 1800-40

One evening in late 1838 as the light was fading, an English teenager in sailor's dress alighted from the Kilkenny horse-car at Milford Cross, having journeyed from Dublin. Tired of his adventures on the sea, John B. Flatman was nearing the end of his journey on his first visit to his parents' new home — his father having recently been appointed as head storeman of Milford mills. On his walk to the cottage he was greeted and assisted by several locals, all linked in some way to 'Mr Alexander, the gent who owned nearly the whole of the surrounding country and was the employer of my father'.⁷⁷ As a stranger to the area, Flatman's short account of the locality and its people at this time is invaluable, offering details of the new community at Milford, fifty years after it first began to assemble there. Crucially, it places John Alexander at the very centre of a remarkably slick wheel of industry and agriculture. The account depicts the estate as a cheerful and prosperous place with a friendly, diligent and conscientious population, where neighbourly kindness and a system of mutual assistance prevailed. John Alexander comes across as an all-powerful, almost mythical patriarch connected with every individual in the locality – as landlord, employer, patron or benefactor. Unsurprisingly, Flatman jnr. found his way into Alexander's workforce within days of his arrival.

As Carlow's largest centre of industrial employment, Milford was a veritable melting pot at this point, home to a diverse group from a variety of backgrounds and religious beliefs. Ulster artisans, Dublin engineers and English managers worked harmoniously alongside

⁷⁷'Recollections of John B. Flatman, 1838-39' (APMH). Flatman claims he was 16 when he arrived in Milford, 'dressed in a seaman apparel'.

local farmers and labourers. It was a heterogeneous community with a homogenous objective to improve their lot, and an all-important mutual interest in propagating the prosperity of the Alexander family. The estate and mills became a renowned centre of engineering and craft excellence with Alexander as an eager and much sought-after patron. It acted as the launch-pad for many promising young professionals. In 1812, Alexander was an early employer of the skills of Richard Griffith (later of ‘Griffith’s Valuation’ fame), then aged 28 and recently elected Professor of Geology, and mining engineer for the Royal Dublin Society.⁷⁸ He conducted the earliest surveys of Milford estate for John Alexander from 1811 to 1812.⁷⁹

John I was also among the earliest promoters of William Dargan (1799-1867), who went on to spearhead the Great Dublin Exhibition of 1853 and was Ireland’s leading engineer and railway magnate of the nineteenth-century. While his biographer Fergus Mulligan claims that ‘somehow Alexander came to hear of the young Dargan and seeing his talents decided to help the young man at the start of his career’, it would seem that Alexander was intimate with Dargan’s father, who had originally been ‘a very respectable, substantial farmer in the county Carlow’.⁸⁰ Although the nature and extent of Dargan’s work at Milford remains unknown, he retained a link with the Alexanders through their mutual interest in railway development and in the late 1840s, he worked intimately with John II (as contractor and director respectively of the Irish South Eastern Railway company) in bringing a railway line to Milford.⁸¹ Similar assistance was hoped for by the young John Tyndall (1820-1893) of Leighlinbridge who was to become one of the leading scientists of his generation (among many attributes) and Professor of Physics at the Royal

⁷⁸ Gordon L. Herries Davies and R. Charles Mollan (eds.), *Richard Griffith: 1784-1878* (Dublin, 1980), p. 5.

⁷⁹ Three surveys of parts of the estate by Richard Griffith survive in APMH, Map book, dating from December 1811 to April 1812.

⁸⁰ Fergus Mulligan, *William Dargan, 1799-1867: an honourable life* (Dublin, 2013), p. 14; *Freeman’s Journal*, 30 Oct. 1852

⁸¹ See Chapter 8 below; *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Jan. 1847.

Institution of Great Britain from 1853 to 1887.⁸² Eager for a position in the Inland Revenue in 1839, Tyndall wrote to his father in Leighlinbridge urging him to canvass the interests of local luminaries: 'If you could procure that of Mr John Alexander, it would be better than all.'⁸³ Although he never entered the revenue and left for England the following year, Tyndall's views on Alexander are very telling of the latter's influence in contemporary society and the value attached to his patronage, even as an elderly man in his late seventies: 'Mr. Alexander's interest is powerful, and tho' at present it may not have scope to work in, still I am sure that at a future day it will be found availing. It gives me great satisfaction therefore to find him on my side'.⁸⁴

Although a model industrial village was not built at Milford, John Alexander was no less involved than the textile entrepreneurs who typically developed such villages in the first half of the nineteenth century, in establishing 'paternalist structures' on his property.⁸⁵ However, for John I, the mills and the estate were fused into a single enterprise, which probably accounts for the dispersed (as opposed to centralised) development of housing and facilities across his property. The term 'Milford' now came to refer to the big house, demesne and estate as much as the mill sites, and they increasingly became a centre of population and employment from 1810 onwards. The mill and lime quarry workers (numbering over 150 in total by 1840) joined with the indoor and outdoor staff (at the house, out-buildings and gardens) and the 80 or so tenant families, to create a population explosion in the area. Milford's emergence as a social centre can be tracked in publications and surveys of the time, and from detailed responses to questionnaires on

⁸² Norman MacMillan and Martin Nevin, 'Tyndall of Leighlin', part 1, *Carloviana* (1978), pp 22-27, and part 2 in *ibid*, (1980), pp 23-27.

⁸³ John Tyndall jnr to John Tyndall snr, 23 Sep. 1841 (Tyndall papers, Royal Institution of Great Britain, RI MS JT/1/TYP/10/3245). With thanks to Dr Norman Macmillan and Martin Nevin for putting me in touch with Professor Geoffrey Cantor of the University of Leeds, who is currently editing the papers for publication and who provided transcripts. Also to Professor Frank James at the Royal Institution for permission to quote from the same.

⁸⁴ John Tyndall jnr to John Tyndall snr, 5 Feb. 1842 (Tyndall papers, Royal Institution of Great Britain, RI MS JT/1/TYP/10/3266).

⁸⁵ Bielenberg, 'The industrial elite in Ireland', p. 159; Petherbridge, 'Expressive monuments of industry and order', p. 748.

social conditions that Alexander supplied to the Poor Law Inquiry in the early 1830s. As early as 1810, the new community and its population were significant enough to merit a separate category in Carlow grand jury's survey of the 'able men in the Barony of West Idrone'.⁸⁶ Incorrectly (but significantly), Milford is listed as a distinct townland, with Ballygowan listed separately. The names of 38 men are recorded which documents the draw of various occupations to the area by the big house and the mills, including a weaver, a butler, a smith, a butcher, a steward, a clerk, three servants, 2 gardeners, 4 millers and 23 'general workers' (employed, no doubt, in the mills). Similarly in 1813, Milford was given a separate category in a population census for the barony as collected by its High Constable. In the section for the parish of Cloydagh (one of the two traversed by Alexander's property), the return states that there were 38 families in Milford (probably meaning the townland of Ballygowan) with a population of 261 people—almost a third of the entire population of the parish.⁸⁷ In Ambrose Leet's 1814 *Directory to the market towns, villages, gentlemen's seats and other noted places in Ireland*, 'Milford' was listed as a village.⁸⁸ Its status was upgraded five years later in William Shaw Mason's volume of parochial surveys, with its reference to 'Milford Town'.⁸⁹ This impression was corroborated in 1828 by a young woman from Dublin, a stranger to the area, who was sufficiently impressed with its size to refer to it as 'the town of Milford'.⁹⁰ John Alexander himself explained to the Poor Inquiry in the early 1830s that the population in his district was 'increasing rapidly', and there were almost a thousand people on his estate (961 people on the five townlands) according to the census of 1841.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Taken from Nevin, *The sprig in the window*, p. 36.

⁸⁷ 'Population of the barony of Idrone west as returned by the high constable, A.D. 1813' (Vigors papers, NLI, Ms 24982). The total population for Cloydagh parish is given as 852.

⁸⁸ Ambrose Leet, *A directory to the market towns, villages, gentlemen's seats and other noted places in Ireland*, second edition (Dublin, 1814), p. 286.

⁸⁹ William Shaw Mason, *A statistical account or parochial survey of Ireland* (Dublin, 1819), vol. iii, p. xxxii.

⁹⁰ *Carlow Morning Post*, 21 Jul. 1828.

⁹¹ PP, 1836 (35-42), *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Supplement to appendix (E) for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 43; *The census of Ireland for the year 1851. Part I. Showing the area*,

The 'new' elements of the population were probably mostly drawn from neighbouring estates and Carlow town, but some arrived from further afield. James Flatman relocated his family from England as we have seen to take up the post of storeman in 1838 and John I's coachman in 1836, John Hart arrived from a stint soldiering at the British fort at Île Aux Noix near Montreal.⁹² John I also brought a cohort of workers from Belfast with him who were placed in positions of management and trust. Energy and initiative were qualities admired in Ulster workers by Carlow landlords with northern backgrounds, such as Alexander and Hugh Faulkner of Castletown (originally from Tyrone).⁹³ Alexander remained very much a Belfast man: he was a regular visitor to that town and it is likely that his northern accent remained a defining feature of his personality. In his later years, he was just as likely to refer to himself as 'John Alexander of Belfast' as 'John Alexander of Carlow' in official documents.⁹⁴ He clearly wished to bring exemplars of the spirit of industry in Belfast's denizens to Milford. From Carrickfergus, he brought brothers John (1770-1838) and William McMurthry (1778-1855), members of an extended family which would be associated with both the Milford and Belfast mills for the next 50 years. They had settled into life at Milford by 1800 and ten years later, William and John were working with Martin Murphy and James Johnson as the head millers at Milford.⁹⁵ They remained a Belfast family at heart with milling very much in the blood as the family trade. Four of William and John's siblings remained in Belfast, including Thomas

population, and number of Houses, by townlands and electoral divisions. Vol. I. Province of Leinster (Dublin, 1852), pp 1-14.

⁹² Samuel McMurtry's letters to his cousin John McMurthry of Darlington mills, New castle, Upper Canada, 28 Jul. 1836 and 5 Mar. 1841 (McMurthry letters, Clarington Museum and Archives, Bowmanville, Canada). With thanks to Charles Taws of the Clarington Museums and Archives for providing digital copies of this material.

⁹³ Hugh Faulkner to Samuel Faulkner, 25 May. 1795 (Faulkner papers, NLI, p.3500).

⁹⁴ For the latter, see for example a lease from Lord Donegall, 22 May 1829 (Donegall papers, PRONI, D509/2461).

⁹⁵ The McMurthrys' names are in Alexander's Letterbook index, 1800 (APMH), and are listed as millers at Milford in 'Able men in the aftermath of 1798: townland of Milford', c.1810 in Nevin, *The sprig in the window*, p. 37. For details of the McMurthry genealogy, see 'McMurtrys of Co. Antrim and Co. Carlow' on <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mcmurtriecfr/sam/cf202narrative.htm>, and <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mcmurtriecfr/sam/cf-202.html>, accessed 29 Oct. 2013.

McMurthry who was a miller at Alexander's Belfast Flour Mill in the early 1830s.⁹⁶ The two brothers quickly made an impact at Milford: settling down, having families and helping John Alexander's business to excel. By 1822, there were 19 McMurthrys in Milford and the two fathers held important positions of responsibility.⁹⁷ Hard-working, skilful, conscientious, literate and God-fearing Protestants, Alexander established a family at his new frontier who would lead by example.⁹⁸ The job of head-miller almost became an inherited position in the family: John McMurthry apprenticed his son Samuel to the trade in the flour mill, and the son assumed the father's position of head miller on the latter's death in 1838; at that point, Samuel proceeded to teach his younger brother the trade.

Three Neilson brothers also journeyed south: Francis worked at Milford, while William and Robert served as accountants at the Carlow and Newbridge storehouses of *John Alexander & Co.* respectively.⁹⁹ Another northern recruit was Joseph Robinson of Carrickfergus, who was working as a clerk at the mills in 1810.¹⁰⁰ While the migrants appear to have integrated into the community very well (some of William and John McMurthry's children married Carlow natives, and John McMurthry supported his Catholic neighbours' application to build a National School in Ballinabranna in 1835), there certainly remained a northern subset in the Milford population— a group who never really regarded the place as home.¹⁰¹ Also, their positions of seniority

⁹⁶ Samuel McMurthry, Milford to John McMurthry, Canada, 28 Jul. 1836 (McMurthry letters, Clarington Museum and archives).

⁹⁷ The McMurthry family at Milford is based on online genealogical accounts at <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mcmurtriefr/sam/cf-202.html>, accessed 29 Oct. 2013.

⁹⁸ It appears that one of the families remained Presbyterian and one was Church of Ireland, *Carlow past and present* (1996), vol. 1, no. 5, p. 182.

⁹⁹ Letterbook index of John Alexander I, 1800 (APMH).

¹⁰⁰ 'Able men in the barony of Idrone west', in Nevin, *Sprig in the window*, p. 36; Will of Joseph Robinson of Milford, 17 Sep. 1817 (PRONI, D1251/1/1).

¹⁰¹ See Samuel McMurthry's marriage to Anne O'Neill of Dunleckney in 1844 at <http://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/reels/c-125-1-5-106.pdf>, accessed 30 Oct. 2013; John McMurthry signed his name in support of an application for the female national school in Ballinabranna in 1835 (NAI ED1/1/34/12B).

probably worked against deeper social integration. Writing his memoir in the 1830s, William Farrell detected an unwelcome sense of superiority amongst the industrious migrants from the north to Carlow and criticised 'the adventurers who flew from Ulster [...] who always assumed a consequence over the Catholics of this country that was never allowed them at home'.¹⁰² Nevertheless, their contribution to Alexander's business was considerable, the success of which was hailed by some as evidence of the industrial superiority of the north. Fellow Belfast man (and MP) James Emerson Tennent regarded Milford as something of a northern colony in southern Ireland, and declared the pride of his hometown in Alexander's achievements.¹⁰³ That Alexander felt reciprocal gratitude to this sector of his workforce is a fact recorded in stone in the graveyard at Clonmelsh, close to Milford, where John I commemorated perhaps the most diligent of the northern migrants:

Beneath this tomb lie the mortal remains
of John McMurthry who for many years filled
the situation of master miller at Milford with
great zeal and high integrity, he died on the
19th of April 1838 aged 68 years.

This monument was placed here by
Mr Alexander in testimony of his great esteem and regard for his faithful service
during the long space of 45 years.¹⁰⁴

Indeed, it was the prominence of such migrants into positions of standing and management positions in the mills and malthouse that gave Ballygowan a distinctly Protestant aura at this time. Unlike the broader Milford landed estate where Catholics were in the majority, Protestants were better represented at *John Alexander & Co.*, with surnames like Beard, Chatham, Lee, Tennent, Forde, Newsom and Ennis (as well as those

¹⁰² Farrell, *Carlow in '98*, p. 34.

¹⁰³ Emerson Tennent, *Letters to the north from a traveller in the south*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁴ Inscription on flat tombstone at Clonmelsh graveyard, Co. Carlow.

already mentioned) appearing in the surviving records of employment.¹⁰⁵ In the Ordnance Survey field name books of 1839, Ballygowan (which included the mill quarter) was the only townland in Alexander's ownership not to bear the following description: 'The inhabitants are chiefly Roman Catholic'.¹⁰⁶

Apart from northern Presbyterians and Anglicans, several members of Carlow's Wesleyan Church worked in the mills. In 1853, its leaders—great promoters of ecumenism in society—singled out John I for praise for 'a liberality unhappily so rare' which,

pursued by the House of Messrs *John Alexander & Co.* for more than fifty years, has been exemplified by the position of trust and emolument to which they advanced men of probity and talent, irrespective of creed, and the full protection which they gave to every man in the free and conscientious discharge of his religious duties. [...] The noble temple of industry, embracing both ends of our island, which has been erected under the divine blessing, by the talent of [John I] and his family, has never been defiled by sectarian exclusivism.¹⁰⁷

The predominance of Protestants in his workforce was largely a consequence of geography (John I's association with Belfast) rather than policy and other religious denominations featured heavily in the Milford workforce, most notably local Catholics. It was surely a matter of massive regret for John I that an ill-advised and politically-motivated act of his son in 1835 provided a solitary but powerful exception to this paean of praise.

This new workforce required local accommodation which led to a building boom at Milford which was carefully regulated and planned (as usual), with an eye to the picturesque as well as the pragmatic. At the time of the parish census of 1813, there were 38 houses in Milford and a new one was being built, which was a huge advance on the

¹⁰⁵ For employees at Milford, see Letterbook index of John Alexander I, c. 1800 (APMH), and PP 1836 (255), *Return of names and residences of each person in Ireland to whom licences have been granted to keep arms*, pp 6-7; also, the signatures and religion of many employees in 1836 is given in ED1/1/34/12b (NAI).

¹⁰⁶ Ordnance Survey field name books, parish of Tullowgreen, 1839 (NAI, OS 88 Carlow 52).

¹⁰⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 29 Jan. 1853.

‘single cabin’ John I noted on his arrival thirty years before.¹⁰⁸ It is clear that he designed and built several houses for his mill workers, some on site and others along the roads in the vicinity. A terrace of two-storey houses, all with granite window sills and door frames was built behind the flour mill (‘beautifully situated residences for clerks &c.’, according to the *Irish Times*), which bears testimony to the quality of the materials and craftsmanship employed.¹⁰⁹ Labourer’s houses were also built; a survey of 1830 refers to the ‘new houses’ being built along the roads outside Milford demesne.¹¹⁰ Granite, a tough and attractive rock in abundance in the county, became a signature feature of the estate. Already used in the bridges, and the portico of Milford House, it now appeared at the entrance gates of houses on the estate, in the form of rounded and dressed piers. These were accompanied by limestone mortared walls with triangular-shaped granite capstones. With these, John I has been credited with creating a unique, picturesque type of construction named ‘the Milford wall’ by geologist Michael Conroy, which ‘have not been observed in other parts of the country’.¹¹¹ The sparkling granite and uniform appearance of the stout walls (about 40cm wide) did much to enhance Milford’s appeal to observers. The Milford wall (1,000 metres of which has survived despite reconstructions and demolitions) neatly symbolises the fusion of vision, skill and productivity which characterised Milford in the early decades of the century.¹¹² By 1841, there were 147 houses in total on the Milford estate.¹¹³

This phase of improvement also had a knock-on effect on the cottages of his agricultural tenants, but not to the same extent. Alexander lent weight to Wakefield’s observation that

¹⁰⁸ 1813 parish census, Cloydagh (Vigors Papers, NLI, Ms 24982).

¹⁰⁹ *Irish Times*, 8 Nov., 1862. These buildings survived until the mill site was demolished in the early 1980s. Photographs from the 1960s show the terrace. With thanks to Mr Bobby Quinn, Milford, for showing me these.

¹¹⁰ ‘A return of all the lands in possession of Pat Neill under John Alexander esquire’, Oct. 1830 (APMH, map book).

¹¹¹ Conroy devotes a whole chapter of his book, *The Carlow fence*, to the Milford wall, (Carlow, 2000), pp 96-8.

¹¹² *Ibid*, p. 98.

¹¹³ *Census*, 1851, pp 1-14. See also Table 8.3 below.

the construction, fitting-out and maintenance of these cottages was the sole responsibility of the tenant.¹¹⁴ However, John I provided cash advances to tenants who wished to build or rebuild and allowed them to draw free sand from his gravel pit in Ballinabranna.¹¹⁵ When Patrick Kehoe (a tenant of 54 acres in Craan) wanted to rebuild his house in the 1820s, it was claimed that John I offered him a gift of a year's rent of £114 for that purpose.¹¹⁶ Alexander also communicated clear and high expectations that every dwelling on the estate should be clean, attractive and well-maintained. Disappointingly, he found that this was not always the case. On assessing his tenants' houses in the early 1830s, he found that most of them were 'comfortable, and might be all so only for the careless and imprudent conduct of the inhabitants'. As part of his scheme of beautification, Alexander provided white-wash free of charge to applicants who were expected to perform this task on a regular basis.¹¹⁷ Hedgerows were planted around the cottages and along the old and new roads which were strictly monitored and meticulously maintained as an indication of neatness and order. When James Murray was 'caught in the act of cutting it' without permission in February of 1840, he was brought to petty sessions by John Alexander and fined 2s.¹¹⁸ In 1818, the author J.C. Curwen celebrated the Milford cottages, 'white-washed, and mostly sheltered by trees, which imparted to them an air of rural comfort and neighbourhood so seldom to be met with in Ireland'.¹¹⁹ In 1830, Rev William Hickey recommended John Alexander's schemes and reported that 'the cottages on this gentleman's estate are exquisitely neat, without exception'.¹²⁰

Overall, the Milford population were far better accommodated than many of their counterparts in the surrounding districts. In the vicinity of Carlow town, Rev William Blood described many of the cabins inhabited by the poor as 'misery in the abstract'

¹¹⁴ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 244.

¹¹⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Apr. 1836.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Hall's *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 405.

¹¹⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 22 Feb. 1840.

¹¹⁹ Curwen, *Observations on the state of Ireland*, pp 76-7.

¹²⁰ Hickey, *Hints for the small farmers of Ireland*, p. 97.

which required a great effort from him simply to enter.¹²¹ In contrast with the neighbouring parish of Tullomagimna where cottages were fitted out with ‘poor and miserable’ furniture, according to Fr Thomas Tyrrell, the Milford cottages all had proper bedsteads, straw and blankets.¹²² There were only six to eight cases of a dwelling being shared by more than one family at Milford, compared to 20 in Fr Tyrrell’s parish. Even the labouring population fared much better. According to John I, ‘all that are in the parish, of industrious habits, have constant employment’. They were well-fed on a diet chiefly of milk and potatoes, and were well-dressed, ‘and on Sundays and holidays most comfortably.’¹²³ James Conolly noted that they generally provided their own food from their gardens but that oats and oatmeal also formed a great part of their diet, but that there was very little consumption of meat.¹²⁴

Rates of pay at Milford were also excellent by contemporary standards in Carlow where wage levels were a controversial subject. In 1824, Daniel O’Connell claimed that ‘two hundred labourers could be had in Carlow to work for two pence a day without food!’¹²⁵ While writing his memoir in 1832, William Farrell accosted Carlow landlords for the poor daily rates paid to such workers, local and otherwise (‘you screw your labourers down to sixpence or eightpence’).¹²⁶ Those who were lucky enough to be employed by Alexander or the Milford farmers enjoyed wages of up to 10d a day all year round without food, rising to between 1s and 2s with food during the harvest— figures in stark contrast to the ‘miserably small’ wages paid to workers in Co. Cork at this time.¹²⁷ James Conolly was satisfied that ‘our labourers, in [the] county of Carlow get something about

¹²¹ PP, 1836 (35-42), *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Supplement to appendix (F) for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 42.

¹²² *Ibid*, *Supplement to appendix (E) for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 43.

¹²³ *Ibid*, *Supplement to appendix (D) for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 43.

¹²⁴ PP, 1823 (561), *Report of the select committee on the employment of the poor in Ireland* evidence of James Conolly, p. 67.

¹²⁵ *Carlow Morning Post* quoted in the *Times*, 27 Jul. 1824.

¹²⁶ Farrell, *Carlow in '98*, p. 45.

¹²⁷ PP, 1836 (35-42), *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Supplement to appendix (D) for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 43; James S. Donnelly jr., *The land and people of nineteenth-century Cork* (London, 1975), pp 21-3.

1s a day. [...] I do believe that we have paid them at periods more than that'. He conceded that this was far greater than the average paid to such workers, but that the labourers in his experience in Carlow (i.e. at Milford) 'are of a superior description'.¹²⁸ Such wages were enjoyed by storeman James Flatman's 16-year old son in 1840, who was employed at a variety of tasks (working in the big house garden, clearing islands and watercourses of wood, attending John II etc.) for 10 shillings per fortnight.¹²⁹ Fr Tyrell estimated that the average annual labourer's wage was only £8 or £9 in his parish. On William Duckett's estate his men earned from £10 to £12 a year each. At Milford, agricultural labourers could expect to earn a boon £14 to £16 a year.¹³⁰ Unsurprisingly, Alexander reported 'I have never heard of any labourers leaving this parish in search of labour elsewhere, either in England or Ireland'.¹³¹

Those in secure employment at *John Alexander & Co.* enjoyed even better pay. In 1847, labourer John Bryan was earning 9s a week at the mills, 'and his family were otherwise employed and in comfortable circumstances'.¹³² Skilled industrial workers were particularly well-rewarded and could expect much more than their labouring counterparts inside or outside the mills. In 1841, Samuel McMurthy was given a rise in salary, which brought his annual earnings as head miller to a sizeable £70 a year; his younger brother John enjoyed £20 a year as his apprentice.¹³³ Despite his incorrect supposition of low rates of pay at Milford, Jimmy O'Toole is right in claiming that 'the total weekly wages bill must have been substantial in relative terms, providing a major boost to the local

¹²⁸ PP, 1823 (561), *Report of the select committee on the employment of the poor in Ireland* evidence of James Conolly, p. 65.

¹²⁹ 'Recollections of John B. Flatman, 1838-39' (APMH).

¹³⁰ PP, 1836 (35-42), *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Supplement to appendix (D) for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 43.

¹³¹ PP, 1835 (369), *First report from His Majesty's commissioners for inquiring into the conditions of the poorer classes in Ireland, with appendix (A) and supplement*, evidence of John Alexander, p. 46.

¹³² *Carlow Sentinel*, 3 Apr. 1847.

¹³³ Samuel McMurthy to John McMurthy in Canada, 5 Mar. 1841 (McMurthy letters, Clarington Museum and archives).

economy, and removing for labourers total dependence on agriculture'.¹³⁴ If we take the 9s mentioned above as an average wage c. 1845, a labourer at the mills may have earned in the region of £23 annually. With a workforce of 100 at the mills and malthouse, the total annual payroll would have exceeded £2,500, taking account of the higher wages enjoyed by the skilled workers and those in management. Periods of long service were common at Milford, with employment at the concerns effectively amounting to a secure and lucrative family asset, to be inherited by successive generations; this continuity was also a great asset to the smooth running of the firms.¹³⁵ There is little hard evidence that women were employed at Milford mills, but it is likely that girls were employed to mend sacks there as they were at Simeon Clarke's mills in Carlow town.¹³⁶ We do know that women were employed in the fields at Milford during harvest-time. Interestingly, in a sketch illustrating the Halls' *Ireland*, it was a woman (accompanied by young girls and small children) that William Harvey depicted cutting corn in a field at Milford, armed with a rake and scythe beside stacked sheaves (see Fig. 2.7 above).

The evidence suggests that there were excellent labour relations between employer and employee between 1800 and 1830 at Milford, with only minor exceptions. One such instance was Alexander's dismissal of a group of boat-loaders in his employment in 1821 for involving themselves in 'a most formidable confederacy' along the Barrow line who were demanding higher weekly wages and were intimidating millers and workers who opposed their schemes.¹³⁷ Clearly dissatisfied with their tactics and the scale of their demands, Col. Rochfort reported to chief secretary William Gregory that Alexander 'has turned away some of his men for being rogues'.¹³⁸ Alexander's position was so strong in

¹³⁴ O'Toole, *Carlow gentry*, p. 6.

¹³⁵ See the case of the Forde family in 'Revenue raid on the malthouse of John Alexander of Miford, 1837', documents in the possession of Mr John Sheehan. For three generations of the Hackett family in the Strongstream mill, see John Alexander II, 10 Jun. 1880 (LB3, APMH).

¹³⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 23 Dec. 1848.

¹³⁷ *Carlow Morning Post*, 28 Mar. 1822; James Tandy, chief magistrate of police for Carlow to Alexander Mangin, 24 Nov. 1821 (NAI, CSORP/SC/1821/1434).

¹³⁸ J.S. Rochfort to William Gregory, 14 Mar. 1821 (NAI, CSO/RP/SC/1821/1245).

the Barrow's trade and in the county's economic hierarchy that Lord Norbury (as a friend of Rochfort) himself appealed to government on behalf of the merchants along the Barrow, but particularly for 'Mr Alexander and other great traders upon it' for its assistance in dealing with the boatmen.¹³⁹

From surviving records, it appears that *John Alexander & Co.* enjoyed an almost impeccable safety record between 1790 and 1870, unlike other mills in the locality where accidents and deaths were a regular occurrence.¹⁴⁰ Remarkably, there is no record of a fatality on the premises and there is only one press report of a maiming over this entire period; in October of 1857, a labourer named Byrne became entangled in the machinery in the flour mill and had a narrow escape from being killed, coming away 'with some severe contusions'.¹⁴¹ Tight control of safety standards outside the mills walls was another matter entirely, however, and the fact that the premises were built around a vast number of water courses meant drowning was an omnipresent risk. While no worker appears to have drowned while on duty, there were several accidental deaths of this nature over the years, such as that of maltster John Ennis (possibly related to malthouse manager, Matthew Ennis), who fell into the Barrow after a social evening spent in the lock-keeper's house at Milford one night in November 1837.¹⁴² Measures were taken to protect the public from the high volumes of horse-drawn traffic travelling to and from the mills, in the form of footpaths constructed on all thoroughfares in their immediate vicinity. However, in 1839, despite taking the precaution of remaining on one such footpath, Catherine Hoolohan's walk home was endangered by two carts from the mills proceeding at furious speeds in opposite directions. Caught between them, 'her cloak was

¹³⁹ Lord Norbury to the Lord Lieutenant, 21 Jun. 1822 (NAI, CSO/RP/1822/748/2).

¹⁴⁰ For example, see the accounts of an accident at Haughton's corn mill, *Carlow Morning Post*, 11 Oct. 1834; a fatality and an accident requiring amputation at Clarke's mills in Carlow town, *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Mar. and 23 Dec. 1848; and a fatality at Clashganny mill in *Carlow Sentinel*, 12 Jan. 1861.

¹⁴¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 24 Oct. 1857.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 4 Nov. 1837.

torn and she narrowly escaped with her life', and she brought her complaint (unsuccessfully) to petty sessions.¹⁴³

Given the prosperity of the area, it is hardly surprising that there was virtually no emigration from Milford between 1810 and 1840. In 1814, James Conolly had written to John Foster of his fears that changes to the Corn Laws could result in a mass exodus to America: 'Not a man that will go but will act as a decoy & a flock will follow him, for in general Patt is fond of seeing what he calls foreign parts'.¹⁴⁴ However, a combination of favourable legislation along with his partner's management of his business and estate in Carlow ensured that virtually no 'Patt' left Milford between 1810 and 1840 and those who did were generously assisted by Alexander. It was largely members of the Protestant population who emigrated, and those who had already migrated to Milford from elsewhere. Speaking of emigration c.1822, Col. Rochfort estimated the ratio of Protestant/Catholic emigrants at 20:1.¹⁴⁵ The family of William McMurthry is a case in point. Having already moved from Belfast (thus embracing migration as a life improver), McMurthry was disturbed by the poor harvest of 1821 which made him doubt the future for his wife and ten children in Milford. He set his sights on America (eventually settling in Ontario) and applied to his employer for a reference. In 1822, John I wrote in his letter of recommendation that he discharged McMurthry 'at his own request, being determined to go to America where he hopes to be able to provide for a large family better than in this country'.¹⁴⁶ The surviving correspondence shows how Samuel McMurthry was constantly looking across the Atlantic for news and it was in the context of correspondence from relatives in Canada (detailing his uncle Samuel's earnings as a baker in Montreal of 18s per week with board) that made him doubt his prosperity,

¹⁴³ Ibid, 9 Nov. 1839.

¹⁴⁴ Conolly to John Foster, 6 Jan. 1814 (Foster Massereene papers, PRONI, T2519/4/1467).

¹⁴⁵ PP, 1825 (129), *Report from the select committee on the state of Ireland*, p. 439.

¹⁴⁶ Alexander's reference is transcribed at

<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mcmurtriecfr/canada.htm>, accessed 9 Dec. 2013.

immense in local terms, and write to his cousin: 'We must be content with this till better will offer, for it's hard to make anything in Milford'.¹⁴⁷ In contrast, apart from the family of Patrick Sleaven mentioned above, there is only one recorded case of a Catholic emigration from the Milford estate between 1810 and 1840: the family of Charles Fitzpatrick (a total of 5 people) from Ballinabranna in 1828, left behind arrears in excess of £12. Nevertheless, his journey to America was aided by a token £40 from John I for the interest in his farm.¹⁴⁸

Overall, the impression is of a thriving and attractive centre of social activity and commercial prosperity. Milford was already a centre for traffic because of the bridge, the numerous stage-coaches that stopped at Milford cross and the twice-daily Barrow passage-boat that moored at the canal.¹⁴⁹ The emergence of the area as a social hub was enhanced by a regular weekly market and bi-annual fairs, the patent for which was originally granted to John La Touche on 21 April 1796, probably due to requests from Alexander and Conolly.¹⁵⁰ La Touche paid a meagre annual rent to the crown of 13s 4d for the privilege, which was purchased by John Alexander in May 1836 for the bargain price of £16 10s.¹⁵¹ Although he did not become the legal patentee until this date, it is likely that the management and running of the Milford fairs were in Alexander's hands since the original grant—his impeccable reputation in the locality made him an obvious choice for this position of responsibility. The right to hold a fair was also a profitable privilege in itself.¹⁵² Apart from the weekly market, the nominated dates for the fairs were 3 May and 7 November, which became highly anticipated occasions on the social

¹⁴⁷ Samuel McMurthry to John McMurthry, 5 Mar. 1841 (McMurthry letters, Clarington Museum and archives).

¹⁴⁸ Milford rental, 1828 (APMH); PP, 1836 (35–42), *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Supplement to appendix (F) for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 43.

¹⁴⁹ *Finn's Leinster Journal*, 21 Aug. 1801.

¹⁵⁰ PP, 1852–3 (1674), *Report of the commissioners appointed to inquire into the state of the fairs and markets in Ireland*, pp 63–4. There were 22 fairs in operation in Carlow in 1852. Patrick J. O'Connor, *Fairs and markets of Ireland: a cultural geography* (Limerick, n.d. {2003?}), p. 65.

¹⁵¹ PP, 1837 (536), *Fourteenth report of the commissioner of his majesty's woods, forests, land revenues ...*, p. 30.

¹⁵² Johnston-Liik, *History of the Irish parliament*, vol. i, p. 379.

and commercial calendar of the locality.¹⁵³ It is likely that Milford became a specialist grain fair but all produce was catered for with sideshow entertainments and opportunities for drinking and social interaction, as was the national norm.¹⁵⁴ The increased footfall to the area would have lent Milford a carnival air and the high spirits engendered, often fuelled by alcohol, had the potential to spill over into violent behaviour.¹⁵⁵ Alexander was well aware of the possibilities of danger and unruliness at such gatherings. While attending the renowned cattle fair in Leighlinbridge in 1819, his horse was charged and savagely gored by a free-roaming bull as he rode through the streets. 'Mr Alexander had a most providential escape by possessing presence of mind to throw himself off his horse at the moment', the local newspaper reported.¹⁵⁶ The incident was presented as a cautionary tale for safety at such events with the implication that the loss of John I would have been a catastrophic event for the locality.

Apart from drinking and attending fairs, the Milford population enjoyed cock-fighting (usually in a local public house) and games of illegal road bowling known as 'bullets'.¹⁵⁷ There were also Sunday dances and hurling matches although these were disapproved of by an official at the Sunday school attached to Cloydagh Protestant church, who reported in 1821 that 'the Sunday is now much more strictly observed than formerly. Dances and hurling matches are driven into remote corners, and none but the very dregs of the people attend them'.¹⁵⁸ The mills themselves were also a huge centre of socialisation for the local people (providing opportunities for conversation, bartering, the oral reading of

¹⁵³ References to Milford fair first appear in *Watson's Gentlemen's and Citizen's almanac* (Dublin, 1798), p. 170.

¹⁵⁴ Johnston-Liik, *History of the Irish parliament*, vol. i, pp 377-8.

¹⁵⁵ On typical violence at Carlow fairs, see magistrate Robert Cornwall to his uncle Samuel Faulkner, 5 Jul. 1790 (Faulkner papers, NLI, p.3500).

¹⁵⁶ *Carlow Morning Post*, 17 May 1819.

¹⁵⁷ For cock-fighting see the case of John Alexander's coachman, John Hart who was assaulted on his return from a cock-fight in Dargan's public house in Tomard in 1836, *Leinster Independent*, 9 Jul. 1836. For road bowling, see *Carlow Morning Post*, 13 Aug. 1818 and a case brought by Sergeant O'Sullivan of Milford police barracks in *Carlow Post*, 1 Jul. 1865.

¹⁵⁸ *The eleventh report of the Sunday school society of Ireland* (Dublin, 1821), p. 48.

newspapers etc.) if William Carleton's stories of such establishments are to be credited.¹⁵⁹ That author may have had some personal knowledge of the works at Milford and certainly would have been aware of their prowess given his employment as a teacher at a Protestant school in Carlow in 1824 — the year John Alexander II served as High Sheriff for the county.¹⁶⁰ Carleton claimed that a mill was the focus of social interaction in a rural community and credited the miller (in our case, Alexander, and increasingly his mill managers, as the business prospered) with important social functions of bolstering and entertaining his suppliers:

His business is always associated with a merry and festive spirit. The conveyance of a *meldre* or *kilncast* of grain to be ground, is among the people a kind of holiday labour, inasmuch as it is always accompanied with more or less of conviviality. [...] A country mill in Ireland — and we presume everywhere else — was always the scene of much fun, bustle, and drollery. All the news and scandal of the parish were generally discussed in it — the miller himself, however, for prudent reasons, always making it a point to defend the absent, whenever they happened to be ill-spoken of. [...] No man ever thought of going to the mill without money in his pocket.¹⁶¹

The mill-yards at Milford would certainly have been very busy places and, even if strict application to work was expected, the opportunities for social interaction were myriad.

The early morning was an especially busy time for human traffic in the mill yard with a large sector of the community gathering there around 8 o'clock, according to a farmer from Leighlinbridge: 'That was the hour that the road was most populous, the friends of the workmen at Milford being in the habit of going with their breakfasts to the mill'.¹⁶²

We know that the mills were also a gathering point for local children, probably drawn in by the heat and the company. When the artist William Harvey visited the flour mill with the Halls in 1840, he was struck by a group of four children with ruddy complexions

¹⁵⁹ In August 1830, Horace Rochfort claimed that all the peasantry of the locality 'are readers of newspapers, or hear them read by others', *Carlow Morning Post*, 16 Aug. 1830.

¹⁶⁰ David J. O'Donoghue, *The life of William Carleton, being his autobiography and letters, and an account of his life and writings from the point the autobiography breaks off*, 2 vols. (London, 1896), vol. i, pp 288-9. For Carleton's presence in Carlow in 1824, see T.P. O'Neill, 'William Carleton in Carlow', in *Carlow past and present* (1996), vol. 1, no. 5, p. 170.

¹⁶¹ William Carleton, 'The Miller of Mohill' in *The Illustrated Dublin Journal*, 7 Sep. 1861, pp 1-2.

¹⁶² *Carlow Sentinel*, 27 Jul. 1850.

stoking a fire in a large grate (well-dressed but all barefoot) and sketched the scene to illustrate their text (see Fig. 4.2 below).¹⁶³

Criminal activity was far from commonplace, apart from regular highway robberies near Milford crossroads which ran through Clochrisc on the eastern extreme of the estate. Regarded as 'a dangerous part of the road' for human and commercial traffic, it bore all the stage coaches from the capital to Kilkenny, Waterford and Cork and was the scene of an attempted rape in 1828.¹⁶⁴ Alexander himself was the victim of only two recorded crimes between 1810 and 1830. The first was an opportunistic burglary at his storehouse at the Quay in Carlow town in January of 1819, when the office was ransacked and £8

Fig. 4.2 'Peasant girl of Carlow': William Harvey's sketch of a group of children around a grate in Strongstream mill, Milford, 1841¹⁶⁵



¹⁶³ Hall's *Ireland*, vol. i, p. xii and p. 407.

¹⁶⁴ As described by Catherine Stapleton, found guilty of a robbery on Mary Quinn at Milford Cross. See this author, "'A crime unparalleled': The Stapletons at Milford cross, 1828' *Carloviana* (2013), pp 185-95, at p. 186.

¹⁶⁵ By William Harvey, 1840, engraved by Landells, in Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 407. Courtesy of Carlow County Library. This probably illustrates Strongstream oatmeal mill, as the sketch was used to accompany a claim that 'the refuse of the oats, is extensively used, for firing, by the neighbouring peasantry'. Note the bare-footed children, the dog and cat.

was taken.¹⁶⁶ The next robbery took place at Milford flour mill in the early morning of 1 January 1822, and was regarded as a more than ordinary outrage because the culprits were suspected of being employees. In addition, they had obviously hoped to take advantage of the Alexanders' absence from Milford as the family attended the funeral of John Alexander snr in Belfast (who died on December 23 1821).¹⁶⁷ Unlike the previous burglary, the culprits made off with guineas and sovereigns to the tune of £150, but left a large sum in bank-notes behind, probably wary of their traceability.¹⁶⁸ It was an event worthy of county notice, of particular importance as an instance of gross ingratitude to one had come to be considered a generous benefactor and patron of the area and county at large. As the *Carlow Morning Post* reported in a dedicated article, 'it is almost needless to say, that Mr Alexander is one of the last persons in the country against whom any injury should be meditated, and particularly by those to whom he is giving daily bread'. The biblical language gives some indication of Alexander's reputation in Carlow at this time. However, this occurrence was an anomaly, and John I was proud to report to the Poor Inquiry in 1831 that his locality was 'always peaceable'.¹⁶⁹

Alcohol abuse, in a limited form, was perhaps the area's greatest social problem and was seen as the cause of much social and political discontent in the locality. An altercation between police and fair goers at Leighlinbridge in April 1828 was described by the *Carlow Morning Post* as 'one of those riots, which whiskey so frequently generates in this country'.¹⁷⁰ Within Cloydagh parish, there were three licensed public houses, but John Alexander claimed there were 'many dram shops unlicensed' in the area, the Rev Fishbourne estimating it at eight.¹⁷¹ Mrs Nussy Murray ran a shebeen at Milford cross;

¹⁶⁶ *Carlow Morning Post*, 14 Jan., 1 Feb. 1819.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 11 Feb. 1822.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 3 Jan. 1822.

¹⁶⁹ PP, 1836 (35-42), *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Supplement to appendix (E) for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 43.

¹⁷⁰ *Carlow Morning Post*, 10 Apr. 1828.

¹⁷¹ PP, 1836 (35-42), *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Supplement to appendix (F) for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 43.

there was also a public house in Ballinabranna and another in Tomard.¹⁷² In 1834, Alexander reported to a government inquiry that ‘the people are fond of whiskey. [...] Illicit distillation is going on to an enormous extent’.¹⁷³ Whiskey (as opposed to beer) was the popular liquor of choice in Milford and the surrounding country which was attributed by James Conolly (himself a brewer) to the cheap price of spirits.¹⁷⁴ It was a taste that sometimes interfered with the quality of the local population’s clothing and diet according to Rev Fishbourne: ‘they would be better but for their love of whiskey’.¹⁷⁵ By the 1840s, it seems measures were being taken to ensure that alcohol did not affect productivity at Alexander’s works. *John Alexander & Co.* in Belfast enforced a zero-tolerance policy with regard to alcohol consumption, and it is safe to say that a similar rule was in place at Milford by that time. For example, in November of 1841, a worker in the Belfast mills was fined 10s for drunkenness and was obliged to pay his fine to the treasurer of the ‘Ulster Institution for the education of the Deaf, Dumb and Blind’ — the family’s charity of choice for fines of this kind.¹⁷⁶

iv. ‘Extraordinary improvements’: the critics’ choice, 1830-40¹⁷⁷

In April of 1836, Thomas H. Carroll, the editor of the *Carlow Sentinel*, reviewed John Alexander’s efforts as a landlord in the following manner:

He found the place on which he resides a perfect waste — he expended a large fortune in improving the land, painting, erecting buildings, and we believe it requires no proof, after a lapse of thirty years labour, to

¹⁷² This author, ‘“A crime unparalleled”: the Stapletons at Milford Cross, 1828’, p.191; *Carlow Morning Post*, 14 Jul. 1831.

¹⁷³ PP 1835 (17-19) *Fifteenth report of the commissioners of Inquiry into the excise establishment... malt*, p. 216.

¹⁷⁴ PP, 1821 (668), *Report from the select committee to whom the several petitions complaining of the depressed state of the agriculture of the kingdom of Ireland*, p. 313.

¹⁷⁵ PP, 1836 (35-42), *Poor Inquiry (Ireland). Supplement to appendix (D) for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, p. 43.

¹⁷⁶ *Belfast Newsletter*, 16 Nov. 1841. The Alexanders’ groom was charged with the same offence and was fined 5s, *Belfast Newsletter*, 26 Mar. 1844.

¹⁷⁷ Binns, *Miseries and beauties of Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 231.

substantiate our assertion, that MILFORD is one of the most fertile, picturesque, and improved spots that could be pointed out in this or in any other county of the province of Leinster.¹⁷⁸

The emergence of Milford as a powerbase for a wealthy gentry family was directly based on the improvements Alexander made on his landed estate (agricultural, structural and infrastructural) and was inextricably linked to the success of his milling business. As a case study, Milford estate is remarkable in terms of the vision of its architect, undertaking a project from outside the landed system, and the speed with which his vision was realised. It was a merchant's essay in land proprietorship and was governed more by business etiquette and goals than many of his fellow landlords who were preoccupied with status, a fear of falling rentals and an obsession with saving social face. Alexander gradually acquired and embraced the by-products of landed success — a position as a civic leader, the community's esteem, social influence and power, material aggrandizement — but he never coveted them. Free from all of these concerns, Alexander's projects succeeded excellently and his estate became the best reviewed in the county between the years 1830 and 1850. A writer in the *Quarterly Journal of Agriculture* in 1835 was not alone in his admiration of Milford and 'the improvements of its spirited proprietor [exhibit] altogether one of the most interesting features of Carlow scenery'.¹⁷⁹

The degree to which his improvements were admired can be gauged by the accounts of contemporary visitors, travel writers, agriculturists and tourists who found their way to Milford. For decades, Carlow had received poor attention in travel narratives because it possessed little of national interest and was largely considered unworthy of attention in social, political or historical terms. Arthur Young was typical: he identified 'nothing interesting' apart from his interviews with four Carlovians in 1775.¹⁸⁰ In *The Irish*

¹⁷⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Apr. 1836.

¹⁷⁹ *Quarterly journal of agriculture* (London, 1835), vol. v, 'On the agriculture of the county of Carlow', p. 189.

¹⁸⁰ Young, *Tour in Ireland*, vol. i, p. 73.

Tourist (1815), Arthur Atkinson shared the common perception that the county was 'destitute of variety', prior to his arrival.¹⁸¹ In 1836, Emerson Tennent was uninspired by Carlow ('there was nothing to interest us') and four years later, the Halls wrote dismissively that the county would 'require but a limited notice' as it 'possesses no feature of a peculiar, or exclusive, character'.¹⁸² With the development of Milford, however, a succession of writers made a point of highlighting it as the county's most remarkable and encouraging feature, well deserving of notice.

In 1815, Atkinson considered Milford House and the mills as a single enterprise which, 'when inspected in connection with the river and canals, and the bridges which have been erected over them, give the Milford scene a picturesque appearance'.¹⁸³ Twenty years later, the landscape of the estate had changed significantly for the better as the scenic and structural elements came to complement each other to great effect. The seat of manufacture sat comfortably in a beautiful and improved valley: the result was a victory for both the practical and the picturesque. Despite heavy rain on the morning of his visit on 23 September 1836, James Emerson Tennent MP was not only delighted by the mills, but also the surrounding estate and relished the hospitality of his fellow Belfast-man in Milford House. While he was lavish in his compliments of the industrial enterprise at the site, he reserved his greatest praise for Milford landed estate which he regarded as the pride of Carlow: 'No place in the county afforded us more gratification than the grounds and estate of Mr. Alexander, not only from their intrinsic beauty, but from the fact that they are altogether the creation of their intelligent and enterprising proprietor'.¹⁸⁴ As a unit, the mills and the estate created social conditions at Milford which were commended as exceptional:

¹⁸¹ Atkinson, *Irish tourist*, p. 369.

¹⁸² Emerson Tennent, *Letters to the north from a traveller in the south*, p. 16; Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 401.

¹⁸³ Atkinson, *Irish tourist*, p. 373.

¹⁸⁴ Emerson Tennent, *Letters to the north from a traveller in the south*, pp 15-18.

It is now covered, as far as the eye can reach, with luxuriant and well-grown timber, above the foliage of which rises the beautiful mansion and unrivalled mills of their owner. [...] Mr. Alexander's own estate lies contiguous to his residence, and present a most gratifying appearance from its admirable state of cultivation, and the comfort and excellence of its dwellings; [...] nor could there be a better proof, that the people who cultivate the lands must have some encouragement and capital, than the appearance of their fields and crops, which seemed in the very highest order, and perfectly free from weeds, or other results of poverty and neglect.

Tennent confirmed the local opinion of Alexander as a patron and benefactor who led an admiring and loyal population by example and neither the bad weather nor a near-death experience on site (when his carriage was almost pulled into the canal by a stumbling horse) could dampen the author's enthusiasm.¹⁸⁵

In 1840, the Halls wrote about the positive atmosphere in Milford. Along with praise for the plantations and the plant-covered cottages, they wrote that

the aspect of the whole neighbourhood is remarkably cheering, comfortable and encouraging; all given tokens of the improvements that are proceeding under the direction of its enterprising proprietor and his sons. Roads have been opened through several of the adjacent mountains, and cultivation has naturally followed; the hedge-rows in every direction are as neatly and carefully trimmed as those of England.¹⁸⁶

Alexander had cultivated a tenantry of 'sober and industrious occupants' and his estate was presented by the authors as a case study of successful management — the only such case in Carlow — offering 'unquestionable evidence of the vast importance of resident landlords in improving the face of the country and the social condition of the people'.¹⁸⁷

In *The miseries and beauties of Ireland* (1837), Jonathan Binns commented on the 'extraordinary improvements in planting, in the construction of new roads, and in the erection of corn-mills, farm houses and cottages'.¹⁸⁸ The *Parliamentary Gazetteer* of 1844 defined Milford as Carlow's 'singularly interesting locality' and deemed the locality

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 22.

¹⁸⁶ Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 405.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, pp 405-6.

¹⁸⁸ Binns, *Miseries and beauties of Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 231.

worthy of demarcation on its map of Leinster in the following year's edition.¹⁸⁹ In comparison with Leighlinbridge's ruinous storehouses and empty cottages, a contributor to the *Dublin University magazine* in 1855 made reference to Milford as a quasi-tourist attraction worthy of notice— 'what the Americans would term "a delightful location"'.¹⁹⁰ The last word can be left to a reporter from the *Irish Times* who was clearly overwhelmed when he visited in 1862:

The neighbourhood is ornamented with many handsome cottages, erected for the workmen; and also beautifully situated residences for clerks. [...] Milford presents many beautiful charms to the fancy of the pencil or the photographer. The great mills at twilight appear like a palace upon a lake. The castellated style of architecture, with bell-tower and weathercock, the stillness of the great mill-pond, and the beautiful plantations all combine to make one suppose that taste was more the study of the proprietors than hoarding up thousands. But Nature gave her aid too in the ornamentation of Milford; the picturesque and fertile hills surrounding the place, and the gorgeous Barrow, with its numerous tributaries, contribute to make Milford more a Paradise than a place of business.¹⁹¹

Ironically, it was to be the last of Milford's great reviews, prompted as the visit was by the destruction of the flour mill by fire that November, a catastrophe that hastened the inexorable decline of Milford's fortunes.

In 1820, however, Alexander's success and humble personality had endeared him to his social superiors, who could not deny his status as a landed gentleman, even if they wished to guard against encroachers on their privileges. Unlike the Bruens whose pedestal was dogged by rumours of ill-gotten gains, John I could be openly admired as a self-made gentleman of remarkable skill and integrity. As Barnard has commented, 'self-help was admired; helping oneself, not. Contemporaries discriminated between legitimate and unsavoury methods of aggrandizement'.¹⁹² In many ways, Milford was a paragon of industry and a model estate, headed by an exemplary proprietor. It is little wonder that

¹⁸⁹ A. Fullarton, *Parliamentary gazetteer of Ireland* (London, 1844), p. 469; *Parliamentary gazetteer of Ireland* (London, 1845), vol. ii, map of Leinster by 'J. & C. Walker'.

¹⁹⁰ 'J.R. O'F', 'Irish rivers, no. xiii: the Barrow' in *Dublin University magazine*, (Dublin, 1855), vol. xlv, July-December 1855, p. 689.

¹⁹¹ *Irish Times*, 8 Nov. 1862.

¹⁹² Barnard, *New anatomy of Ireland*, p. 49.

the Carlow gentry sat up and took notice of one who attracted such positive reviews and favourable attention for Carlow, which reflected benignly on all their number and made his entrance and entrenchment into their domain all the smoother. An early indication of his rise is the local gentry's response to the robbery at his mill in 1822. It was an offence that demanded solidarity in the ranks of the socially and politically influential. A prominent advertisement in the *Carlow Morning Post* detailed the contributions by 37 local gentlemen to a reward kitty that totalled £600. It included pledges from Alexander's milling competitors, his neighbours, his brother-in-law, his doctor and the local clergy, but also the heads of the leading landed families— Henry Bruen, John Staunton Rochfort, William Burton, William Duckett, even Sir Thomas Butler— all of whom promised £20 each for the detection of the culprits.¹⁹³ With the lines of 'us' and 'them' clearly drawn by the incident, John I was welcomed with sympathy into the club where money talked; the powerbase at Milford was consolidating by the day. On 4 March 1836, the House of Commons was informed of Alexander's prestige and enterprise in a valuable and enabling nod of approval from the county's most powerful gentleman, Henry Bruen, MP:

This I do know of Mr Alexander, that to no man in Ireland is the community more indebted than to him, for the extraordinary improvement he has caused in an extensive district. The most extensive mills, I believe, in Ireland, a handsome residence, fine trees, extensive plantations, strikingly neat and comfortable houses, with a numerous, happy and grateful tenantry, in constant employment, were the results of the endeavours of one of the most public-spirited and munificent men in the empire.¹⁹⁴

This was high praise but it had been hard earned. Between 1828 and 1833, despite his popularity, reputation and wealth, attempts were made to freeze John Alexander out of the corridors of political power as his liberal politics were disapproved of by Carlow's Tory leadership in the wake of Emancipation. Indeed, the only blister on the surface of Milford's development was the increasing political tension as the county fractured along

¹⁹³ *Carlow Morning Post*, 11 Feb. 1822.

¹⁹⁴ *Carlow Sentinel*, 12 Mar. 1836.

religious lines as the 1820s progressed. Religion and politics, heretofore non-issues in the running of Alexander's mills and estate, began to influence matters of policy and completely altered the Alexander *modus operandi*. The isolation from the surrounding Catholic community detectable in the letters of the Protestant McMurthys in the 1830s is symptomatic of the tension and fear visited upon the area at this time when divisions were exacerbated, and landlord/employer was pitted against tenant/employee, culminating in the electoral hurricane of 1835. The deference shown to the Alexanders, born of gratitude and respect for John I, began to be superseded by political animosity. In 1825, when asked by a select committee if the 'the common people' in his neighbourhood were grateful for good treatment from their rulers, Col. John Staunton Rochfort replied prophetically : 'I do not believe there is a people on the face of the earth more sensible of it [...] Very much so, except political causes interfere; they supersede everything'.¹⁹⁵ In this way, having been carefully and laboriously assembled, the Alexander powerbase opened itself up to its first serious assault.

¹⁹⁵ PP 1825 (129), *Report from the select committee on the state of Ireland*, p. 452.

Chapter 5

The Alexanders and liberal politics, 1790-1820

‘There was once a miller and his name was Jack (but not a Union Jack)’.

Carlow Post on John Alexander I, 1855¹

i. An inherited liberalism, 1790-1820

As he amassed his wealth and set about shaping a model landed estate, John Alexander gradually came to enjoy political clout, first on the local stage and increasingly at county level. His gifts to the county at large entitled him to a role in its governance which in turn bolstered the reputation and prestige of all the Milford institutions. His son was groomed to assume and wield this growing political authority, which reached its zenith on his election as MP for Carlow borough in 1853. By that time, the Alexander powerbase was at its strongest, and political office seemed to crown their position among the Carlow gentry. However, this political ascent, which was seventy years in the making, was marred by several controversial hiccups and was remarkable in that the family arrived at a political destination far removed from the position they had set out from. In one generation, the political reputation of the head of the family was transformed from that of ‘a conscientious liberal’ to one of a ‘tyrannical Tory’.²

The Alexander family remained largely outside politics for the first forty years of their tenure in Carlow (1784-1824), and it is no coincidence that this was the period in which they enjoyed their greatest popularity. John I brought a liberal egalitarianism with him to Milford which invited social harmony and accord. Politically, his early years in Carlow

¹ *Carlow Post*, 26 May 1855.

² *Carlow Sentinel*, 29 Aug. 1835.

placed him in the popular mind at a far remove from the Toryism so prevalent in Carlow. Looking back on his early years in the county, a correspondent of the Liberal *Carlow Post* newspaper described him fondly as ‘Jack (but not a Union Jack)’.³ Under his influence, despite differences in standards of living, politics and religion, he presided over a largely cohesive social unit at Milford. Coming from the north of Ireland, ‘arguably the most politically radical region anywhere in the British Isles’ in the late eighteenth century according to John Bew, it is hardly surprising that some of the political thinking from that crucible informed his outlook and philosophies in Carlow.⁴ In fact, the socio-political concerns and actions of father and son were almost carbon copies of each other.

Belfast was a centre for enlightened and progressive thinking, a bastion of open-minded liberalism in the late eighteenth century. From the 1770s, John Alexander snr sympathised with the growing dissatisfaction among Catholics and wealthy and influential Presbyterians with their political disenfranchisement and he shared their desire for reform. He partook of what Gerard R. Hall has described as ‘a political tradition in Ulster in which neither nationalism nor unionism was the foremost consideration. [...] Instead, their primary concerns were social and political policies that are best described as liberal’.⁵ His position as the employee and representative of Lord Donegall necessitated political awareness but probably tempered political action with the result that he favoured a cautious, softly-softly approach. While he associated himself openly with the leaders of Belfast liberalism, in private and in public, he was not a radical and seems to have been frightened by such notions. As a moderate, he believed that reform would naturally emerge, as an organic flower rather than the harvest of a revolution. Hall has identified four strands within Ulster liberalism at this stage: Whigs, civic republicans, covenanters

³ *Carlow Post*, 26 May 1855.

⁴ John Bew, *The glory of being Britons: civic unionism in nineteenth-century Belfast* (Dublin, 2009), p. 28.

⁵ Gerald R. Hall, *Ulster liberalism, 1778-1876* (Dublin, 2011), p. 11.

and nascent liberals.⁶ Interestingly, John Alexander appears to have associated himself with and been influenced by the concerns and objectives of all four groups. As an employee of Lord Donegall and intimate of Dr Haliday, he believed in the role of a properly independent aristocracy in a monarchical society as espoused by the Whigs. He also espoused civic republican ideals, actively participating in municipal life (as freeman of the town, grand juror and seneschal) and wanted the democratic voice of the general population to be heard—probably being influenced by his experiences as land agent. His Scottish heritage and business associations made him sympathetic to the Presbyterian grievances of the covenanting tradition. He also partook of the interest of many nascent liberals, feeling a general malaise with the *status quo*, and was open to the enlightenment ideals expressed in a multitude of contemporary pamphlets and newspapers. He was friendly with perhaps this arm's leading light, Dr William Drennan, who proved instrumental in the founding of the Belfast Society of United Irishmen in 1791.⁷

However, Alexander never committed himself openly or publicly to any camp. We only find his name attached to defensive clarifications and qualifications, and he appears to have been governed by a fear that his liberal conscience would be manipulated by seditious hands. When the Volunteers at the Dungannon convention passed resolutions on 15 February 1782 rejecting the claim of the British parliament to legislate for Ireland and called for a relaxation of laws against Catholics,⁸ Alexander was among a group of 42 local gentlemen who took issue with the aggressive language of overt separatism in which they were delivered.⁹ Similarly, while associating with Alexander Haliday, Samuel McTier and Henry Joy he was not amongst the early members of Haliday's Northern

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Ian MacBride, 'William Drennan and the dissenting tradition' in David Dickson, Dáire Keogh and Kevin Whelan (eds.), *The United Irishmen: republicanism, radicalism and rebellion* (Dublin, 1993), pp 49-61, at p. 49.

⁸ R.B. MacDowell, 'Colonial nationalism, 1760-82' in *A new history of Ireland iv*, pp 196-235, at p. 230.

⁹ [Henry Joy], *Historical recollections relative to the town of Belfast: from the earliest period to the union with Great Britain* (Belfast, 1817), p. 223.

Whig Club, established in 1790, and there is no record of any subsequent participation.¹⁰ In January 1792, at a meeting of Belfast citizens who assembled to consider petitioning parliament on behalf of the Catholics, Alexander was wary of the radicals in the audience who demanded that ‘the restoration of all rights to the Roman Catholics should be immediate and unlimited’.¹¹ Preferring to stand with those whom MacDowell has termed ‘the gradualists in Belfast’ who favoured progressive rather than immediate reform, Alexander signed a memorial urging change ‘from time to time and as speedily as the circumstances of the country and the general welfare of the whole kingdom will permit’.¹² He considered violence and social upheaval as evils and was hugely unnerved by the rate and demand for change in his society. Nevertheless, his involvement in reform circles and his association with known radicals has led some modern historians to mistakenly identify him as the John Alexander who hosted a meeting of United Irishmen in his home in April 1797.¹³ The house was raided by Fencibles, papers were seized and 21 people were arrested. It was an event that troubled Wolfe Tone, and T.W. Moody, R.B. McDowell and C.J. Woods wrongly identify the host as John Alexander snr.¹⁴ The actual John Alexander in question was an innkeeper and United Irishman who lived at Peter’s Hill in the town.¹⁵

Education was one area in which Alexander expressed his liberal agenda without apology. In the years after the act of union, education was embraced by Belfast’s liberals (including former radicals) as a fundamental element of a socio-political agenda, ‘where

¹⁰ Alexander’s name does not appear on the list of the original members of the club, [Joy], *Historical recollections relative to the town of Belfast*, pp 341-2.

¹¹ R.B. MacDowell, ‘The age of the United Irishmen: reform and reaction, 1789-94’ in *A new history of Ireland iv*, pp 289-338, at p. 321.

¹² John Lawless, *The Belfast politics enlarged; being a compendium of the political history of Ireland for the last forty years* (Belfast, 1818), p. 314.

¹³ [Henry Joy], *Historical recollections relative to the town of Belfast*, p. 462, 467; Mary McNeill, *The life and times of Mary Anne McCracken* (Dublin, 1960), pp 117-118.

¹⁴ T.W. Moody, R.B. McDowell, C.J. Woods (eds.), *The writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone, 1763-98* (Oxford, 2007), vol. iii, p. 75. In the index, they list him as ‘Alexander, John (1736-1821)’, the birth and death dates of our subject, vol. iii, p. 545.

¹⁵ *Belfast Newsletter*, 14-17 Apr. 1797.

they hoped to direct their energies which had been turned aside by religious and political rancour into the channel of a common purpose of enlightenment', according to John Jamieson.¹⁶ The plan for the Belfast Academical Institution was first mooted at a public meeting in May of 1806 and was given the royal assent in 1810.¹⁷ No religious tests were required of its students and its reputation as a pioneer and bastion of mixed, enlightened education soon prospered; according to Bew, 'the Belfast Academical Institution provided an incubated atmosphere for the local liberal heritage'.¹⁸ John Alexander was in the thick of this new initiative. He was one of 66 early subscribers to the Institution and was considered a 'proprietor' (those who had subscribed £22 15s, and who retained the right to elect the Institution's administrative officers from among their number). He played a central role in the school's hierarchy of management and was appointed one of its four vice-presidents (along with the Marquis of Downshire, the Hon. John O'Neill and Cunningham Greg) in July 1812.¹⁹ He retained this position for four consecutive years, and was listed as the most senior vice-president on his re-appointment in July 1815.²⁰ Interestingly, William Drennan served as a 'visitor' in the school's management structure for much of Alexander's tenure.

If Alexander snr's liberal politics were not always obvious in life, they were certainly advertised by the plans he made for his death, where he retained his link with Drennan and his ideologies. At some point before 1819, he bought two plots in Clifton Street cemetery, opened by the Belfast Charitable Society in 1795, adjacent to its poorhouse.²¹ It was here he chose to be buried, sharing the cemetery with mass graves, the diseased and destitute of Belfast society. It was an act of modesty that paid tribute to social

¹⁶ John Jamieson, *The history of the Royal Belfast Academical Institution 1810-1960* (Belfast, 1959), p. 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp 1, 223.

¹⁸ Bew, *Glory of being Britons*, p. 12.

¹⁹ PP 1816 (389), *Papers relating to the Belfast Academical institution*, p. 3.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 4.

²¹ Joe Baker, *Clifton Street cemetery: north Belfast's historic gem* [n.d.], and *Tour of Clifton street cemetery* [n.d.] available at <http://www.cliftonstreetcemetery.com/>, accessed 12 July 2013.

inclusion and the graves of some of his associates, including Joy, Haliday and Drennan are within a short walking distance of his own.²²

ii. John Alexander I and the rebellion of 1798 in Carlow

John I brought his father's liberal sentiments with him to Carlow in 1784. In his first forty years in the county, he was never swayed by party politics or made judgements based on religious or political persuasion and became renowned as an individual of 'professed liberal opinions'.²³ His commercial partnership with the Catholic Conolly advertised an open-mindedness and willingness to treat with all.²⁴ Alexander created an inclusive community at Milford where, according to his tenants, he planted himself in 'the ranks of the people (with whom he held in common, at that time, the principles of civil and religious liberty, and equal justice to all)'.²⁵ The savagery of the 1798 rebellion in Carlow tested him politically and personally, and like his father, he attempted to resist the pull of the contending parties and remain outside the maelstrom.

The rebellion was all the more disruptive when one considers the excellent relations which appear to have been existed between Catholics and Protestants in the county during the early 1780s. According to Farrell, 'there was no part of Ireland where a better feeling of friendship existed between both Catholics and Protestants, nor no part where greater numbers of both were blood relations'.²⁶ That the Catholic population was in the majority

²² On the maintenance of this plot by John Alexander's grandson, see John Alexander II to Fanny Alexander, 14 Apr. 1882 (LB3, APMH).

²³ *Carlow Morning Post*, 13 Dec. 1834.

²⁴ Conolly was a loyalist. His eldest son James, served in the 18th Light Dragoons under Lieutenant Colonel Charles Stewart, half-brother of Viscount Castlereagh, an introduction which Conolly snr had arranged through John Foster. Conolly to Foster, 1 Jul. 1807 (PRONI, T2519/4/376), Conolly to Foster, ? Jul. 1807 (PRONI, T2519/4/382), Conolly to Foster, 20 Jan. 1809 (PRONI, D562/11096).

²⁵ *A statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow*, p. 35.

²⁶ Farrell, *Carlow in '98*, p. 49.

in the county was clear, perhaps in as great a ratio as 10:1.²⁷ Another commentator noted the ‘many persons of considerable property [...] of liberal minds’ in the county’.²⁸ However, with the outbreak of the French revolution, the establishment of a Catholic college in Carlow town and concessions to the Catholics granted by Langrishe’s relief bill of 1792, Protestant confidence was unsettled and they proved the genesis of what Duggan, in her remarkable study of the period, terms ‘a garrison mentality’: what we have we will hold.²⁹ The thought that Catholics might receive the franchise—a measure conceded in 1793—was extremely worrying. In Clogrennane, the Rochforts were greatly disturbed by such developments. As early as September 1792, Col. John Staunton Rochfort (1764-1844) sat on a committee of Carlow gentlemen to take Catholic ‘mistrust and jealousy’ into consideration, ‘where none ought in reason or justice to exist’.³⁰ The gentry’s aggressive attitude and growing fears can be seen in the committee’s most significant resolution:

That we will resist by every means in our power any measure that shall directly or indirectly tend to give the Roman Catholics any influence over the Legislative Body, as we are fully convinced was any share whatever of the elective franchise to be imparted to them, the Protestant establishment in Church and State would be totally subverted.

By December, this unrest had begun to affect trade as reported by John Alexander’s contact at Castletown, Phil Kennedy:

The minds of the people are in a ferment on acct. of the alarm is spread of a Revolution, but I hope it will attend to no ill consequence more than a reformation in parliament, which many think will be effected by the condescension of the present ruling power, in the interim it hurts trade as no credit will be given.³¹

However, political tension not only impacted John Alexander’s ledgers. In June of 1793, as a county militia was being formed by Henry Bruen, a group of radical activists made

²⁷ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 599.

²⁸ ‘Beau Myrtle’ in 1790 quoted by Malcomson, *Carlow parliamentary roll*, p. 25.

²⁹ Duggan, ‘County Carlow: 1791-1801’, p. 44.

³⁰ *Freeman’s Journal*, 27 Sep. 1792.

³¹ Phil Kennedy to Samuel Faulkner, 21 Dec. 1792 (Faulkner papers, NLI, p.3500).

their way to Alexander's cottage at Milford to seize arms —the first quasi-political incident which highlighted his differences with his workforce (social, religious and financial). Phil Kennedy reported on 17 June that the 'the people have taken the arms from most of their neighbouring gentleman. They visited Mr Roche [Nicholas Greene Roche of Fonhill, between Clogrennane and Milford] and Mr Alexander but I hope they soon will be quelled. The gentlemen is [sic] to interfere and cause them to give up their arms, if not the army will march out tomorrow and destroy them'.³² Although we do not possess evidence of John I's reaction to this incident, it is clear that it greatly alarmed him as he demonstrated a great terror of arms raids for the rest of his life.³³ With the outbreak of war with France in 1793, the gentry gladly accepted the idea of forming local militias, as a successor to the Volunteer movement. The Cloydagh & Killeslin Yeomanry was established as early as 31 October 1796, led by Rochfort.³⁴ The unit was comprised of infantry and a cavalry corps headed by his younger brother, Captain (and Rev) Robert Rochfort (1775-1811), who was to become infamous in the district over the following decade for his sectarian violence and militancy, which earned him the sobriquet 'the slashing parson'.³⁵

Although it is likely that William Farrell exaggerated when he claimed the United Irishmen 'spread in every direction like wild-fire', the organisation took a firm, if not omnipresent hold in the county.³⁶ The society made definite strides close to John Alexander's home territory. Leighlinbridge, only four miles from Milford, became a hotbed of United Irish activity. Croppy haircuts were common, late-night meetings by the Barrow were noticed, as were sprigs of trees in the windows of homes in the area— a

³² Phil Kennedy to Samuel Faulkner, 17 Jun. 1793 (Faulkner papers, PRONI, MIC 21/2).

³³ See below, pp 226-8.

³⁴ Duggan, 'County Carlow: 1791-1801', appendix O, p. xxxvii.

³⁵ See this author, 'The "slashing parson" of 1798: the life & death of Rev Robert Rochfort of Clogrennane, Co. Carlow, 1775-1811', *Carloviana* (2012), pp 117-39.

³⁶ Farrell, *Carlow in 98*, p. 30.

symbol of solidarity with the United Irishmen.³⁷ By late 1797, according to David

‘Hibernicus’ Byrne, Leighlinbridge was

a very disturbed neighbourhood, where patrols of the soldiery and parties of armed peasantry, not as yet denominated *rebels*, alternately prowled by night, doing so much mischief that the friends of each party suffered in turn. Murders, house-burning, imprisonment, whipping, carrying-off cattle and other property became so frequent [...].³⁸

On 9 September 1797, the local landlord, attorney, magistrate and MP (for Enniscorthy), Robert Cornwall estimated that there were ‘not less than four hundred’ sworn United Irishmen—‘these deluded people’—in the area between Leighlinbridge and his home in Myshall.³⁹ The following month, Col. Rochfort warned chief secretary Thomas Pelham that ‘if there are not troops stationed immediately at Leighlinbridge [...] that part of the county Carlow on the west side of the river Barrow will be united & be forced to join the United Men’.⁴⁰ This centre of activity included the Alexander property at Milford.

In his assessment of events in counties Kildare, Wicklow and Wexford in late 1797, L.M. Cullen has argued that ‘the situation was much uglier in Carlow’.⁴¹ The murder of William Bennett (a popular gentlemen farmer with a loyal pedigree, who had openly expressed disapproval of the United Irish movement) in Leighlinbridge in October 1797 precipitated a premature attempt at ‘a general uprising’ in the locality from 26 October to 3 November.⁴² In effect, a week-long celebration took place in the village, led by a swelling group of United Irishmen who seized the market house and directed a series of arms raids in the locality.⁴³ It was at this point that the rulers of the county sought refuge in solidarity and ignored the divisions inherent in party politics. The prosecution of

³⁷ Martin Nevin, *The sprig in the window: 1798 in the Leighlin area* (Carlow, 1998), p. v and p.2.

³⁸ Byrne, *Hibernicus*, p. 38. The identity of the author as David Byrne of Leighlinbridge, Co. Carlow, has been conclusively established by Edward J. O’Day, in ‘From Carlow royalist to Kentucky republican: the emigration odyssey of David Byrne, 1797-1827’ in *Carloviana* (1996), pp 31-35.

³⁹ Cornwall to Pelham, 9 Sep. 1797 (RP, NAI, 620/34/23).

⁴⁰ Rochfort to Pelham, 2 Nov. 1797 (RP, NAI, 620/33/8).

⁴¹ L.M. Cullen, ‘Politics and rebellion: Wicklow in the 1790s’ in Ken Hannigan and William Nolan (eds.), *Wicklow: history and society* (Dublin, 1994), pp 411-501, at p. 419.

⁴² This author, ‘Prelude to rebellion: the murder of William Bennett in 1797 and Leighlinbridge’s “Ten Day Republic”’ in *Carloviana* (2015), no. 63, pp 161-77.

⁴³ *Ibid*, pp 171-2.

sedition in the county became a gentry-driven campaign which exacerbated religious divisions and polarised allegiances.⁴⁴ Anyone seeking the middle ground would make themselves suspect to the two main camps.

By January of 1798, fear and paranoia were palpable in Milford, and the vicinity of Clogrennane Lodge resembled a battle ground, where only one side had taken the field. The Rochforts utilised the Cloydagh & Killeshin Yeomanry like a private defence force, and had some of them on active guard duty after dark outside their demesne, while a regiment of the Ninth Dragoons from Carlow town was also regularly assigned to guard duty at Clogrennane.⁴⁵ Such apparently exorbitant defensive measures were not entirely unwarranted. On 19 January 1798, Col. Rochfort informed government that 'a yeoman of mine' was shot at on the road between Leighlinbridge and Milford when he was on his way to guard at Clogrennane between five and six o' clock in the evening.⁴⁶ Rochfort and his younger brother viewed the United Irish movement as an essentially Catholic conspiracy, as he alleged in a letter to Pelham in October of 1797.⁴⁷ However, by March of 1798, the Rochforts became a lot more self-assured because of their involvement in the greatest threat to United Irish activity in the county: the Orange Order. The Rochforts were intimately involved in the earliest creation of Orange Grand Lodges at county level in March 1798: Lodge 414 was established in Clogrennane and Robert Rochfort was appointed as Grand Master of the county.⁴⁸ By late spring, there were 10 Orange lodges in the county.⁴⁹ In a very short space of time, Orangeism, Protestantism and Oppression became synonymous concepts in the county in the minds of the Catholic population and fears of Orange massacres were used as spurs to encourage enrolment into the United

⁴⁴ Duggan, 'County Carlow 1791-1801', p. 88-92.

⁴⁵ 'The examinations of Robert Rochfort', 3 Apr. 1798 (RP, NAI, 620/36/224).

⁴⁶ Rochfort to Edward Cooke, 19 Jan. 1798 (RP, NAI, 620/35/51).

⁴⁷ Rochfort to Pelham, 26 Nov. 1797 (RP, NAI, 620/33/93).

⁴⁸ This author, 'The "slashing parson" of 1798', pp 135-36.

⁴⁹ Pádraig Ó Snodaigh, 'Ceatharlach i 1798 — nua amharc ar na staraithe' in *Carlow: history and society*, pp 587-611, at p. 606.

Irish ranks.⁵⁰ Trailing a notable and vicious sectarianism in its wake, the arrival of the Orange factor into Carlow's volatile crucible proved a catalyst which brought the disgruntled elements of society into open rebellion from fear of apparently imminent Orange brutality.⁵¹ With Cornwall, the Rochforts contributed the largest block of correspondence from Leinster to Dublin Castle in 1798, and their promotion of Orangeism certainly contributed to Carlow's unique status as the only Leinster county to be proclaimed in its entirety, on 15 November 1797.⁵² Indeed, in early June, the under-secretary William Elliot lamented to his superior Thomas Pelham that the rebellion in Leinster 'has certainly assumed a strong religious spirit and I cannot help suspecting that the Orange associations, which, you will recollect, were formed and promoted by Colonel Rochfort and some other gentlemen in the counties of Wexford and Carlow, operated very mischievously'.⁵³

However, there were some exceptions in the ranks of 'gentlemen' who chose to remain outside the Order. John Alexander was operating in the immediate neighbourhood of this activity and was surely a visitor to Clogrennane Lodge at this point. As local society became polarised along sectarian and political lines, he tried to keep his head down and remain aloof —no less dangerous an option than actively taking a side. As Duggan has argued, 'in a revolutionary era it is always the liberal who is caught on the wrong foot, for compromise is of his very essence and thus he finds himself accepted by neither reactionary nor radical —or claimed by both at once as a supporter of their doctrine'.⁵⁴ Byrne reported the contemporary attitude that 'there was no such thing as neutrality allowed of in the kingdom, the government maxim then being, "He that is not for us is

⁵⁰ Duggan, 'County Carlow: 1791-1801', pp 125-43.

⁵¹ Ibid, see chapter vi and p. 231; Cullen, 'Wicklow in the 1790s', p. 413.

⁵² Duggan, 'County Carlow 1791-1801', p. 91; Cullen, 'Wicklow in the 1790s', p. 445.

⁵³ Gregory to Pelham, 3 June 1798, in John T. Gilbert, *Documents relating to Ireland, 1795-1804* (Dublin, 1893), pp 125-6.

⁵⁴ Duggan, 'County Carlow, 1791-1801', p. 44.

against us””.⁵⁵ Alexander joined neither the militia nor the yeomanry, which was surely regarded with great suspicion by Rev Rochfort and Cornwall who believed that gentlemen who did not speak or act out were colluding with sedition.⁵⁶ His decision not to row in with his caste, coupled with his Belfast background would have added to their misgivings at a time when seditious pamphlets printed in Belfast had been confiscated in the county and northern United Irishmen had come recruiting.⁵⁷ Had Alexander’s father’s associations with known radicals in Belfast been made public, he may well have warranted more aggressive attention from Rev Rochfort and other militants on the loyalist side.

In addition, the business at Milford was essentially a Catholic institution, and the promotion of the Orange Order in the area in early 1798 inevitably made this fact a political statement—all the more potent when Alexander did not join the Order. His daily work brought him into intimate contact with those very parties which Rochfort considered most recalcitrant and subversive, and some of Alexander’s neighbours and employees in the mills were suspected of being United Irishmen.⁵⁸ In March of 1798, George Nowlan of Ballinabranna stood trial on a charge of bearing arms and taking the oath of the United Irishmen.⁵⁹ His later actions and gestures prove that John I was hugely supportive of his Catholic neighbours and future tenants and was very sympathetic to their grievances; the high ideals of the United Irishmen would have met his approval. On the other hand, Alexander’s Protestantism was his key saving grace and he was corresponding with the leading figures on the loyalist side including Cornwall, John Staunton Rochfort (both of whom had supported infrastructural developments at Milford), William Burton of Burton Hall and Sir Richard Butler. His landlord, John La Touche also exerted himself in the

⁵⁵ Byrne, *Hibernicus*, p. 38.

⁵⁶ See Cornwall to Pelham, 22 Oct. 1797 (Rebellion papers, NAI, 620/34/24).

⁵⁷ Duggan, ‘County Carlow 1791-1801’, pp 82-3.

⁵⁸ *Irish Times*, 8 Nov. 1862.

⁵⁹ ‘Pleas of the Crown at a general assizes’, 26 Mar. 1798, p. 23 (Carlow County Archives, P2 0052).

loyalist cause in the yeomanry of co. Kildare.⁶⁰ Milford mills were patronised by many senior members of the military and yeomanry.⁶¹ Alexander was very discreet in his behaviour, made no pronouncements either way and was very successful in retaining the trust of both camps. He could not avoid on-going intercourse with activists on both sides and his path was eased by his affability, popularity and good character which simultaneously endeared him to the United Irishmen and acted as bulwarks against loyalist bullying, which is probably where he felt the most pressure at this time.

Remarkably and courageously, he pursued independence in the neighbourhood of perhaps the most diligent, active and aggressive Orange centre in the province. Abstentionism was hazardous at a time when one's birth and religion conferred badges of identity which were seized upon as political shorthand. A deeper understanding of the dangers facing Alexander and the fraught tightrope he was obliged to tread can be seen in a study of the fate of Sir Edward Crosbie of Viewmount.⁶² Professing an attitude of independence, Crosbie's personal troubles with an influential landowning family (which led to a duel with one of the Burtons in early 1798), his refusal to join the Orange Order and his liberal acts of generosity to the inmates of Carlow gaol in early 1798 made him unpopular with many of the local gentry and military at a time of crisis.⁶³ After his controversial execution for supposed collusion with the Carlow rebels in June of 1798, his family claimed that 'it is a remarkable circumstance, in a country where every man belonged to some club or society, that he was *not* a member of *any club whatever*'.⁶⁴ Undoubtedly, John Alexander was conspicuous in the same regard and shared with Crosbie what Duggan has called 'a reputation for liberal principles —sentiments then totally out of

⁶⁰ McGinley, *La Touche family in Ireland*, p. 210-11.

⁶¹ See list of customers on rear inside cover, Letterbook index of John Alexander I, 1800 (APMH).

⁶² See Duggan, 'County Carlow: 1791-1801', pp 171-185, and *An accurate and impartial narrative of the apprehension, trial & execution on the 5th of June 1798 of Sir Edward William Crosbie, bart.* (London, 1801).

⁶³ *An accurate and impartial narrative... Sir Edward William Crosbie, bart*, pp 40, 60 and 82-3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 40.

season'.⁶⁵ The fact that Alexander was not as yet a major landowner certainly brought him outside the immediate radar of the county's notorious detectors of sedition. While Crosbie was a baronet, John Alexander was as yet only a prosperous miller. He was almost certainly under surveillance but of too little consequence socially to merit making an example of. His non-committal to militant Protestantism was not as much of a *faux pas* as it would have been for a landed proprietor, and therefore, a cog in the wheel of the Protestant Ascendancy.

He had clearly decided not to be drawn into politics in an attempt to protect his business, his relationships in the community and his conscience. In placing himself in this religious-political middle ground, he probably resented the fact that his Protestantism could set him at political odds with many of his associates and employees, and that his liberalism might engage the antipathies of the traditional rulers of the county. He clearly did not speak out against the United Irish movement and suffer the fate of men like Cole of Moneybeg (who had sworn evidence against United Irishmen) or Bennett of Leighlinbridge who were both murdered by rebels in late 1797. Apart from the arms raid on his cottage in 1793, there is no evidence of rebellious activity against Alexander unlike many on the loyalist side, notably Cornwall and the Rochforts who were the targets of assassination plans.⁶⁶ Specifically, his business was not targeted and ultimately benefitted from the rebellion—an irony which was probably not lost on Alexander. Milford mills escaped the fate of premises like the Lodge Mills (Milford's strongest competitor in the county in the 1790s) which were burned to the ground by vengeful rebels in June of 1798 because of the Mercer family's aggressive loyalism.⁶⁷ Neither were they subjected to the wholesale looting by loyalist forces which came to typify their behaviour in

⁶⁵ Duggan, 'County Carlow: 1791-1801', p.170.

⁶⁶ Cornwall to Pelham, 22 Oct. 1797 (RP, NAI, 620/34/24). For Rochfort see Farrell, *Carlow in '98*, p. 146.

⁶⁷ Byrne, *Hibernicus*, pp 52-3. Richard Mercer snr. (d. 1787) had been a captain in the Royal Dragoons, *Freeman's Journal*, 25 Mar. 1766 and 3 Apr. 1787. The Lodge mills had been re-built by 1806. For the plundering of maltster Michael O'Keeffe's premises by troops, see Farrell, *Carlow in '98*, p. 128.

Leighlinbridge during the trials and executions of May and June 1798.⁶⁸ In terms of loyalism, Alexander remained resolutely faithful to King and government throughout his life, but he refused to condone the sectarianism at the heart of the Orange agenda. He was also fearful of the violence at the heart of the Rochfort/Cornwall alliance and found the militancy of the local militias and yeomanry distasteful and socially divisive. Similarly, although he supported political reform, he was no radical and was just as opposed to the United Irish move towards physical force as the development of Orange extremism. Nevertheless, Alexander's positive reputation with the rebel forces can be seen in their view that Milford was safe territory at this time. Local folklore had it that just two days after the battle of Vinegar Hill on 21 June, the retreating rebels led by Fr John Murphy passed through Alexander's estate having escaped through the Scullogue Gap on their way to Castlecomer, thereby avoiding Leighlinbridge and Carlow. The discovery of three skeletons in a shallow grave close to the Alexander quarry in 1864 was immediately explained by local recollections that 'a party of insurgents beat a rather hasty retreat that way' in 1798.⁶⁹

With Orange rumours whipping the demoralised United Irishmen into a frenzy, they launched an ill-fated, and easily-quashed attack on Carlow town on the night of 23 May 1798, when 630 people were said to have been killed.⁷⁰ It was at this point, when peaceful society stood at the abyss, that events overtook Alexander and demanded that he move from his ostensibly neutral position and involve himself on the side of the established authorities. It was a pattern which he would repeat many times over the succeeding decades. In times of peace, he employed liberal and optimistic policies which encouraged Catholic self-determination through peaceful channels. However, he was terrified of violence and for the sake of his family, his property and for the protection of

⁶⁸ Farrell, *Carlow in '98*, p. 128.

⁶⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 12 Nov. 1864. See also the map of the rebels' retreat in Mick Kinsella, Conor Murphy and Edward N. Moran (eds.), *Kilcumney in '98: its origins, aftermath & legacy* (Kilkenny, 1998), facing p.1.

⁷⁰ Duggan, 'County Carlow: 1791-1801', p. 151.

the people from self-harm, he appealed to the governing authorities (typically seeking military reinforcements) to restore the *status quo*. In the immediate aftermath of the battle of Carlow, no volunteers could be found to deliver a critical despatch to Dublin. For the greater public good, Alexander volunteered his skills as a horseman to deliver the communication to the Lord Lieutenant in Dublin Castle.⁷¹ It was regarded as a highly ‘dangerous expedition’ which required him to ride through the rebel camp at Castledermot—a feat which merited the thanks of the grand jury at the Summer assizes for his apparent ‘zeal and efficiency in upholding the law’.⁷² Despite this fact and false reports in subsequent decades that he was a member of Sir Richard Butler’s yeomanry corps, Alexander was far from a zealous loyalist.⁷³ He desperately wanted to pour oil on troubled waters, and only the government and its forces had the capacity to do this effectively. The argument against Alexander being an active opponent of the rebel forces is supported by the second of his critical actions in the wake of the battle of Carlow.

As trials and executions got underway in Leighlinbridge, a thrill of vindication was evident among the regular military and yeomanry in the village.⁷⁴ It was in such triumphant spirits that a troop of the King’s 9th Dragoons rode towards Milford on a fine day in June 1798. The party was probably headed by the notorious Cornet Launcelot Lowther, who was ‘the chief actor at all the floggings and hangings and shootings in Leighlin Bridge and was so violent in his temper that his name was a terror in town and country’, according to Farrell.⁷⁵ We know that Lowther was familiar with Milford and was a regular customer at the mills, running up a personal debt of nearly £8 by April of

⁷¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 1 Jan. 1859.

⁷² *Ibid*, 1 Jun. 1861.

⁷³ *Ibid*.

⁷⁴ Robert Rochfort, *An arrangement of light infantry and sharp-shooting movements adapted for the yeomen infantry of Ireland* (Dublin, 1801), p. 40. See Byrne, *Hibernicus*, pp 67-9.

⁷⁵ Farrell, *Carlow in '98*, pp 184-5, 189. On Lowther’s notoriety, see also Byrne, *Hibernicus*, pp 67-8.

1800.⁷⁶ The arrival of the soldiers at the gates caused great panic, and it was recalled for decades in local memory how they

rode into the mill-yard, and seized the foreman cooper and another on mere suspicion of being United Irishmen. They were placed behind the horsemen, and carried to Leighlin—a village two miles further—to be tried, of course by court-martial, and, no doubt hanged.⁷⁷

One of the men may have been a Michael Nowlan of Tomard, who is listed as a cooper in Alexander's letterbook index of 1800.⁷⁸ Alarm spread through the premises until some clerks ran to inform John I, at work in his office. His ride to Dublin Castle had been undertaken to quell rebel excesses; now, he was obliged to undertake another journey to prevent loyalist forces from inflicting similar outrages. According to the report, 'he sprang from his study — ran to the stable— seized a horse, without bridle or saddle, pursued the dragoons, and, by his fame, fortune and influence, brought his two men back victorious'. The incident depicted Alexander as a saviour, a liberal and enlightened hero prepared to risk personal safety and commercial prosperity in the name of right. It did much to bolster his reputation with the locals, and built a trust and respect he later harnessed as their landlord.

However, the story is almost certainly exaggerated. It is clear that the dragoons would not have released their prisoners without the sanction of the court president, Col. Rochfort and undoubtedly, Alexander had to plead his case before that individual. What is beyond doubt is that Alexander took a great personal risk in standing against the wave of violent excess that raged in the village, where suspects were allegedly being executed without trial.⁷⁹ His popularity and respectability, Rochfort's growing distaste for the executions and the fact that the plaintiff and magistrate were close neighbours combined to secure

⁷⁶ 'Account of debts due by sundries April 1st 1800' referring to 'Launc't Lauder [sic], Cor't 9th dragoons, his order, £7 19s 3d', in Letterbook index of John Alexander I, 1800 (APMH).

⁷⁷ *Irish Times*, 8 Nov. 1862. Anecdote told to a reporter during research on the burning of Milford flour mill on 4 Nov. 1862. This is the only surviving reference to this incident.

⁷⁸ Letterbook index of John Alexander I, 1800 (APMH).

⁷⁹ Byrne, *Hibernicus*, pp 68-9.

the release of the prisoners.⁸⁰ This is undoubtedly the incident which John Alexander II referred to in 1853, in trying to explain the strong friendship between two generations of their families: 'His father and Mr [Horace] Rochfort's father had long been friends together, and on an occasion when his (Mr A's) father stood in need of true friendship, Mr. Staunton Rochfort came forward and rendered that assistance by means of which the difficulty was overcome'.⁸¹

John I's direct actions in the rebellion of 1798 were consistent with the paternalism he showed his employees and neighbours, which sought to prevent rather than provoke bloodshed. He had literally ridden through bands of rebels and loyalists in his attempts to defend peace—the key requirement for the civilised and productive community he cherished. His two key acts balanced each other out somewhat and confirmed him as a liberal citizen with a keen and powerful faith in the rule of law. However, he hugely regretted the violence necessary to prosecute the rebellion and he described the whole affair as 'the worst of times'.⁸² Try as he did to abstain from direct involvement, the events of that summer made a great and immediate impact on him and left him with a powerful fear of 'a general rising of the people' for the rest of his days.⁸³ In the following decades, he repeatedly encountered the effects of '98 in his business and social life. Some of his earliest contacts in the county were executed for alleged involvement in the revolutionary conspiracy. These included the steward Phil Kennedy (who had latterly worked as a gardener for Sir Richard Butler at Garryhunden), who was hanged and beheaded as a United Irishman in Carlow jail in June of 1798.⁸⁴ The legacy of other executions was suffered by many of Alexander's future tenants like Thomas Donohue of Clochrisc, a 'rich farmer' and correspondent of Alexander's who shared his wife's

⁸⁰ On John Staunton Rochfort at the time of the executions, see Farrell, *Carlow in '98*, pp 144-6.

⁸¹ *Belfast Newsletter*, 19 Jan. 1853.

⁸² John Alexander to William Saurin, 4 Jun. 1817 (Peel papers, BL, Ms 40211 f. 342).

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ For Kennedy, see Farrell, *Carlow in '98*, p. 159, and John Monahan's two articles 'Your humble servant Phil Kennedy, born to be hanged', *Carloviana* (1953), pp 25-7 and 'Phil Kennedy of Castletown', *Carloviana* (1977-78), pp 13-14.

agony as her brother Jack Hughes was executed in Leighlinbridge.⁸⁵ In 1826, Alexander was renting a substantial farm at Tomard to James Curran, whose relative had been publically flogged, stripped and hanged in Carlow for his activities during the rebellion.⁸⁶

On the other hand, Alexander equally sympathised with the horrors experienced by some of his loyalist associates, such as the violence encountered by his friend Captain John Steuart in confronting rebels who shot away the feather in his cap and tore his pantaloons with a pike. John I would have been horrified that Steuart's wife, Mary and her infant children endured a terrifying overnight vigil in the shell of Leighlinbridge castle awaiting the rumoured approach of 20,000 vengeful rebels.⁸⁷ Mrs. Steuart's first cousin, the future Mrs Alexander, also suffered that summer: Christian Izod Nickson's uncle, Abraham Nickson of Munny, captain of the Coolkenno Yeoman Infantry was killed during a significant fight against rebels in Ballyrahan on 2 July, and her cousin, Lieutenant Abraham Nickson jnr. barely escaped from the same skirmish after his horse was shot dead.⁸⁸

iii. Finding a voice: 1799-1820

The immediate and lasting legacy of the 1798 rebellion in Carlow was the injection of a potent sectarianism into all aspects of life in the community. According to Duggan, it was 'a phenomenon new to county Carlow [...] The Protestant gentry regressed a century or more in their attitude towards the Catholics.'⁸⁹ In the years after the act of union (which was opposed by a number of gentry families in the county, including the

⁸⁵ For Hughes see Farrell, *Carlow in '98*, pp 138, 142, 147.

⁸⁶ Farrell, *Carlow in '98*, p. 132. See Curran's tenancy in Milford rental, 1826 (APMH).

⁸⁷ Hickey, *Not us from kings but kings from us*, part 5.

⁸⁸ Ruán O'Donnell, *The rebellion in Wicklow, 1798* (Dublin, 1998), pp 263-4, p. 392 n.338; Sir Richard Musgrave, *Memoirs of the different rebellions in Ireland* (Dublin, 1802), third edition, vol. ii, pp 55-6; Pat Power, *People of Wicklow 1798- the rebellion* (Dun Laoghaire, 1999), p. 74.

⁸⁹ Duggan, 'County Carlow, 1791-1801', pp 231-2.

Rochforts), many loyalists clung to militarism to consolidate their victory.⁹⁰ A land agent 'to a very large estate in the county' noted that Protestant tenants were enjoying more favourable leases than their Catholic neighbours: 'They are the "pets" of the country gentlemen, and are paid for serving in his yeomanry corps. He added that he found it difficult to manage them, and to restrain them from oppressing their neighbours'.⁹¹ A correspondent ('A Carlow friend') to the *Irish Magazine* in June 1811 pointed out that all public positions in Carlow were occupied by Protestants, 'and that too, in a town, where almost all are Catholics'.⁹² At this time, Wakefield considered the Carlow gentry 'ignorant and conceited [...] having never devoted any of their time to the acquisition of knowledge'.⁹³ The author also noted how they took expectations of deference from their social inferiors to shocking and violent extremes, personally witnessing a poor man being whipped in the face at the Carlow races in July of 1809, by 'a gentleman of some rank in the county' for having the temerity to obscure his view: 'Not a murmur was heard, nor hand raised in disapprobation; but the surrounding spectators dispersed, running different ways, like slaves terrified at the rod of their despot'.⁹⁴ Such anecdotes go a long way to show the ingrained and unquestioned authority of Carlow Protestantism at this point and the deference enjoyed by rank.

However, such hegemony and militarism gradually came under attack in the decade after the rebellion. Rev Robert Rochfort's failure to advance professionally (despite his eminent family connections) is a case study of the speed with which sectarian militancy fell out of favour in the county (and beyond) in the years after the rebellion.⁹⁵ By 1810, John Alexander was displaying a new-found confidence in his liberal sentiments, probably spurred on by the controversy attaching to the loyalist campaign. At variance

⁹⁰ Ibid, pp 218-230; Rochfort, *Arrangement of light infantry*, p. 40.

⁹¹ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 598

⁹² *Irish Magazine*, Jun. 1811, p. 277.

⁹³ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 773.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ This author, 'The "slashing parson" of 1798', pp 130-134; See Wakefield's critique of the yeomanry as a divisive force in society, *Account of Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 373.

with the sectarian tensions evident elsewhere, Alexander did not shy away from employing personnel at Milford who had been significantly involved in the society of United Irishmen. Lawrence Nowlan (whose skills as a land surveyor were so valued that they twice saved him from hanging in 1798 for attending a meeting of the United Irishmen) was the draughtsman most regularly employed on the Milford estate between 1807 and 1818; eleven samples of his work from this time survive in the Alexander papers.⁹⁶ More remarkably, it seems John Alexander employed known United Irishmen leader Thomas Myler as his land steward. Myler's previous employer had been the ill-fated Sir Edward Crosbie, and it was the close physical resemblance between the two men which led to Crosbie being mistaken for Myler as the rebel leader who addressed the gathered pikemen in his gardens at Viewmount before their march to the battle of Carlow. Myler enjoyed an 'almost miraculous escape' from prosecution and may have found a safe harbour at Milford shortly after the rebellion.⁹⁷ Alexander was writing to him as early as 1800 and Myler was still working as the steward at Milford in 1810.⁹⁸

Alexander now assumed a more proactive role on behalf of the Catholic campaign. In tracking his liberal acts, the *Carlow Sentinel* reported that around 1800,

he came forward to advocate the claims of his Roman Catholic countrymen; he attended their meetings — subscribed to every fund raised to carry the measure into effect. So far from a desire to exterminate Roman Catholics, he gave them exclusive encouragement. He raised that *pauper* tenantry into comparative affluence.⁹⁹

In particular, John I was an early supporter of the local campaign led by William Gerald Bagot, a Catholic landowner of Castle Bagot in Dublin, who also held land in Myshall

⁹⁶ Edward J. Law, 'Contentious county Carlow land surveyors', *Carloviana* (1997), pp 8-9; Farrell, *Carlow in '98*, pp 161-4.

⁹⁷ Myler told the tale of his escape to William Farrell several years after the rebellion, but the author did not record the details. Instead, Farrell gives Myler's vindication of Crosbie, *Carlow in '98*, p. 126.

⁹⁸ Myler is listed as a correspondent of Alexander's in his 1800 letterbook index (APMH). His employment at Milford is obvious from his listing as a steward for the 'townland of Milford' in the list of able men in the barony of Idrone in 1810, Nevin, *Sprig in the window*, p. 37. Myler is listed immediately before that of the miller McMurthry brothers as 'Thos. Miles' — almost certainly taken incorrectly from the original document, now missing.

⁹⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Apr. 1836.

and Ballon in Carlow— exceptional as the only Catholic on Carlow's grand jury in 1809.¹⁰⁰ Bagot chaired a meeting of 'the Roman Catholics of the town and county of Carlow' on 3 October 1811 which enjoyed attendance by all sectors of the community. In stressing their adherence to constitutional and legal channels, they expressed their wish to attain their right to a full and free participation in all the benefits and advantages enjoyed by others of the King's subjects. They further stated:

That in seeking, by the means which the constitution prescribes, a repeal of those laws which still remain in force, to the prejudice, in all the situations of life, of the Roman Catholic and which, in their effect, are scarcely less injurious to every description of persons in Ireland, by creating an unnatural division of interests, an injurious distinction of parties, and thus obstructing, the prosperity of the country.¹⁰¹

These were sentiments straight from John Alexander's heart and it is not surprising to learn that he attended the meeting and was amongst the group of 'liberal and enlightened Protestant gentlemen, of this and adjoining counties' who were thanked for 'liberally and generously' supporting not only the objectives of the meeting, but also its resolutions.¹⁰² While the Bruens, Rochforts and Kavanaghs did not attend, it was supported by the county representatives in parliament, Walter Bagenal and David La Touche, as well as avowed Orangeman John Steuart of Leighlinbridge which supports Wakefield's claim that by this time, 'the majority of the Protestant gentlemen in this county are decidedly in favour of the Catholic claims'.¹⁰³ Robert Rochfort had been dead three months when this meeting was held, and Cornwall died a week after it. In many ways, their passing allowed a breath of fresh air to be blown into Carlow's politics, where open-mindedness was not considered as traitorous or offensive. By February of 1812, it was reported that

¹⁰⁰ Lewis, *Topographical dictionary*, vol. i, p. 9; Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. ii, pp 598-9; *Carlow Morning Post*, 19 Feb. 1818.

¹⁰¹ 'County Carlow Meeting' in *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, vol. vii, July-December 1811, pp 322-324, at p. 322.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p. 324.

¹⁰³ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 599.

that were three petitions seeking Protestant support for Catholic emancipation in circulation in the county.¹⁰⁴

John Alexander came to embody Catholic hopes and his rising star further endeared him as a champion to the local Catholic population. He was something of a figurehead among 'such of the Irish gentry as advocated their claims to emancipation. Mr Alexander was one of the earliest supporters of that measure from principle', as a local newspaper recorded.¹⁰⁵ He did not fear the notion of land being owned by Catholics and there is evidence that he was actively engaged in ensuring that the fee simple of some properties remained in Catholic hands. At this time, Joanna Mary Donohue, a native of Queen's County (probably a relative of Alexander's tenant, Thomas Donohue), was assisted by Alexander in securing her rights to her late father's property at Curragh which enabled her to live on its profit rent for the rest of her days.¹⁰⁶ In old age, she referred to Alexander as 'my benefactor through life', and in gratitude, she hoped to bequeath the land to him on her death:

It would be a comfort to me to think that when I am in my grave, it was possessed by one who had shown kindness to [my father's] family. I offered it to Mr Alexander considering he had the first right to it, as it was owing to his generous confidence in my integrity in early youth, that I was enabled to keep it.¹⁰⁷

Characteristically, John I turned down her offer and encouraged her to bestow it on a quarter in greater need.

At this point, John Alexander's rise in local politics and his desire to effect a paternal liberalism in local governance were patronised by Col. John Staunton Rochfort. Their association from 1810 to 1820 was mutually productive and beneficial: Alexander received a valuable leg-up and introduction into the infrastructure of local government

¹⁰⁴ Brigade Major Moore to the Chief Secretary, 19 Feb. 1812 (NAI, SOC/1409/3).

¹⁰⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 20 Sep. 1834.

¹⁰⁶ Joanna Donohue to Henry Bruen, 4 Oct 1842, 4 Jan 1843 (Bruen papers, NLI, Ms 29,775/4).

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

while Rochfort observed and was tutored in practical open-mindedness which helped to heal his reputation in the community which enjoyed a remarkable turnaround from ‘that devil’s wich [sic]’ of ’98 to ‘our truly patriotic countryman’ by 1819.¹⁰⁸ Rochfort had once lamented to his uncle (and former speaker of the Irish House of Commons) John Foster that ‘in this country, you know, passion generally overrules judgements’.¹⁰⁹ Certain misgivings about his politics and the role he and his Orange brethren had played in the rebellion began to take root in his mind from 1811 onwards. Having never been a promoter of violence and disgusted by brutality, Rochfort began to disassociate himself from what he called ‘an Orange feeling’, advocating new, more liberal and paternal politics, while admitting that ‘my early prejudices lay the other way.’¹¹⁰ While remaining an implacable defendant of the Ascendancy’s privileges, Col. Rochfort lost his fears of a Catholic threat, and came to believe that relief measures would be beneficial for all parties in Ireland. In fact, he welcomed Catholic Emancipation as a means of ensuring the perpetuity of Protestant authority by eliminating religious hostilities.¹¹¹ In 1818, he even recommended the appointment of Catholic Walter Blackney as a magistrate for Carlow, and by 1824 he was attending as a guest of honour at the annual academic exercises at the town’s Roman Catholic college—an institution he had regarded as dangerously subversive in 1798.¹¹² Rochfort’s support and promotion of Alexander’s interests from this point onwards makes it likely that John I played a fundamental role in this transformation.

In return, Rochfort performed a number of favours for Alexander which were to the latter’s commercial or socio-political advantage. For example, during disturbances on the county’s waterways in 1817 (caused by boatmen refusing to carry goods out of the county

¹⁰⁸ The former comment was reported during an election meeting in 1832, *Carlow Morning Post*, 12 Jul. 1832 and the latter in the same newspaper on 15 Nov. 1819.

¹⁰⁹ Rochfort to Foster, 22 Mar. 1805 (Foster Massereene papers, PRONI D207/33/17).

¹¹⁰ PP, 1825 (129), *Report from the select committee on the state of Ireland: 1825*, pp 441, 452.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 434.

¹¹² Rochfort to Lord Manners, 29 Jun. 1818 (NAI CSO/RP/1818/560); *Freeman’s Journal*, 10 Jul. 1824; Rochfort to Pelham, 26 Nov. 1797 (RP, NAI, 620/33/93).

during periods of shortage or agricultural distress) several mills and provision stores were attacked and plundered in Carlow and Queen's county; the entire contents of Byrne's oatmill at Sleaty outside Carlow town were taken on 2 June.¹¹³ John Alexander had reason to fear for his own property at this time. He had a store on the quay in Carlow town where Rochfort and his yeomen had confronted 'a mob' seeking control of some cars conveying flour there.¹¹⁴ As tensions grew that summer, Col. Rochfort wrote to under-secretary William Gregory that 'you should be aware of the imminent danger that threatens Mr Alexander's mills & extensive stores'.¹¹⁵ It was a protective and specific gesture of support from an ally that sought to promote Milford's prowess by bringing Alexander's enterprises to the attention of officials in Dublin Castle.

With developments at the mill largely complete and with plans for his estate in place, John Alexander now had an opportunity to devote himself to the greater public good. His greatest inducement towards political activity arose from social unrest borne out of economic hardships. Not surprisingly, therefore, his first forays into public life at county level were essentially economic initiatives. In 1815, he took a leading role in a scheme which says much about his desire to patronise self-help projects and promote self-sufficiency among the people. He was nominated as a permanent trustee on the management committee of the Carlow Charitable Loan, which aimed to gather a borrowing pot through subscriptions from the gentry, to be loaned to 'industrious tradesmen, dealers and some few of the labouring class' to enable improvements and expansions in their enterprises.¹¹⁶ The scheme was generously supported by almost 40 individuals who contributed a total of £261. Henry Bruen gave the largest subscription of £50, with Alexander donating £11 —double that of his milling competitor, Simeon

¹¹³ Robert Jackson to Rochfort, 2 Jun. 1817 (NAI, SOC 1824/4); Rochfort to Gregory, 17 Jun. 1817 (NAI, SOC 1824/6).

¹¹⁴ Rochfort to Gregory, 3 Jun. 1817 (NAI, SOC 1824/4).

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Carlow Morning Post*, 2 Feb. 1818.

Clarke. However, there were some notable exceptions (Walter Kavanagh, Sir Thomas Butler, the Ducketts etc.) which indicates a disinterestedness or disinclination of a large sector of the landed elite to meddle with existing economic conditions. Interestingly, the robbery at Milford mill three years later managed to generate a reward fund from the gentry (of almost zero benefit to the community at large) which was three times the amount raised by the loan committee, intended for productive purposes and the public good.¹¹⁷ Alexander persevered with the initiative and more subscriptions did materialise. It was a great success with 397 borrowers up to December 1817, in sums from £1 to £5 each and played a significant role in financing many of the smaller players in the local economy, particularly in times of distress.

The depression of 1816-17 appalled Alexander on two counts: he feared for the welfare of the destitute but also for the potential destruction of the economic market by the forces of social unrest. He admitted that such thoughts promoted many sleepless nights in Milford House in June of 1817. The mood in the air frightened him and reminded him of 1798 :

The state of the country is every day becoming more alarming. [...] I must acknowledge that I always thought there was sufficient food in this country for its wants. I hope I am not yet mistaken, but if it is to be distributed by the Mob, all will soon meet their fate & lie in one heap of indiscriminate ruin.¹¹⁸

Although open rebellion was only a possibility, he saw the need to protect the local people and his mills. Just as in 1798, he relied on governmental supremacy and he took the unprecedented step of making direct personal contact with the authorities in Dublin. On 4 June, he wrote to the attorney general, William Saurin, to express his social and economic concerns. Saurin at first appears a strange choice of correspondent for Alexander, given the former's committed Orangeism and notoriously anti-Catholic

¹¹⁷ See above, p. 153.

¹¹⁸ John Alexander to William Saurin, 4 Jun. 1817 (Peel papers, BL, Ms 40211, f. 341).

bias.¹¹⁹ However, it seems John I knew him from his youth in Belfast and given the impending chaos, was willing to use this contact to have his voice heard, writing ‘You, my dear sir, are the only one connected with Government that I am acquainted with, & I think it my duty to give you my sentiments. They are not those of an alarmist’.¹²⁰

Alexander’s fears are palpable in the letter, written in confident, blunt, often accusatory language, making clear his view that in failing to relieve the distressed, the government was undermining essential political and economic structures. Again he demonstrated his belief that the government should strengthen military resources as a protection of the economic *status quo*: by sympathetically managing the disaffected, the economy would be saved.

Government should not be asleep. They are in a more perilous situation than they ever were, even in the worst of times. Instead of disbanding the army, they should put the yeomanry on permanent duty & embody the militia for three months. This would keep in order the disaffected & distribute some money in the very best manner it could be done — don’t tell me of want of means. It is better to keep things as they are than have a general uprising. When famine is abroad, nothing but the prompt interference of a strong Government can meet it.

Government apathy in the face of distress and economic injustice had the power to transform the local farming and labouring population (those whom John I habitually referred to as ‘the People’ or ‘the lower orders’) into ‘the Mob’.¹²¹ It was a similar case ten years later when on 15 March 1827, John I was prompted to inform the Lord Lieutenant Henry Goulburn that

in the town of Carlow & several other places in this county, mobs of a most alarming nature have appeared, threatening the peaceable inhabitants with destruction if they were not supplied with food. Having large mills and considerable stocks of grain and oatmeal, I am apprehensive that the

¹¹⁹ See Desmond McCabe, ‘Saurin, William (1757/8-1839)’ in James McGuire and James Quinn (eds.), *Dictionary of Irish biography*, vol. 8, pp 783-6.

¹²⁰ John Alexander to William Saurin, 4 Jun. 1817 (Peel papers, BL, Ms 40211, f. 341).

¹²¹ For John I’s reference to ‘the People’ see *ibid*; for references to ‘the Mob’ in times of unrest see John Alexander to Lord Lieutenant, 15 Mar. 1827 (NAI, SOC 2831/1).

conveyance of the same to the several markets in the county & the adjoining one of Wexford in particular may be obstructed.¹²²

Here, it is again clear that Alexander felt ‘such an emergency’ (i.e. interference with economic procedures) called for an increase in military personnel as a check on the population’s apparent impulse towards self-destruction, and the implementation of more humanitarian and egalitarian social and economic policies once peace had been restored. Ultimately, he believed that the government (and he, as a member of the landed gentry) were to be the servants of the needs of the people as he informed Saurin in 1817: ‘If the Government & the Gentry do not give their all for the preservation of the country, then all will be taken from them — God grant that I may see things in a worse light than they really are, but you may depend on it that no time is to be lost’.¹²³ The relief he envisaged was to be immediate and extensive.

It is no coincidence that in the year following the crisis of 1817, which clearly shook John I to the core, he availed of a position with some say over social administration. He acquired another asset for his powerbase in Carlow by securing public office (albeit of the lowest form) as a grand juror. It was the beginning of a brisk political ascent which undoubtedly was most appealing in the influence and authority it promised in relation to the development of the county’s economic infrastructure and the opportunity to mould (if not implement) more paternalist social policies. He attended the assizes in Carlow on Monday 23 March 1818 along with fellow property owners interested in the public affairs of his county.¹²⁴ Having called such ‘unquestioned grandees’ (to borrow Barnard’s phraseology) as Henry Bruen, Walter Kavanagh, Sir Charles Burton and John Duckett to serve on the jury, high sheriff John Faulkner Cornwall named the miller of Milford as his final selection.¹²⁵ In a county with a prolific gentry, competition for inclusion was significant and as an institution bolstered by friendships and alliances, the influence of

¹²² John Alexander to Lord Lieutenant, 15 Mar. 1827 (NAI, SOC 2831/1).

¹²³ John Alexander to William Saurin, 4 Jun. 1817 (Peel papers, BL, Ms 40211, f. 341).

¹²⁴ *Carlow Morning Post*, 26 Mar. 1818.

¹²⁵ Barnard, *New anatomy of Ireland*, p. 50.

Rochfort (listed in fifth position) is apparent in Alexander's selection. According to Virginia Crossman, 'membership of the grand jury carried considerable honorific value and the order of precedence was taken very seriously'.¹²⁶ At a time when the order of the printed list of the jury was an indication of social standing, the positioning of 'J. Alexander' as the twenty-third and final juror set him firmly at the bottom of the pecking order.¹²⁷ With his foot in the door, the only way was up and by March of 1823, John I had risen to 9th place of 23 jurors (see appendix F).¹²⁸

Much of the significance of the grand jury lay in the collective nature of the institution. There was safety, power and prestige in numbers, and John Alexander was now a sworn member of a foundation of gentry life. Alexander's selection would surely have alarmed the politically-aware Catholics at Milford, as it could have been construed as a step away from their interests, bringing their patron into the sphere of those who wished to preserve rather than reform the *status quo*. It was an institution at the very heart of the Protestant ascendancy and was in much need of reform. Rochfort noted how 'there is a great jealousy of the conduct of the grand jury; they sit with closed doors, and they are supposed therefore to be liable for influence'.¹²⁹ It was a position that exposed Alexander to the full gamut of law-making and law-breaking in the county and rid him of any political naiveté he may have harboured. On his first day as juror in 1818, he witnessed the disturbing trial and sentencing to death of a man accused of strangling his wife in Nurney.¹³⁰ Such experiences spurred him on to more intense socio-political activity and although he was never appointed as a magistrate, he was afforded quasi-judicial authority by Rochfort who encouraged him to use his popularity to temper socio-political tensions on his estate which first arose in the winter of 1820.

¹²⁶ Crossman, *Local government in nineteenth century Ireland*, p. 28.

¹²⁷ On grand jury selections, see *ibid*, p. 27.

¹²⁸ *Belfast Newsletter*, 12 Jul. 1823.

¹²⁹ Evidence of Col. J.S. Rochfort, PP, 1825 (521), *Minutes of evidence taken before the select committee of the house of lords, appointed to inquire into the state of Ireland, more particularly with reference to the state of circumstances which may have led to disturbances in that part of the United Kingdom*, p. 301.

¹³⁰ *Carlow Morning Post*, 26 Mar. 1818.

At that time, a small but significant agrarian dispute occurred at Milford in the townland of Craanluskey which ‘originated in some family contention about the possession of the property’. Outrages of an ‘evil’ but unspecified nature were perpetrated which warranted the attention of the county magistrates. Col. Rochfort presided over a meeting of their number on 20 December 1820 where they resolved to implement the ‘Whiteboy act’ against the perpetrators.¹³¹ At this point, John I approached Rochfort and offered to intervene and settle the matter. Here, it seems he not only wanted to protect his tenantry from prosecution but also to influence decision-making at a political level. For his part, Rochfort willingly accepted Alexander’s offer and took the unorthodox step of recommending the participation of a non-magistrate to settle the affair. His letter to chief secretary Charles Grant betrays a nervousness regarding the irregularity of such a move:

Mr Alexander of Milford came forward, and from the contiguity of the premises to his residence and his knowledge of the parties, undertook to have matters accommodated between them and that these outrages should cease. Your committee *in acceding to this interference* and recommending it to your sanction, wish it to be understood that they were induced to it from the circumstances of it being the first outrage in that part of the country and their conviction that Mr Alexander would impress upon the guilty parties a just sense of the illegality of their conduct, the extensive powers of the magistrates, the certainty of their conviction and punishment if the inquiry should be proceeded on, and that they were not to suspect that such conduct would be permitted with impunity.¹³²

Although a heavy task-load for a civilian, it was a remarkably astute move which benefitted all interested parties. For all intents and purposes, John I had been invested with the authority and prestige of a magistrate, without having to assume the alienating mantle of an official law enforcer. It ensured the elimination of outrages to the satisfaction of the magistrates, and had also protected his tenants from criminal prosecutions. It was the practical embodiment of Rochfort’s view that ‘the magistrates should be kept upon as good terms as possible with the people, and they should not be

¹³¹ Rochfort to chief secretary Charles Grant, 6 Feb. 1821 (NAI CSORP/SC/1821/214); Geo. III, 15 & 16, c.21.

¹³² Ibid. The italics here are my emphasis.

brought into hostile collision with them; that they should be looked upon as friends and not as prosecutors, or as many consider them, persecutors'.¹³³ In addition, by 'this interference', Alexander's reputation as an approachable landlord was saved. This not only enhanced landlord-tenant relations but simultaneously proclaimed a clear code of appropriate conduct for future agrarian and political disputes in his realm of authority: approach your landlord and never employ violence. It was in future years, when his central position at the heart of the Milford unit was ignored or when political actions took place in spite of him that he was most offended.

iv. Religion and education at Milford, 1810-30

John Alexander's breed of political liberalism was largely channelled through the lens of economics and predicated on fiscal prosperity, but was also greatly informed by a commitment to social justice and reform. This is clearly seen in his actions pertaining to religious observation and educational facilities in his neighbourhood. He never trumpeted his own faith or its attendant social elevation and he was active in providing religious and educational facilities to all sectors of the community in Carlow. He believed in the individual's right to practise his own religion and express their own political philosophies—as long as this was done in a peaceful, rational manner which did not impinge on daily business. He never considered faith as a foundation for a character judgement and while it was largely irrelevant to performing a good day's work, he sympathised with his Catholic neighbours' lack of a house of worship and regretted the political debilitations attached to their beliefs. He also noted the irony that the vast majority of the local

¹³³ PP 1831-32 (677), *Report from the select committee on the state of Ireland; with the minutes of evidence, appendix and index*, p. 72, Col. Rochfort's evidence.

population (6,888 Catholics as opposed to 897 Protestants in Leighlin parish in 1827) enjoyed unequal access to religious and educational opportunities.¹³⁴

John Alexander remained a committed (if not devout) member of the Church of Ireland throughout his life. In his early decades in Carlow, he probably attended services in Old Leighlin Cathedral or St. Mary's Church in Carlow town. In 1804 he began to attend the new Protestant church which was constructed just outside the Rochfort demesne in Cloydagh, only a mile from Milford. Rev Robert Rochfort led people to believe it was 'built for him' and indeed, the building was symbolic of aggressive Protestantism in the area in the years after the rebellion.¹³⁵ It was very much the Rochforts' church in its early years and Alexander abstained from the rush towards the chancel and humbly selected a pew for his family towards the back of the church, 'near the door'.¹³⁶ He was not a particularly active member of his own church community although his social standing saw him appointed as a commissioner for the tithe composition act in the neighbouring parish of Wells, and he performed this surveying role in 1823-4.¹³⁷ While he took his duties seriously as a collector, the assertion that he had reduced each of his tenant's rent by the amount of the tithe due (in the region of £200 across his whole estate in 1834) gives us some indication of his political views on the righteousness of the charge.¹³⁸

He was far more proactive in education circles and promoted the spread of knowledge and learning among children and adults of all classes and creeds. John I would go on to recommend a third level education to some of his children, and in opening his new library at Milford House to his genteel neighbours, he professed his belief in the value of reading

¹³⁴ Bishop Doyle's Diocesan Book, p. 56, 24 Nov. 1823 (Delany Archive, Carlow College, JKL/BV/03).

¹³⁵ This author, 'The "slashing parson" of 1798', pp 130-1.

¹³⁶ This fact is hinted at in two letters of John Alexander II, 12 Oct. 1874 and 13 Nov. 1874 (LB2, APMH).

¹³⁷ NAI, Tithe Applotment Books website at

http://titheapplotmentbooks.nationalarchives.ie/reels/tab//004625730/004625730_00054.pdf, accessed 16 Apr. 2014.

¹³⁸ Ibid, tithes payable for each of John Alexander's five townlands as surveyed in 1825 and 1834; in the House of Commons in early 1836, Henry Bruen alleged that Alexander deducted tithe charges from his rents. *Carlow Sentinel*, 2 Apr. 1836.

and study. By the late 1830s, he had sanctioned the use of the library at Milford House as a centre for enlightenment, education and entertainment among his friends and neighbours. While it was not the only library in the locality (and was dwarfed by the Rochforts' collection of over 7,000 volumes at Clogrennane House, just two miles away) there is evidence of a reading group or 'committee' operating from Milford House c.1820, apparently headed by Christian Alexander, who organised a lending and purchasing system to cater for reading demands and tastes in the locality.¹³⁹ The existence of this reading group testifies to many things: to John I's willingness to 'share' his material acquisitions; to Milford's reputation as a centre of education, development and civilisation; and to the assumption by his family of a leadership role in spearheading a campaign of local improvement. Crucially, it also signals a growing deference in local gentry society to the Alexanders' organisational capacities but also their emerging role as arbiters of contemporary taste.

His belief in the importance of a proficient education had already been extended to the community at large, particularly to its children. In the early 1810s, a mud cabin had served as a schoolhouse in Tomard (where Patrick Kehoe taught 50 children in 1824) but there was only one purpose-built schoolhouse, which had a definite Protestant bent as an institution of the Clogrennane estate.¹⁴⁰ Originally intended as a free parish school, it was attended by children of both denominations but gradually became associated with the new church at Cloydagh. By 1811, it had allegedly come under the sectarian influence of Rev Robert Rochfort who reputedly paid the schoolmaster a stipend to proselytise the school's Catholic attendees.¹⁴¹ By 1824, its management had adopted a new system in connection with the Kildare Place Society (who paid the master his wages) and scriptures were read

¹³⁹ Inventory of furniture at Clogrennane Lodge dated 1797 (Rochfort papers, NLI, MS 8682). Notes in some Milford volumes read 'Ordered by committee, 20 days', 'Ordered by Mrs Alexander', 'Ordered by Mrs Vigors [of Burgage House, Leighlinbridge], set 21 days' etc.

¹⁴⁰ Michael Brennan, *Schools of Kildare and Leighlin: 1775-1835* (Dublin, 1935), pp 357-8. Information based on the 'Blue Book Summary' of 1824. For details of the Clogrennane school's origins, see John Alexander II, 18 Dec. 1873 (LB2, APMH).

¹⁴¹ Obituary of Rev Robert Rochfort, *Irish Magazine*, August 1811, p. 384.

to the children. John Staunton Rochfort subscribed £5 a year to the school and provided a house and 2 acres of land for the master, while John Alexander donated £2 5s 6d annually towards what was described as a Protestant pay school.¹⁴² Despite this fact, more Catholic than Protestant children attended in 1824 and made clear to Alexander the need for a dedicated Catholic school on his property.

Accordingly, he arranged the construction of a schoolhouse on a prominent site in Ballinabranna. The building was small but significant and was operating from some time in the mid 1810s. John Alexander not only gave the site but paid the entire £50 for its construction and stated that it was provided 'for the accommodation of his tenantry'.¹⁴³ Slated and solid, its significant cost was at great variance with the £5 extended at the same time by Henry Bruen for a schoolhouse in his attempt at a Protestant colony at Nurney.¹⁴⁴ With the benefit of his father's experience in the establishment and management of the non-denominational Belfast 'Inst', Alexander clearly desired to provide a proficient education for all (but especially the Catholic) children on his property, his future workforce, free from controversial religious associations.

Significantly, although the school was under the patronage of Leighlin's parish priest, scriptures were not read in the Milford school and it was not connected with any society. In the summer of 1824, there were 68 pupils in attendance, including 6 Protestants (possibly some of the McMurthry children from Milford). The importance attached to the venture can be seen in the substantial annual wage of £30 enjoyed by the schoolmaster, James Murphy, paid by subscriptions from the children.¹⁴⁵ At the same time, renowned

¹⁴² PP 1824 (179), *Returns to order of the honourable house of commons, dated 9th February 1824; for accounts and papers relative to schools and education in Ireland*, p. 41; Brennan, *Schools of Kildare and Leighlin*, p. 358.

¹⁴³ Brennan, *Schools of Kildare and Leighlin*, p. 356.

¹⁴⁴ PP 1824 (179), *Returns to order of the honourable house of commons, dated 9th February 1824; for accounts and papers relative to schools and education in Ireland*, p. 41

¹⁴⁵ Brennan, *Schools of Kildare and Leighlin*, p. 356.

teacher John Conwill was earning only £18 at his school in Ballyknockan, Leighlinbridge.¹⁴⁶

Alexander's school came to the attention of Dr James Doyle ('J.K.L.'), bishop of Kildare and Leighlin since November 1819, on one of his regular and intensive parish visitations.¹⁴⁷ Doyle was arguably the most vocal and influential cleric in the struggle for Catholic Emancipation and was a noted advocate for educational reform which would allow Catholic children to be competently taught in their own faith. He issued guidelines for his diocesan clergy in 1820 on an appropriate education for his flock and openly disapproved of schools along the lines of Clogrennane.¹⁴⁸ Doyle's educational ideals were represented in his 'Carlow Free School' project in 1822, where over 200 poor Catholic boys were clothed, received a core education, learning the catechism and recited daily prayers in the chapel.¹⁴⁹ John I supported this venture as a laudable social intervention and subscribed £1 to the support fund, as did Col. Rochfort.¹⁵⁰ In turn, Doyle was very impressed by the leadership and ecumenical foresight Alexander had shown in providing a school for the local Catholic population which was free from corruptive doctrinal influences and he opened a channel of communication with the Protestant landlord in the early 1820s.¹⁵¹ Doyle was notably involved in pastoral developments at Milford from this point onwards and harnessed Alexander's liberalism in religious and educational affairs. With little faith in the efficacy of the Catholic aristocracy, Doyle believed Alexander epitomised the class of liberal Protestant proprietors and industrialists

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 357. On Conwill, who would later teach at the National School in Ballinabranna, see Myles Kavanagh, 'The village schoolmaster: John Conwill' in *Carloviana* (1989), pp 3-8.

¹⁴⁷ Thomas McGrath, *Religious renewal and reform in the pastoral ministry of Bishop James Doyle of Kildare and Leighlin, 1786-1834* (Dublin, 1999), pp 26, 47-9.

¹⁴⁸ *Carlow Morning Post*, 31 Jan. 1820; Thomas McGrath, *Politics, interdenominational relations and education in the public ministry of Bishop James Doyle of Kildare and Leighlin, 1786-1834* (Dublin, 1999), p. 159.

¹⁴⁹ McGrath, *Politics, interdenominational relations and education*, p. 162.

¹⁵⁰ *Carlow Morning Post*, 1 Apr. 1822.

¹⁵¹ On Doyle's efforts to assess educational services in his diocese at this time see Brennan, *Schools of Kildare and Leighlin*, p. 10.

who would be invaluable allies in the struggle for Catholic Emancipation. He might have had John Alexander in mind when he claimed in 1824:

The men who have purchased properties in land—who have lent their money acquired by industry, on mortgages, those who are engaged in commerce, or in the liberal professions, are, with a few silly exceptions, on the side of the people. These are men of literature or of trade, and therefore if history or experience can be credited, they are bold and ambitious, fond of justice and of freedom — from such men, the Government, should it persist in its present course, has only to expect defiance or open hostility. [...] The proprietors and capitalists in Ireland, are affected by the prospect which lies before them, and are, if not blind to self-interest as well as dead to patriotism, anxious to establish peace and security amongst us.¹⁵²

Doyle was intent on a programme of church building and enlargement in the 1820s.

Apart from the ruined chapel in Tomard, the nearest Catholic church to Milford was in Leighlinbridge, almost four miles away. When William Cullen, the parish priest of Leighlinbridge and Paulstown, died in 1823, Doyle created Leighlin as a distinct parish with the Milford estate in its northern half—a move which was probably a nod to the area's growing importance.¹⁵³ Perceiving a need for a place of worship for the growing population in Alexander's neighbourhood, Doyle sought the cooperation of both Alexander and Rochfort in erecting a chapel in Ballinabranna, beside the successful school. It was a sign of changed times in the late 1810s as the Protestant gentry openly and generously contributed to the building of Catholic places of worship in the county.¹⁵⁴ John Alexander was extremely generous and conscientious in assisting capital projects for other faith communities. He attended the stone-laying ceremony for the new Presbyterian chapel in Carlow in 1818 and donated £2 5s 6d the following year to help rebuild a place of worship for the Methodist society.¹⁵⁵ Such instances of Protestant liberality and ecumenism became almost prolific in Carlow in 1818-22. For example, Col. Henry

¹⁵² *Morning Chronicle*, 18 May 1824.

¹⁵³ Bishop Doyle's Diocesan Book, 1823, p. 14(a) (Delany Archive, Carlow College, JKL/BV/03).

¹⁵⁴ On the resentment and jealousy among Carlow's Orangemen of impressive Catholic places of worship, see Musgrave, *Memoir of the different rebellions in Ireland*, vol. ii, p. 244.

¹⁵⁵ *Carlow Morning Post*, 29 Jun. 1818, 4 Oct. 1819.

Bruen MP donated £20 each for new Catholic chapels at Killeshin and Clonmore in 1818.¹⁵⁶

Plans for a chapel on the Milford estate were broached to John I who proved highly supportive of the initiative. On 24 November 1823, Bishop Doyle noted in his journal how he was 'about this time greatly indebted to Col. Rochfort and to Mr Alexander who greatly assisted in building the chapel at Milford'.¹⁵⁷ Rochfort's contribution is unclear, but Alexander's generosity was a matter of much public gratitude. He granted a site for the chapel beside his schoolhouse with half an acre of land attached, on a perpetual lease which was free from all rent; he also made 'a large subscription' towards the building fund.¹⁵⁸ It was intended (and was understood) as a gift to the people, a benefaction from landlord to tenant, from employer to employee. It marked the Milford estate apart as a Catholic bastion with its school and chapel (in the one yard) in contrast to Clogrennane's Protestant school and church. For the local population, the result was an expensive and proud celebration of Catholicism on the estate, presided over jointly by their spiritual and temporal overlords: Bishop Doyle and John Alexander. It was highly gratifying to see their bishop so heavily involved, respected and accommodated in their locality, which was extremely conducive to community cohesion across denominational lines. Doyle laid the foundation stone of the church in May of 1823.¹⁵⁹ The chapel land was vested in him and the Leighlin parish administrator, Fr Anthony Goss. The three remaining trustees were four local Catholic landholders, two of whom held the largest farms on Alexander's estate (Andrew Sleaven and Patrick Kehoe). The bishop also performed the ceremony of consecration there on 2 May 1830.¹⁶⁰ Like in many constructions in Milford at this time,

¹⁵⁶ *Carlow Morning Post*, 10 Aug., 30 Nov. 1818. On Protestant donations to Catholic church-building projects, see McGrath, *Religious renewal and reform*, p. 56 and p. 258 n. 239.

¹⁵⁷ Bishop Doyle's Diocesan Book, 1823, p. 14(a), (Delany Archive, Carlow College, JKL/BV/03).

¹⁵⁸ Rev Patrick Kehoe to the chief secretary, 29 Jul. 1833 (NAI, ED1/1/34/7).

¹⁵⁹ *Dublin Evening Post*, 3 Jun. 1823, cited in McGrath, *Religious renewal and reform*, p. 85.

¹⁶⁰ *Carlow Morning Post*, 29 Mar. 1830.

granite was liberally employed in the three-bay, single-cell chapel, lending uniformity to the built landscape of the area.¹⁶¹

In recognition of John I's generosity and assistance, Dr Doyle and the local community paid him grateful lip-service by adopting his family's brand name in originally referring to the building as 'the chapel of Milford'.¹⁶² This nominal link, denoting gratitude to their liberal landlord's powerbase, was summarily rejected during the religious tensions of the following decade, when in a period of conflict with the Alexanders, the Catholic population wrested their chapel from titular association with his estate and mills. From 1833 onwards the community insisted on referring to it as Ballinabranna chapel, which has survived into modern usage. Symbolically, the nomenclature of the planter was erased and ancient titles were restored. It was a move largely prompted by the contrary and incendiary policies of Alexander's eldest son, who became an increasingly unpopular figure on the estate as the 1830s progressed and threatened the goodwill generated by his father's active and celebrated liberalism.

¹⁶¹ On the architectural features of Ballinabranna chapel and entrance gates, see *Carlow county council: record of protected structures 2009* (Carlow, 2009), p. 4 and the survey on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage website at <http://www.buildingsofireland.ie/niah/search.jsp?type=record&county=CW®no=10301202>, accessed 15 Apr. 2014.

¹⁶² See *Carlow Morning Post*, 29 Mar. 1830. Also a letter from Fr Patrick Kehoe applying for a male national school in 1832, where he twice refers to 'the chapel of Milford'. The references to Milford are both scribbled through and overwritten with 'Ballinabranna' (NAI ED1/1/32).

Chapter 6

The early career of John Alexander II, 1802–30

‘The people took it into their heads that Master John was a Brunswicker.’¹

Carlow Morning Post, on John Alexander II in 1828

i. The seeds of a new political departure: 1802-23

While it would be incorrect to claim that John Alexander I courted public popularity, it is beyond doubt that he was proud of the reputation he had earned in Carlow. He lived by a very strict set of principles which deemed honesty and a sense of humanitarian justice to be essential foundations of mercantile success. He regarded his integrity as his greatest asset. In 1836, when wrongly accused of employing fraudulent malting practices, John I’s legal counsel noted how ‘Mr Alexander does not care for 200l [the potential fine] in comparison with the reputation which his long life has earned for him. [...] He feels that sum, or ten times its amount, as of no value, compared with that of a character remarkable for probity and honour’.² In the second generation, the Alexander heir set out on a political path at complete odds with his father’s ideologies of decency, inclusivity and social justice. It threatened the family’s high reputation in the 1830s by using its wealth and new-found status among the Protestant gentry as a weapon to demand political deference from the local Catholic community. It was a move prompted by a generational shift as much as the wider political context, which resulted in deep sectarian divisions in the Milford businesses and on the estate —hitherto a largely cohesive ensemble. For the first time, it was felt that the Alexanders’ success was not of benefit to the entire

¹ *Carlow Morning Post*, 25 Oct. 1834.

² *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Jul. 1836.

community; in fact, it was being used to coerce and control them. Much of the good publicity the family had enjoyed was nullified by the area's new hallmarks of controversy, scandal and violence. The origins of this state of affairs can be tracked to the early social and educational experiences of John I's eldest son.

The birth of the heir to the Milford properties was a much-anticipated event in the summer of 1802 as Christian Alexander's first pregnancy progressed. When John Alexander II was born in Milford House on 26 July, it was a moment of great joy for his doting parents, fondly remembered fifty four years later by his mother in a birthday greeting to her son (by then MP for Carlow borough), where she refused to 'allow this day to pass without writing you a few lines were it only to let off a little of the exuberance of feeling it excites, when I recollect the first joyful gaze of my eyes on your face'.³ Such sentiments are typical of the indulgence and support enjoyed by the young heir, which he continued to enjoy even when his actions in later life appeared to defy his father's celebrated liberalism and avowed social ideologies. Their upbringings differed hugely, with the son's being most notable for the privileges he enjoyed and a contrasting homogeneity of experience in terms of religious intercourse. It is unclear what John Alexander's hopes and plans for his namesake were. Despite his humble and grounded nature, it is not improbable that he hoped his own mercantile successes would act as a launch-pad for his son into grander, more powerful and influential fields in society and was probably delighted to think that his efforts would allow his child to enjoy a more genteel lifestyle.

It is a contrast reflected in the history of John II's early education which saw him move from circles of humble parochial interaction to enrolment in elite institutions in the capital. His early education took place in Carlow: in 1853 at an election meeting, he

³ Christian Izod Alexander to John Alexander II, 26 Jul. 1856 (APMH).

informed his audience, 'I have been reared and educated amongst you'.⁴ By the age of fifteen, he was probably being tutored at home and was encouraged to peruse the books in his father's library, an occupation he appears to have little relished. A copy of Sallust's *Delphini* (a Latin history of Rome) is littered with John II's doodles and his practising of his autograph ('John Alexander jr. Esq.'), but its subject matter appears to have held little appeal, and occasioned a note from him that 'there is nothing but nonsense in this book'.⁵ In the following year, his education took a turn which would prove fundamental to his future social, religious and political outlook. As a daughter of the landed gentry and given her family associations with Trinity College, Mrs Christian Alexander probably wanted to eschew the limiting parochialism of the parish school and place him in an environment which would facilitate contact-making and produce a refinement in his manners, presentation and speech. John II entered Trinity on 4 January 1819, aged just 16, under the tutelage of Mr Townsend.⁶ Significantly, his father's occupation was given as 'Generosus' [Gentleman] and not 'Mercator' [Merchant] as later recorded in the enrolment information of his younger sons George (b. 1814) and Henry (b. 1822) at the same institution.⁷ The sense of concealment of information, or an active attempt to eschew his mercantile roots is unmistakeable. Young Alexander does not appear to have excelled in academic circles at Trinity and many of the subjects he undertook failed to inspire him. However, his studies of Latin and English literature, and the Greek and Roman philosophers and dramatists enabled a sprinkling of classical references in his future political speeches. More importantly, his enrolment there is the earliest indication of the trajectory envisaged for his future by his parents. Like many other sons of the provincial gentry, John II underwent a deliberate and rigorous education in the habits,

⁴ *Belfast Newsletter*, 19 Jan. 1853.

⁵ *Sallust Delphini* (n.d.) (APMH).

⁶ George Dames Burtchaell and Thomas Ulick Sadleir (eds.), *Alumni Dublinenses: a register of the students, graduates, professors and provosts of Trinity College in the University of Dublin, 1593-1860*, new edition (Dublin, 1935), p. 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*

ideologies and prejudices of the youthful elite of the ascendancy. For him, as a member of upwardly mobile family, and unlike many of his peers there, the rites of passage were rather an initiation than a consolidation of existing mores. As the first of his family to enjoy a college education, the experience lacked the tolerance and inter-denominational fraternity and intercourse enjoyed by his father and grandfather in their formative years. By contrast, the worldview of the new Alexander heir was increasingly channelled into one specific mode of thinking. The two provosts in office during his three years at the college were renowned for qualities which became synonymous with John II in the following decade: Thomas Elrington's rigid conservatism and Samuel Kyle's opposition to Catholic political advancement.⁸ Moreover, it was his fellow students he mixed with who fostered in him a passionate belief in his class superiority, his entitlement to social and political authority and a conviction of the rights associated with his religion. Crucially, his short time in the capital must be seen as a foundation for the actions of the young landlord and politician to be.

In relation to the educational background of the Irish industrial elite in the nineteenth century, Bielenberg has argued that 'learning on the job within the family business was probably the most common form of training for Irish industrialists of the second and subsequent generations'.⁹ John II's time at Trinity was a definite step away from his mercantile heritage, or at least an attempt to further the intellectual and social credentials of the family; if milling was to be his lot, then a college education would have been highly superfluous. Therefore, it is clear that it was not intended that he would take over the practical running of the mills, which would have been beneath the gentility his parent envisaged for him. From a statement in his will written in 1830, it is clear that John I planned for his eldest son to spearhead the businesses, but this was a mere formality which would only require him to act as a figurehead and have the final say on matters of

⁸ J.V. Luce, *Trinity College Dublin, the first 400 years* (Dublin, 1992), p. 77.

⁹ Bielenberg, 'Industrial elite in Ireland', p. 152.

importance.¹⁰ Interestingly, the brother closest to John II in age, Lorenzo William (1810-1867) did not receive a college education and spent his early twenties managing the home farm and garden at Milford instead.¹¹ While obviously revering his father's memory and commercial achievements, John I's mercantile history was an association his son was perpetually eager to minimise or ignore. In 1872 as an elderly man, he stressed 'I am not a "retired" merchant, never having served my time to any business, and during the years I was proprietor of the mills on this property, I took almost no part in the working of them'.¹² He was only too happy to enjoy the profits and social elevation allowed by Milford mills (employing the stereotype of the honest hard-working miller when it suited) without ever acquiring the skills set or practical knowledge which had enabled the enterprise to soar. The effect was to dilute the importance of his mercantile heritage and present himself as a young country gentleman of undisputed 'quality'. Unlike his father who came to the area 'amongst' the people, John II returned to Milford in the summer of 1822 (following his graduation with a Bachelor of Arts degree) with a consciousness of his position over and above a community indebted to his family in several ways— his moniker with the Milford employees and tenantry, 'Master John', assuming a new and hitherto unappreciated social relevance for the young scholar. However, such notions were as yet only fermenting rather than finished brews.

Following an Italian tour in 1821-2 (an almost obligatory journey for the children of the landed elite),¹³ John II remained aloof from the Milford enterprises and was encouraged in his embrace of the leisurely lifestyle of the country gentleman.¹⁴ The traditional pursuits of shooting, hunting and fishing (facilities for which were in abundance at

¹⁰ Will of John Alexander I, 1830 (APMH).

¹¹ 'Recollections of John B. Flatman, 1838-9' (APMH).

¹² John Alexander II to Edward de Moleyns, 10 Aug. 1872 (LB2, APMH).

¹³ On the 'grand tour', see Pakenham, *The big house in Ireland*, p. 66,

¹⁴ Columbia University, Avery Classics AA957 AL27 F, 'Sketchbook documenting John Alexander's trip through Italy beginning in April 1821 and ending in 1822'. Electronic scans seen by this author.

Milford) were not especial passions, 'not being myself a sportsman' as he claimed.¹⁵ John II preferred the more sedentary pleasures of boating trips along the Barrow and was often to be seen with 'others of the family in the galley which they kept for pleasure upon the river above the mills here' as young John B. Flatman reported.¹⁶ The galley would have passed numerous barges as they transported the cargo of *John Alexander & Co.* to and from Milford on the river, and this serves as a neat image for the contrasting experiences, priorities and outlooks of father and son at this time. Perhaps John II's greatest interest at this time was music, especially singing ('for which there is some talent in our family')¹⁷ and he took a keen interest in the 'catch and glee' clubs of his day.¹⁸ His love of singing endeared him to his friends and he could always be relied on to enliven a social evening. His signature song was William Kertland's 'The Irish Oak' which he was called on to perform at numerous dinners (political, commercial and agricultural) in the decades ahead—a song which celebrated the nobility and strength of this Irish tree as a symbol for the United Kingdom.¹⁹ His rendition of the song created a reputation for him amongst the local gentry as a fun-loving and relaxed young gentleman who enjoyed the social scene.

ii. John Alexander II as high sheriff of Carlow, 1824

By 1823, John Alexander II was ready to make his first moves on the local political stage. It was a time when the confidence of the Protestant elite of the county was at a peak, bordering on arrogance, in the security of their privileged positions. Carlow's political and social peace were regarded by the authorities as consequences of effective Protestant

¹⁵ John Alexander II, 9 Aug. 1869 (LB1, APMH).

¹⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 17 Jan. 1846; 'Recollections of John B. Flatman, 1838-9' (APMH).

¹⁷ John Alexander II, 15 Mar. 1871 (LB2, APMH).

¹⁸ See John II's three volumed *The harmonist: a select collection of ancient and modern glees, catches, canons, epigrams &c.* (London, 1825) in APMH.

¹⁹ *The Lady and gentleman's universal melodist* (? 1825), p. 49, a bound volume in APMH, bearing John II's signature.

rule by the landed elite which made the county a bastion of ascendancy control. In March of 1822, John Alexander I sat on the grand jury benches as Lord Norbury informed that body that ‘the grand juries and gentry of Ireland are our best safeguard against the enemies of our peace’.²⁰ The following summer, Norbury congratulated them again on the tranquillity of the county due to the evident sway of its gentry, claiming that Carlow ‘was a town rising in consequence every hour’ and that it ‘possessed a great and respectable gentry in proportion to its size— men of as sound integrity, and of as much intellect as any other county in Ireland’.²¹ He rejected notions of reform as ‘novelties’ and encouraged ‘the peasantry’ to embrace deference to their superiors, ‘to look up to them as their best safeguard’.²²

As John II began to toy with the hope of public office, the most influential individual in the county was undoubtedly Henry Bruen II, who had been educated at Eton and Oxford with Lord Byron and Robert Peel.²³ He reached his majority in 1811 and first secured election for Carlow county the following year which placed him a position of authority which defied the persistent rumours about his father’s frauds.²⁴ In terms of his parliamentary duties, Bruen was considered as a lax attender and is not known to have spoken in parliament before 1825.²⁵ Records show that he was more eager to become the most influential landowner in the county and was shameless in petitioning the assistance of Peel (from his time as chief secretary right up to his terms as prime minister) to further his own personal and political agendas.²⁶ So frequent were his appeals for favours from Peel that Bruen felt obliged to make a rule for himself ‘not to annoy you by applications

²⁰ *Carlow Morning Post*, 28 Mar. 1822.

²¹ *Freeman’s Journal*, 12 Jul. 1823.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Belfast Newsletter*, 10 Nov. 1852; *Carlow Sentinel*, 13 Nov. 1852.

²⁴ Malcomson, *Carlow parliamentary roll*, p. 30.

²⁵ Philip Salmon, ‘Bruen, Henry (1789-1852), of Oak Park, Co. Carlow’, <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/member/bruhen-henry-1789-1852>, accessed 12 Jul. 2012.

²⁶ See for example, Bruen to Peel, 16 Oct. 1814 (Peel papers, BL, Ms 40239, f.332), and Bruen to Peel, 6 Jan. 1816 (*Ibid.*, Ms 40251, f.67).

even for my nearest relatives'; it was a rule that was often broken.²⁷ Bruen was notably protective of his privileges and jealous of the rise of other candidates on to his podium, whom he believed to be unqualified through a lack of funds, land or political clout and regularly enlisted Peel's influence in this regard.²⁸

Bruen regarded the death of Walter Kavanagh of Borris House in 1818, as 'a great resolution in the politics of this county'.²⁹ He perceived an opportunity to achieve one of his greatest aspirations by securing the patronage and goodwill associated with the county's oldest and most respected social, agrarian and political base. In an excited note to Peel, he claimed that

Kavanagh of Borris is dead, and if Lord Ormonde [Walter Butler, Marquess of Ormonde] would influence his sister [Lady Elizabeth Butler, cousin and wife of the new heir, Thomas Kavanagh] who is mistress of that interest in my favour, I should be most materially benefitted. I write this to you because I know you would give me all the assistance in your power.

Whether or not Peel interfered in his friend's favour is unclear, but it is certain that Bruen inveigled himself into the Kavanaghs' company and a match was soon arranged with Thomas Kavanagh's eldest daughter, Anne Wandesforde Kavanagh. They were married on 14 September 1822.³⁰ It was a mutually beneficial arrangement: Bruen compensated for his own weak pedigree by knitting himself into the tapestry of Carlow's finest family, and Kavanagh benefitted by association with Bruen's political and financial muscle. Hardly surprisingly, Bruen claimed he was 'proud of a connection with such a man as Mr Kavanagh: few men equalled him in worth, and no man exceeded him'.³¹ As the new heir at Borris, Thomas Kavanagh was guided into the county MP's corridors of power and authority which undoubtedly strengthened his resolve to join—and manage—the club. It

²⁷ Bruen to Peel, 10 Oct. 1843 (Peel papers, BL, Ms 40534, f.75).

²⁸ See his objection to Philip Newton on a shortlist for the post of high sheriff in 1817 because Newton was 'a very young man, not even the eldest son and without any property'. Bruen to Peel, 7 Dec. 1817 (Peel papers, BL, Ms 40272, f.73).

²⁹ Bruen to Peel, 12 Jun. 1818 (Peel papers, BL, Ms 40278, f.113).

³⁰ *Carlow Morning Post*, 26 Sep. and 3 Oct. 1822.

³¹ *Ibid*, 16 Aug. 1830.

is no coincidence that he joined his son-in-law as county MP just four years later.³² This was the foundation of an incredibly powerful family coalition of landowning, political and religious hegemony that was to hold sway in Carlow for decades.

It was Kavanagh's preference for a seat in Westminster, as opposed to local office, which probably enabled John Alexander II to secure the post of high sheriff for the county in 1824, but the hand of his father's old friend, Col. Rochfort is also clearly evident. As the principal representative of local government in the county in relation to the execution of the law, the sheriff's duties included attending the judges at assizes, selecting the grand jury and supervising the conduct of parliamentary elections.³³ Typically, they were appointed by the Lord Lieutenant on the recommendation of the assize judge who provided a list of three suitably qualified candidates. The office had long been 'a source of political patronage' according to Virginia Crossman, and the county MPs had significant influence over the choice of officeholder.³⁴ In 1812, the House of Commons had heard evidence of the shrievalty being 'promised' to particular gentlemen in Carlow.³⁵ Peel tried to limit the use of the office as a political prize when he began his term as chief secretary that year but despite his efforts, he admitted that the outgoing sheriff sometimes still made the list. This appears to have been the case in Carlow in late 1823 when the retiring Sheriff, John Staunton Rochfort (who had addressed regular missives and communications to Peel over the years, including a request for a baronetcy in 1815) forwarded his choice of three nominees to succeed him: 'Thomas Kavanagh of Borris, John Alexander of Millmount [*recte* Milford], esq. and William Duckett of Duckett's Grove'.³⁶ Remarkably, John II, without any previous magisterial experience,

³² Brian Walker, *Parliamentary election results in Ireland, 1801-1922* (Dublin, 1922), p. 200.

³³ Crossman, *Local government in nineteenth century Ireland*, pp 7-15.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 7; See for example, Bruen to Peel, 7 Feb. 1815 (Peel papers, BL, Ms 40243, f.97) in which the former recommends his own candidate for the position of sheriff.

³⁵ *Morning Chronicle*, 21 Apr. 1812.

³⁶ *Belfast Newsletter*, 22 Nov. 1823.

having never been selected for the grand jury and at the tender age of twenty-one, was selected as high sheriff over older and more experienced landowners with larger estates.

Perhaps Thomas Kavanagh refused the shrievalty, having fixed his ambitions on the bigger prize of parliamentary representation. In any case, it facilitated a huge step in the ascent of the Alexanders. Only six years after the family's first appearance on the grand jury lists, a member of the second generation had come to be its selector, playing a prominent role in the county's political, civic and social life. As Crossman argues, 'the sheriff's office was vital to the peace of the county and, while the office itself was often little more than an honorary position, it could involve the active participation of the holder in the maintenance of law and order'.³⁷ In 1835, the *Carlow Sentinel*, eager to preserve the office as the prerogative of a Conservative gentry, asked rhetorically, 'in what consists the qualification of a high sheriff, if not by rank, property and education?'³⁸ It was exactly such connotations that John II would have been most eager to cultivate in his fulfilment of the role, and if it was indeed conferred as an honour, it is hugely significant that a member of his family was deemed worthy of it at this time. In some ways, the office had come to symbolise the rise of the *nouveau riche* in the county.

Writing in 1828, David Byrne of Leighlinbridge reflected that

the high-sheriff used generally to be a man of the first consequence, while his sub or deputy, always an attorney, did all the business, received all the emoluments, and incurred all the responsibility of the office, which, in later times, as I have shewn, is often conferred on men of very small note indeed.³⁹

The dilution of the prestige of the office can be seen in the case of Thomas Kavanagh's apparent disinterestedness in it in 1823 — a decision which was undoubtedly influenced by Henry Bruen who had never lowered himself to assume the office. Previous to this, Sir Thomas Butler had been reluctant to take up the position in 1817 (claiming the need to

³⁷ Crossman, *Local government in nineteenth century Ireland*, pp 14-15.

³⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 5 Dec. 1835.

³⁹ Byrne, *Hibernicus*, pp 93-4.

be abroad on business) and confided his wishes to Bruen, who made a representation to Peel on Butler's behalf.⁴⁰ However, it is unlikely that John II was worried by such thoughts as he undertook a position of undoubted prestige which had also been filled recently by Sir Charles Burton in 1820, and by Col. Rochfort three years later.⁴¹ It must have been a proud day for the family when John II was issued with the warrant of appointment in early 1824.

Although there was much to be gained in terms of personal and political influence, the office required significant investment from John II, including the payment of salaries for his returning officers and bailiffs as well as a recognizance to the Crown to the sum of £1,000 before the barons of exchequer.⁴² His formal role brought him into contact with Lord Norbury, and he regularly met his carriage at the bounds of the county on evenings before the assizes and brought him and his associates to their lodgings in the town. The following morning, Alexander would provide his own carriage to transport the judges to the courthouse, a ceremony which warranted considerable investment in appropriate equipages and costumes.⁴³ Alexander's term occurred during a remarkably quiet year, without elections where Alexander would have been called on to play a far more active and assertive public role. Indeed, in July of 1824, during his shrievalty, Lord Norbury congratulated the grand jury that 'although you have the heaviest crops, you have the lightest calendar you ever had'.⁴⁴ Such peace and prosperity (which undoubtedly limited the enlargement of his public profile) was reflected in a report John II made to government on 30 June 1824, stating that only 76 people had been committed to the

⁴⁰ Bruen to Peel, 7 Dec. 1817 (Peel papers, BL, Ms 40272, f.73).

⁴¹ PP 1826 (17), *Reports from commissioners. Courts of Justice, Ireland, XIVth and XVth reports: prerogative courts, and office of sheriff*, p. 107

⁴² Crossman, *Local government in nineteenth century Ireland*, p. 9.

⁴³ See the procedure enacted by John James Lecky as Carlow's High Sheriff in 1828 in *Carlow Morning Post*, 17 Jul. 1828. On this ritual, see also Byrne, *Hibernicus*, p. 93.

⁴⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 4 Aug. 1824.

county jail in the previous year, none of whom had been apprehended under the Insurrection Act.⁴⁵

The most remarkable and perhaps defining occurrence of his term was the steady and inexorable resurgence in sectarian tensions, particularly in Carlow town which erupted into a controversy of national significance that November and unsettled John II to no uncertain degree. Religious animosity became so noted in the county that Carlow's assistant barrister called on the public at large 'to guard particularly against that violence which was but too often generated by sectarian feelings', given the number of cases he encountered which appeared to be inspired by it.⁴⁶ This culminated in two months of intense religious unrest in the county created by the Protestant evangelical crusade known as the 'Bible war' or 'second reformation'. This reached a crescendo at the annual general meeting of the Carlow Auxiliary Bible Society, a Protestant organisation established in 1818, with Col. Rochfort as its President.⁴⁷ The organisation had incurred the opposition of the Catholic hierarchy, with J.K.L. announcing his displeasure with its encouragement of a free reading of scripture without clerical commentary or guidance, and their intention to distribute Bibles freely among the Catholic population of the county.⁴⁸ Meetings held on 18 and 19 November (before an estimated audience of 600) descended into provocative and bitter debates between speakers for both religions, while an even larger crowd assembled outside.⁴⁹ This generated huge public interest and 600 people were admitted to the meeting house where Col. Rochfort acted as chairman.

⁴⁵ PP, 1825 (197), *Criminal Offences. Return of the number of persons charged with criminal offences, who were committed to the different gaols in England and Wales in execution on summary process, in each of the years 1822 and 1823. A similar return for Ireland, for the same periods, exclusive of those committed under the Insurrection Act*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ *Morning Chronicle*, 26 Oct. 1824.

⁴⁷ *Carlow Morning Post*, 30 Jul. 1818.

⁴⁸ *The only full, genuine and authentic report of the Memorable discussion of the Carlow Bible meeting held on Thursday, the 18th, and Friday, the 19th of November 1824; with the speeches of the Catholic clergymen and Protestant ministers who took a part in the proceedings, revised and authenticated by themselves* (Dublin, 1825), p. 3; Irene Whelan, *The Bible war in Ireland: the 'second reformation' and the polarization of Protestant-Catholic relations, 1800-1840* (Dublin, 2005), p. 208.

⁴⁹ PP HC 1825 (129), *Report from the select committee on the state of Ireland: 1825*, p. 444.

Reports claimed that a ‘mob’ inside the meeting house began to riot, breaking pews and barriers and extinguishing candles, encouraged by the knockings and yells of ‘an infuriate rabble’ outside.⁵⁰ The event received significant attention in the national press (the *Dublin Evening Post* and *Dublin Weekly Register* carried extensive coverage), and several publications appeared which were dedicated to the event, describing it from differing biases.⁵¹ Col. Rochfort was naive in his belief that ‘some prejudices against the Protestants may have been done away’ by the meeting.⁵² Instead, it acted as a bellows on a sectarian flame which took control of the county.

Despite Bishop Doyle’s efforts to preach to the contrary, Pastorini’s prophecies of Protestant annihilation in the year 1825 were gaining popularity in Carlow. In early October 1824, Rev John Doyne had reported to government of overhearing two old men in Leighlinbridge discussing an imminent rebellion, and claimed ‘the lower orders of the people are supposed to believe implicitly in Pastorini’s prophecies and are looking forward to their immediate completion’.⁵³ The fallout of the Bible meeting the following month served only to exacerbate the expectations of the Catholics and the fears of the Protestants. As an official overseer of the public peace, John Alexander would also have been alarmed at proceedings. This reached a head in Milford during the Christmas festivities of 1824 — a time when it was believed the prophecies would begin to come to fruition.⁵⁴ Col. Rochfort reported how all the Protestants in his neighbourhood maintained a frightened vigil and ‘sat up the whole of Christmas Eve; they thought they were all to be murdered that night, and they got into whatever houses were the strongest, and there they fortified themselves’.⁵⁵ As the largest dwelling apart from Clogrennane

⁵⁰ *Report of the discussion at the Carlow bible meeting on Thursday the 18th and Friday the 19th of November, 1824. With the speeches of the reverend gentlemen who took a part in the proceedings* (Dublin, 1824), p. 103.

⁵¹ *Morning Chronicle*, 27 Nov. 1824.

⁵² PP 1825 (129), *Report from the select committee on the state of Ireland: 1825*, p. 445.

⁵³ John Doyne, curate of Old Leighlin to Lord Lieutenant, 6 Oct. 1824 (NAI, SOC 2603/1).

⁵⁴ James S. Donnelly jr, *Captain Rock: the Irish agrarian rebellion of 1821-1824* (Cork, 2009), p. 149.

⁵⁵ PP 1825 (129), *Report from the select committee on the state of Ireland: 1825*, p. 440.

House in the district, it is almost certain that Milford House was used as a harbour for the the Alexander family and their Protestant workforce over the festivities, consolidating its status as a big house, and becoming a barracks for landed Protestant interests. It was a defining occasion for John I and his son, proving the power of religion and politics to open an immense gulf between them and their community. It marked, if not consolidated, a clear divide, and was a moment of enlightenment which encouraged the embrace of self-protectionism. For John I, this would have been a disillusioning necessity, and a new assertiveness and wariness of 'the mob' is detectable in his correspondence. For John II, this event nurtured his growing conservatism and defensiveness against the rise of the Catholic agenda. Given his role as the leading civil official in the county, it made an indelible impression on his own political fears and prejudices and intensified a fervent anti-Catholic bias which probably had its roots in his days at Trinity.

iii. Choosing sides, 1828-1830

As the 1820s progressed, the Alexanders found that politics were becoming firmly ingrained into every form of social interaction, and that their mercantile, landed and social identities carried inevitable political weight. The debates in Carlow in 1824 had done 'a great deal of harm' as one anonymous Carlovian reported to a visitor the following summer:

I can't say what may have taken place in Cork or in Kilkenny, but I know for certain that here they did do mischief. From the moment that these men [the Protestant speakers] entered the town, there was a visible separation of Catholic and Protestant; people began to look on each other with suspicion; some, who never thought of controversy before, now began to cross-question each other — men who met every day without once thinking of religious differences now laid a great stress on every little point.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ *Dublin Magazine*, July 1825, pp 207-8.

Events attracted the attention of Daniel O'Connell who seized upon Col. Rochfort's statements denying a riot as evidence that the Protestants of Carlow were intent upon a fraudulent and vindictive campaign against their Catholic neighbours.⁵⁷ On the other side, a Londoner named Robertson was sufficiently motivated to advertise his intention to establish a newspaper in the county to be entitled the *Carlow Protestant Defender*, 'to maintain a warm, exclusive and unbending devotion to the interests of the Protestant church [...] in the town of Carlow, which not improperly may be named the stronghold of Roman Catholic domination in that country'.⁵⁸ Closer to Milford, interdenominational relations became increasingly fraught with Bishop Doyle's appointment of Fr James Maher (1793–1874) as Parish Priest of Leighlin in 1827, who was to become the Alexanders' greatest adversary over the next 50 years. Uncle of the future Cardinal Cullen, cousin of Archbishop Moran, the brother of two nuns and the uncle of eighteen more, Maher brought an assertive and overtly political Catholicism to the parish which made no apologies to the Protestant gentlemen of the locality and spoke of an aggressive determination to overhaul the social and political *status quo*.⁵⁹ While he was not a key participant in the recent Bible debates, he assumed a national profile in the 1830s as one of the most active and outspoken clerical agitators in the country and is cited by Hoppen as an archetypal 'ecclesiastical patriarch'.⁶⁰ In his new parish, Maher coached his parishioners in the need for courage in pursuing socio-political change. As a student in Carlow College he had attended lectures by Doyle, and after Maher's ordination in 1821, the Bishop appointed him as a curate in Carlow parish. A very close friendship and working relationship developed, with Maher living under the Bishop's roof. JKL's faith in Maher's abilities can be seen in his decision to appoint him as the first parish priest of the newly-formed, important and contentious parish of Leighlin, where it was claimed

⁵⁷ M.F. Cusack, *The speeches and public letters of the Liberator* (Dublin, 1875), vol. ii, p. 342.

⁵⁸ Notice in PPP, at http://www.igp-web.com/Carlow/paddy_purcell_C.htm, accessed 18 Mar. 2010.

⁵⁹ Desmond Bowen, *The Protestant crusade in Ireland* (Dublin, 1978), p. 100; *Carlow Sentinel*, 10 Jun. 1837; McGrath, *Religious renewal and reform*, pp 84-5.

⁶⁰ K. Theodore Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society in Ireland, 1832-1885* (Oxford, 1984), p. 232.

that Protestant attempts at proselytism were rampant.⁶¹ Maher arrived at a time when strong leadership for the Catholic populace was badly needed in the area, and his own fiery personality coming to personify their growing expectations and willingness to challenge the hegemony of the Protestant establishment.

Maher was a staunch O'Connellite and used his time in Leighlin to promote the influence of the Catholic Association in the vicinity and was wont to use its power and influence to intimidate his opponents. From January 1828, he convened a regular series of Catholic meetings in Leighlinbridge chapel.⁶² That September, following a dispute over the best interests of the children of a local mixed marriage, Rev Samuel T. Roberts of Leighlinbridge informed government that 'I have been informed by this priest that I am so far answerable to the Catholic Association as to be threatened with their name and powerful influence'.⁶³ By that point, the association enjoyed great influence in the county, with one loyal and wealthy Protestant magistrate confessing privately that he was reluctant to pronounce judgements for fear of it.⁶⁴ Fr. Maher continued his campaign for emancipation and relished having been labelled a 'firebrand' by Roberts.⁶⁵ The meeting was also addressed by Counsellor William Francis Finn of Carlow, a close friend of O'Connell's, married to his youngest sister, Alicia. O'Connell was a frequent visitor to their home in Carlow town.⁶⁶

Tensions at Milford were also heightened considerably by the arrival of a new Protestant curate at Cloydagh in Alexander's parish in the same year, Rev Robert Fishbourne, accused of being 'one of the most perverse, if not one of the most active ministers who

⁶¹ Right Rev Patrick Francis Moran (ed.), *The letters of Rev James Maher, D.D., late P.P. of Carlow-Graigie, on religious subjects; with a memoir* (Dublin, 1877), pp iii–x.

⁶² See for example, *Carlow Morning Post*, 21 Jan. 1828.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Rev Samuel T. Roberts to Chief Secretary Francis Levison-Gower, 5 Sep. 1828 (NAI CSORP/1828/1387).

⁶⁵ *Carlow Morning Post*, 16 Feb. 1829.

⁶⁶ Seán O'Shea, 'Counsellor William Francis Finn', *Carloviana*, no. 59 (2010), pp 42-3, at p. 42.

assumed the special mission of assailing the Catholic creed in Carlow'.⁶⁷ On his appointment to Leighlin, Maher slammed Fishbourne's philosophies as ignorant and incendiary, and categorised the Cloydagh parishioners (which included the inhabitants of Milford House) as 'the deluded persons who listen to you'.⁶⁸ Maher quickly became a formidable presence on Milford estate, cultivating an active political mentality amongst the Alexander tenantry and workforce, and delivering sermons (initially in Leighlinbridge, and subsequently in the newly-finished Milford chapel from April 1830) which, in the course of inculcating a sense of political injustice, inevitably prompted them to question their loyalty to John I. In a very real way and for the first time, John Alexander's position as the undisputed patriarch in the locality was undermined and the phenomenon of divided loyalties amongst the tenantry and labouring population of Milford, which was to haunt the estate for decades, was born.

However, no confrontation took place between Maher and Milford's landlord at this point as they had many facets of a social agenda in common. They both held high expectations for the moral and social probity of Maher's parishioners and the promotion of temperance (the lack of which Maher regarded as 'a main source of all the evils which prevailed in the parish'), the campaign for Emancipation and improved living conditions were shared interests.⁶⁹ Undoubtedly, the two men would have met and conversed many times during Maher's three years in the parish, and the fact that Maher manifested a life-long and publicly-professed respect for John I, even while lambasting the policies and behaviour of his son, speaks volumes about the nature of their interaction at this time.⁷⁰ Crucially, during this time Maher got to grips with the nuts and bolts of the Alexander regime, so that when they were set at odds, he had an extensive and intimate portfolio of information

⁶⁷ Moran, *The letters of Rev James Maher*, p. xvii.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. xix.

⁶⁹ On Maher's efforts to promote temperance in Leighlin parish between 1827 and 1830 see Moran, *The letters of Rev James Maher*, pp xxi-xxii, and McGrath, *Religious renewal and reform*, p. 181.

⁷⁰ PP 1835 (547), *Report from the select committee on bribery at elections; together with the minutes of evidence, appendix and index*, p. 564.

at his disposal concerning its topography, sociology and the concerns of the Milford population, their families and farms.

All opponents to the campaign for Emancipation were categorised as ‘Orange Brunswickers’ by Maher even though such a body had not yet been officially established in the county. The *Carlow Morning Post* proudly reported on unsuccessful ‘attempts to hatch a Brunswick Club in Carlow’ in October 1828, congratulating the gentry on preventing acrimony and claiming that ‘Rochfort and others of our Aristocracy will not contaminate themselves by the slightest contact with the Brunswickers’, and indeed many of the gentry were unsupportive or even opposed to such a club.⁷¹ However, behind closed doors, Henry Bruen, who appeared to adopt a public stance in support of Emancipation, was eager to support oppositional measures, even offering to ‘become president of one [a Brunswock Club], if the majority of the Protestants of the county solicit him.’⁷² On 26 January 1829, the inaugural meeting of the ‘Lordship, manor, Town and County Brunswick Club’ was held in the town courthouse. Plans for the club had first been advertised in a Dublin newspaper in late 1828 and its first meeting was populated largely by individuals from outside the county and the local yeomanry, but without any prominent members of the county gentry.⁷³ Opposition to the group was so powerful that Bruen never publicly admitted involvement despite persistent rumours that he served as its secretary; indeed, some of the Oak Park staff played a leading role in the club’s proceedings.⁷⁴

At Milford, despite his father’s sustained and deep-rooted efforts on behalf of the Catholic population, John II was alarmed by the notion of Emancipation and apparently made his feelings known in some capacity around this time. Several years later, the

⁷¹ *Carlow Morning Post*, 23 Oct. and 20 Nov. 1828.

⁷² John Fitzmaurice, land agent to Lord Downes’s small estate in Carlow (Downes was brother-in-law to Col. Rochfort), 28 Nov. 1828 (Fitzmaurice papers, NLI, Ms 23,525/6).

⁷³ *Carlow Morning Post*, 15 and 29 Jan. 1829.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 7 Jun. 1832; 5 Feb. 1829.

Carlow press recalled how, 'when Brunswick clubs were forming previously to the passing of the Relief Bill, the people took it into their heads that Master John was a Brunswicker'.⁷⁵ Other sources claimed that he had actually become a member of Carlow's Brunswick Club at this time.⁷⁶ Whether John II enrolled in the movement is unclear, but it was certainly possible, even likely. In any case, the rumours were serious enough to warrant a strong reaction from the Catholic population: 'they refused in Dublin and elsewhere to use Mr Alexander's flour; the consequence was, he could find sale for it no where in this country'.⁷⁷ Such a counter-measure had first been mooted by the editor of the *Carlow Morning Post*, who had suggested a boycott of 'illiberal Protestants' by the Catholic Association the previous November.⁷⁸ Although these reports are almost certainly exaggerated, given the political context in which they were written, it is clear that John I would have been seriously disturbed by the rumours and/or actuality of his son taking such a public stand against his own philosophies. Beyond any personal disappointment, he would have considered the significant potential consequences for the Milford businesses. John I quickly, and 'very prudently disclaimed all connection with the *Brunswickers*, or any of the other *Exterminators* of that day'.⁷⁹ We know nothing of how or if he reprimanded his eldest son, but his swift and effective counter-measures to this development speaks very much of putting John II in his place. The father was still very much the owner, figurehead and public spokesman for the concerns, and the political ideologies of his son had not yet attained the powerbase to be heard or enforced. According to one report, 'when Master John first became a Brunswicker, he was glad to retrace his steps', and he cooperated willingly with his father, probably embarrassed by the trouble and controversy he had occasioned and frightened by the public reaction to his

⁷⁵ *Carlow Morning Post*, 25 Oct. 1834.

⁷⁶ *Ibid* 28 Jan. 1833; *Leinster Independent*, 28 Nov. 1835.

⁷⁷ *Carlow Morning Post*, 25 Nov. 1834.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 24 Nov. 1828.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 25 Oct. 1834.

political impulses.⁸⁰ His remorse can be deduced from the contents of his song journal, in which he skipped forward several blank pages to transcribe a number of verses from *The Times* in April 1829 in celebration of Emancipation. However, this was probably done more in honour of his father and in gratitude that there were not more severe consequences for his family. The press believed the incident had been ‘a salutary lesson’ for the young gentleman, but his true feelings are perhaps better indicated by the inclusion of another short poem which he copied in April 1829 entitled ‘Intimidation’, which included the following verse, and may speak of a determination to stick to his guns in future:

Tis better by far to be hurt,
Than be frightened in any degree;
I had rather be stripped to the shirt,
Than intimidated to be.⁸¹

Similarly, Henry Bruen and Thomas Kavanagh were forced to bow to public pressure and the overwhelming hunger for Emancipation, and they both presented petitions from the county’s Catholics for relief in February and March of 1829 and voted in favour of the measure.⁸² In Bruen’s case, this was done against the advice of his wife, Anne (née Kavanagh) who confessed ‘a horror of it’ and urged him to be cautious of embracing it as ‘a matter of political expediency’.⁸³ In viewing the measure as a dangerous encroachment on Protestant privileges, Bruen and John Alexander II, of a contemporary generation, with wealth and a status as newcomers in the county in common, were of the one mind. If John II had indeed joined the local Brunswick club, it marked the beginning of his working relationship with Bruen which was to strengthen in the years ahead.

⁸⁰ *Leinster Independent*, 28 Nov. 1835.

⁸¹ *Ibid*; *The Lady and gentleman’s universal melodist*, the song journal of John Alexander II (APMH).

⁸² <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/member/kavanagh-thomas-1767-1837>, and <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/bruen-henry-1789-1852>, accessed 12 May 2014.

⁸³ Anne Bruen to Henry Bruen, 16 Mar. 1829 (Bruen papers, NLI, Ms 29775/2).

iv. A Liberal embrace: Horace Rochfort's electoral campaign in 1830

The best way for the Alexanders to restore Milford's liberal reputation and to put the dangerous Brunswick rumours to bed was to embrace the popular political cause and support a reforming candidate in the next general election, which they did in July 1830. The Catholic cause was in the ascendant and it was prudent (as well as being a furtherance of John I's deep-rooted social beliefs) to be visibly supportive of this 'winning' side. It was at this point that the fortunes of Liberal Carlow received a boon in the arrival of Horace Rochfort (1807 – 1891) on to the local stage. Following his mother's death in 1808, Rochfort had been reared in England by his maternal aunt and her husband, Sir Robert Heron MP, an influential Whig politician. The eldest son and heir of John Staunton Rochfort, his upbringing had been far more enlightened and liberal than that of his father and uncle, and while they were alarmed by the events in France in 1789, Horace grew up 'rejoicing in the French Revolution as the downfall of bigotry'.⁸⁴ He arrived back in Carlow as a graduate of Trinity College Cambridge, aged only twenty-two, and appeared to embody the improvements which had taken place in his family's reputation since 1798.⁸⁵ He was regarded as something of a prodigy: widely-travelled and highly intelligent, his public speaking introduced an unprecedented eloquence to Carlow's small public stage. Beyond this, his remarkable skills as a sportsman across several disciplines made him immensely popular with all classes and he quickly became the poster boy of Liberal interests in the county.⁸⁶

Rochfort also seemed to possess a deep social and moral conscience and was guided by a fervent conviction of his duty to improve the political, social and religious relations between the two major factions in Irish society. His later career proved that he was primarily motivated by a genuine (if naive) commitment to substantial (if not

⁸⁴ Horace Rochfort to Lord Farnham, 19 Sep. 1830 (Farnham papers, NLI, MS 41146/29).

⁸⁵ J.A. Venn (ed.), *Alumni Cantabrigienses. Part II: from 1752 to 1900* (Cambridge, 1953), vol. v, p. 338.

⁸⁶ On Rochfort's sporting career, see Norman McMillan, *One hundred and fifty years of cricket and sport in county Carlow* (Dublin, 1983), pp 4-11.

comprehensive) reform.⁸⁷ However, Rochfort came from a family with impeccably conservative credentials, and in subsequent decades, his politics resembled those of a liberal Conservative, rather than a conservative Liberal. Nevertheless, his candidacy for Carlow county in the general election of 1830 saw him launch a stinging assault on the Bruen-Kavanagh regime which he critiqued in private as 'one of the most disgraceful coalitions that ever yet was formed to put down the free sense of any body of electors'.⁸⁸ His campaign was bolstered by support from the Catholic authorities in the county. As yet inexperienced in electoral campaigns (the most recent election in 1826 saw Bruen and Kavanagh returned unopposed), the Catholic hierarchy and clergy (including Fr Maher and Bishop Doyle himself) threw their weight behind Rochfort as their best option as the most liberal of all three candidates. Tellingly, Rochfort delivered his first official electoral speech inside Carlow College to a gathering of that institution's students and academics on 1 July.⁸⁹

Private notes express the extent of Rochfort's desires for reform which included the enactment of poor laws, voting by ballot, the repeal of the union and the re-establishment of a parliament in Dublin.⁹⁰ However, his first and greatest challenge would be to educate and induce Carlow's voters to break free from their inveterate, tenure-based and religious allegiances.⁹¹ The franchise was not to be a payback or a genuflection to the local landlord; it was to be viewed as a powerful instrument of reform to be wielded conscientiously and independently. Rather than out of a sense of duty or fear of his landlord, Rochfort wished for every Carlow voter to approach the hustings with an intention to better the county's social and economic prospects. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the establishment of the £10 franchise in Ireland in lieu of the 40s freeholders

⁸⁷ Malcomson, *Carlow Parliamentary roll*, pp 31-34.

⁸⁸ Horace Rochfort to Viscount Milton, 23 Aug. 1830 (Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments, Sheffield Archives, WWM/G2/30).

⁸⁹ *Carlow Morning Post*, 5 Jul. 1830.

⁹⁰ Undated, handwritten notes in Col. Rochfort's hand (Rochfort papers, NLI, Ms 8682).

⁹¹ *Carlow Morning Post*, 29 Jul. 1830.

as a condition of Emancipation (which reduced the county electorate from 1,510 in 1829 to 530 the following year) as he believed it would put the vote into the hands of a more confident and reflective group of men who would gravitate naturally to his cause.⁹² His efforts were lauded by 'M.R.G.' in a letter to the *Carlow Morning Post*, who hoped that his success 'would act as a signal chastisement upon men who are ciphers in parliament, without talent or one generally useful qualification. [...] He encounters the expense and difficulty of emancipating the county from the thralldom of a *family* coalition which has been too long borne already and threatens to continue the representation and liberties of our posterity as an heir-loom in these families'.⁹³

On a visit to Carlow on 16 July 1830, Daniel O'Connell gleefully endorsed 'the spirit of independence that was afloat' in the town and county.⁹⁴ This threat to the kingpins of the Carlow gentry was far more damaging than any wound the Catholic Association or the campaign for Emancipation had managed to inflict because this assault came from within, from a dangerously talented and popular member of one of the county's oldest and most influential landed families. For the first time since 1798, the solidarity of Carlow's landowners was significantly disturbed as gentlemen were asked to take sides. The newspaper accounts of the election make clear the new divisions in the Carlow gentry, who despite the general calm of proceedings, were beginning to express differing opinions about what their best interests were and who was most suited to effect them. In this regard, the Alexanders came down decisively on the side of their neighbours and friends and offered sterling support to the Rochfort cause. In 1830, only four freeholders on the Milford estate had the franchise (all registered in June 1829 for £10, including Alexander's two biggest tenants, Patrick Kehoe and Andrew Sleaven), but beyond their

⁹² Philip Salmon, 'Co. Carlow: 1820 – 1832' on www.historyofparliamentonline.org, accessed 18 Jan. 2015; *Carlow Morning Post*, 5 Jul. 1830.

⁹³ *Carlow Morning Post*, 29 Jul. 1830.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19 Jul. 1830

capacity to guarantee votes, the family endeavoured to help their neighbour in any way they could.⁹⁵

John II appears to have been especially captivated by the colour, activity and excitement Rochfort brought to the neighbourhood. At his coming-of age-celebrations at Clogrennane House in 1828, John II witnessed the rituals and material culture of an entrenched ascendancy family and undoubtedly contrasted Rochfort's position with his own: the house with its hall of marble pillars, the impressive ballroom, the banquet for 250 friends and tenants who cheered and toasted their young host, and the music, bonfires and illuminations across the Clogrennane estate which spoke of the popularity and esteem enjoyed by their Protestant overlord, on an estate brimming with the hallmarks of longevity.⁹⁶ It was a situation he craved for himself. A friendship developed between them in which the younger man (Rochfort, by five years) appears to have been the more dominant personality: John II's role as secretary of Carlow's first cricket club in 1834 — in which Rochfort played a leading role, hosting the matches in his demesne— is typical of the way in which he followed Rochfort's lead. It was this respect which Rochfort enjoyed in so many quarters (social and sporting, as well as political) that John II admired and wished to attain for himself, and he was very eager to promote his association with Carlow's most popular public figure. It was on account of this deep personal attachment that he threw himself so heavily and actively into an overtly 'liberal' campaign, which stands out as a striking and singular anomaly in his political career. In his own words, 'on the occasion of that election, he was actuated by no other motive than friendship and esteem for that gentleman [Rochfort] and his family [...]; he was his friend and early associate in life'.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Milford rental, 1829 (APMH); *Carlow Morning Post*, 14 May 1829.

⁹⁶ *Carlow Morning Post*, 13 Nov. 1828.

⁹⁷ *Belfast Newsletter*, 19 Jan. 1853.

By contrast, it was Horace Rochfort's politics rather than his personality which most gratified John I, in his embodiment of youthful ability, political savvy and conscientious liberalism which would best address Carlow's social, religious and economic problems. Alexander was also clearly dissatisfied with the inactivity of the standing county representatives. In May 1830, he had prepared a petition from the 'Landed Proprietors, Clergy, Freeholders, and Agriculturists of the county of Carlow' in which he expressed great alarm at government measures to increase taxation in Ireland, particularly on agricultural products. He forwarded the petition to Bruen for presentation in the House of Commons, a move which led the *Carlow Morning Post* to commend 'the example of Mr Alexander to the other influential persons of this county and of Ireland in general'.⁹⁸ However, Alexander's doubts in Bruen's capacity to effect change and push a local agenda can be seen in his hearty support for Rochfort's campaign from the following month onwards. Father and son were active on a committee of Rochfort's 'friends' who met regularly at Cullen's hotel to further his campaign.⁹⁹ In taking such 'a prominent part', it was alleged that 'there was, then, no man more apparently liberal in his views — no more staunch opponent of Colonel Bruen and Mr Kavanagh — no more furious demagogue in every sense of the word than Mr John Alexander'.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the *Leinster Independent* noted how both father and son 'neglected not to launch out into the most vituperative strain of invective against Henry Bruen'.¹⁰¹

Such criticism was being modelled by Rochfort and on 9 August 1830 when polling commenced, he delivered a bold and withering attack on Kavanagh and Bruen — both of whom, in a show of complacency, deemed it was not 'in the least degree necessary' to offer promises or pledges to the electorate for their conduct in parliament.¹⁰² In their

⁹⁸ *Carlow Morning Post*, 7 Jun. 1830.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 12 Jul. 1830.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 13 Dec. 1834.

¹⁰¹ *Leinster Independent*, 1 Aug. 1835.

¹⁰² *Carlow Morning Post*, 12 Aug. 1830.

presence, Rochfort accused them of usurping their positions, ignoring the interests of the electors 'as if they had no grievances to remedy or rights to protect'. Most stingingly, he characterised his campaign as a bold and unprecedented one in which he had opened himself up to political, social and economic offensives from the substantial Bruen-Kavanagh arsenal— expressed as 'the united influence and wealth of such men as held the county in political thralldom'.¹⁰³ However, the results left the county in no doubt of the strength of this coalition, with Rochfort polling almost 70 votes fewer than Bruen (see appendix G). On 11 August, it was clear that his campaign had been unsuccessful and he was obliged to calm a disappointed crowd who had smashed the courthouse windows. However, as he conceded defeat at the final declaration the following day, he made his feelings very apparent in the most personal and direct public attack which the Bruen-Kavanagh ascendancy had experienced to date.

Besides accusing Bruen of being inactive and inefficient in parliament, Rochfort alleged that he had inflicted a 'horrible oppression' on his tenantry, that he 'induced —nay forced, them to give the vote promised to [Rochfort] personally, to his father-in-law, Mr Kavanagh.'¹⁰⁴ The fact that these accusations emanated from within their social class made them all the more withering and divisive. Bruen who had been publicly accused of practices tantamount to corruption, of fraudulently employing 'menaces and threats' through the infrastructure of his financial and social power to retain a political position he was ill-fitted to hold. Although the meeting separated in peace, a state of alarm rang through the ranks of the Carlow gentry as an internal war, waged with the weaponry of gentlemanly debate, had significantly damaged the ostensibly inviolate position of the Protestant gentry of the county. Commentators, both contemporary and modern, have grossly underestimated the importance and influence of this election in awakening the admittedly weak Catholic electorate to the possibility of achieving reform, and to their

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 16 Aug. 1830.

own political efficacy.¹⁰⁵ It also proved, despite Rochfort's failure, that landlord hegemony, solidarity and confidence were not untouchable.

In their support for Rochfort, the Alexanders had taken a clear position against the lazy, land-backed Tory politics of the Kavanaghs and Bruens. They helped to arrange an entertainment in Rochfort's honour in Lennon's hotel on 2 September, which was attended by 100 gentlemen who wished to express their esteem for the candidate and his political conduct. John I had agreed to act as president at the dinner but became ill that morning. John II attempted to rouse the company from the palpable disappointment at Rochfort's noble failure by injecting as much joviality as possible into the evening and seized upon his considerable musical repertoire to perform a number of songs for the assembly — the 'most excellent' of which was inspired by a toast for 'the fair ladies of Carlow'.¹⁰⁶ Spurred on by their disappointment, John I and II also made plans for future support and became determined for the first time to harness the electoral power of their tenantry to support their own political inclinations. It is clear that some new leases were granted shortly before the contest— Peter Curran signed a new one for his 12 acre farm in Tomard on 1 May 1830.¹⁰⁷ The instigation behind such new grants is made patently clear in another signed on the same date by Patrick Hughes for his 16 acre holding in Ballygowan, where terms were agreed 'for twenty-one years, or life of Horace Rochford [sic]'.¹⁰⁸ With an eye to political expediency, several more were granted in the immediate aftermath of Rochfort's defeat, to prevent similar disappointment in the future.

It was at this point that John II found a focus for his energies and ambitions by taking on the role of land agent for his father's estate. In September 1830, he embarked on an enthusiastic drive to encourage many of the Milford landholders to apply to register their

¹⁰⁵ See for example, M.J. Brennan, 'Landlord supremacy in 19th century Carlow: from domination to dismissal' in *Carloviana* (2010), no. 59, pp 15-24, at p. 16.

¹⁰⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 6 Sep. 1830.

¹⁰⁷ Ejectment process from John Alexander II to Mary and Matthew Curran, 18 Jun. 1849 (PPP).

¹⁰⁸ 'Rentals, maps and particulars... of the mill quarter of Ballygowan', 2 Jul. 1880, Landed Estates Court auction notice on www.findmypast.ie, accessed 12 Apr. 2013.

freeholds at the upcoming examination in October. In a later petition to the House of Commons, the tenantry claimed

that the anxiety of John Alexander, Esquire, Junior, to have your petitioners registered, induced him to grant new leases, and to lower the rent in some instances, that the claim of the applicants to register might be placed beyond all doubt.¹⁰⁹

One source claims that up to 25 new leases were issued at this time— a clear indication of the Alexanders' desire to inculcate a political awareness among their tenantry at this time.¹¹⁰ Such attractive offers, along with the requests from their highly-respected landlord, were remarkably successful and almost 50 per cent of the tenants (42 of the 87 tenant farmers recorded in the Milford rental for 1830) 'willingly complied' and made applications to register their freeholds for the franchise at the upcoming examination in Carlow, all for the alleged value of £10.¹¹¹ While the vast majority of applicants paid annual rents well in excess of £10, some paid much smaller sums. For example, the annual rents charged to Patrick Fitzpatrick and James Bowe of Tomard and Thomas Ryan of Ballinabranna in 1830 were just over £8 apiece. Nevertheless, John II was prepared to defend all applications. He provided transport and personally accompanied the petitioners into Carlow town on 18 and 19 October for the registry. 'Nay, more, he himself proved, in one of the most doubtful cases upon the estate that the tenant, holding only a few acres of land, and paying a high rent, enjoyed the qualification'.¹¹² Although the proceedings of the registry have not survived, it was later reported anecdotally that 'only about five or six [applications] were passed by the Barrister'.¹¹³ Nevertheless, the process had been one of political enlightenment and empowerment for the tenants, aided and abetted by their landlord and his son, which strengthened the reputation of the

¹⁰⁹ *Statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow*, p. 33.

¹¹⁰ *Carlow Sentinel*, 15 Aug. 1835.

¹¹¹ Milford rental, 1830 (APMH); *Carlow Morning Post*, 23 Sep. 1830, 13 Dec. 1834.

¹¹² *Statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow*, p. 33.

¹¹³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 15 Aug. 1835.

Milford establishments as ones where all classes and creeds cooperated peacefully for mutual benefit and advancement:

In one word, he caused [them] to register, pledging himself, distinctly, and ostentatiously, before and after the registry, that they should always be left at perfect liberty to vote as conscience and judgement dictated; [they] and their landlord, and John Alexander, Esquire, Junior, heir and agent to their landlord, fully concurred, at that time, in the opinion that the peace and prosperity of the country demanded a searching and extensive reform in church and state.¹¹⁴

In subsequent years, when the tenantry's confidence in their capacity to effect change threatened to defy the Alexanders' growing political authority, divisions occurred at Milford which made it notorious as a centre of tension and alleged Tory oppression. Built on the concepts of solidarity and productivity, the power generated by the Milford establishments was seized by John II in the mid 1830s as an offensive tool to enforce the domination of a Protestant landlord over a predominantly Catholic tenantry. This process of transition and its effects will be the focus of the following chapter.

¹¹⁴ *Statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow*, p. 33.

Chapter 7

The Alexanders and Carlow electoral politics, 1831–41

‘A war of extermination’?

The Milford tenantry, 1835¹

i. From Liberals to Conservatives: political change at Milford, 1831-34

Between 1831 and 1841, Milford’s political reputation was completely turned on its head. The semblance of an egalitarian and interdenominational cooperative engineered by John I disintegrated, leaving a sectarian and hierarchical model in its stead in which the Protestant landlord and employer was kingpin. By December 1840, according to an editorial in the *Leinster Reformer*, management policies at Milford made the estate notorious as the home of ‘Tory petty tyranny’. From a centre of enlightenment and productivity and the home of lucky tenants, it became known as a ‘hot bed of oppression’, its citizens ‘cursed with the misfortune of being tenants to the Milford property’.²

The Alexanders’ shift from generous liberalism to overtly defensive Conservatism was a relatively quick process which was determined by three key factors, all of which had self-protecting interests at their core, namely: a fear of being isolated by the ruling Protestant elite; a growing disillusionment with the forces of Catholic self-determination, and finally the personalities of John I and II (and the relationship between an anxious, ageing father and his passionately zealous son). The first of these had its origins in treatment meted out to Horace Rochfort in 1831 when he was simultaneously rejected by the assertive forces of reform and ostracised by the Carlow’s Tory gentry. Placed in an isolating political and

¹ *A statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow*, p. 35.

² *Leinster Reformer*, 16 Dec. 1840.

social limbo, he appeared to personify for the Alexanders their own possible fate if they associated themselves with an agenda which worked against the traditional elite of the county—a campaign Rochfort was blamed for energising.

The extent of the successful mobilisation of Catholic parliamentary opposition in Carlow was made apparent in May 1831 when two pro-Catholic, reforming candidates (Walter Blackney and Sir John Milley Doyle) were put forward to contest the seats of Bruen and Kavanagh. The shock, even amongst the liberal gentry, was palpable. When Rochfort expressed some reservations with the sweeping changes proposed by the Reform Bill—Carlow's labourers and small farmers quickly dusted down their historical prejudices against his family and recalled that he bore 'an ill-omened name', claiming that he was just 'as hostile to the present bill of Reform, as was his uncle, the slashing parson, to the unfortunate Papists in 1798'.³ In the days leading up to this election, an unorthodox and controversial measure was employed by the popular side to achieve their victory—a move that was to become an infamous feature of elections in the county for the next couple of decades. For the first time, up to 60 enfranchised freeholders (including tenants of Bruen, Kavanagh and Lord Downes) were forcibly detained by Catholic gangs in a practice known as 'cooping', allegedly at the behest of their local clergymen, and held until they were conducted to the hustings to vote for the reforming candidates.⁴ Completely unprepared for the audacity and efficacy of such a bold move, Rochfort and the two sitting members were numbed into surrendering the contest.⁵ The impact of the Catholic agenda on the political field was now immense. Richard Lalor Sheil commented gleefully on the political sway of J.K.L., who had effectively made two members of parliament 'with a single touch of his magic crozier [...] Even the great Daniel himself

³ *Carlow Morning Post*, 9 May 1831.

⁴ PP 1835 (547), *Report from the select committee on bribery at elections; together with the minutes of evidence, appendix and index* (hereinafter *Bribery at elections*), pp 634-5.

⁵ *Carlow Morning Post*, 12 May. 1831.

could not achieve so much in any single Irish county'.⁶ From this point onwards, electoral politics in Carlow constituted a battle between the Conservative Protestant gentry and the Liberal Catholic tenantry of the county, and Hoppen has referred to 'the effective terror stalking Carlow' at this time.⁷ Horace Rochfort was blamed by Conservative Protestants for the disintegration of solidarity and common purpose among the Carlow gentry. In the preface to his *History and antiquities of Carlow* (1833), the unapologetic Tory John Ryan (with an obvious nod towards Rochfort) claimed 'that the gentry themselves are not altogether blameless in the affair'.⁸ Having achieved popular approval in his challenge to the local Protestant elite, Rochfort had aroused the Catholic masses and made them aware of their potential electoral power. An anonymous correspondent to the *Carlow Morning Post* summarised Rochfort's position succinctly: 'Despised by the humble but honest freeholders, and distrusted by the aristocrat, he is alike contemptible in the estimation of both, young in years but old in political delinquency'.⁹

One of the consequences of the divisions he had exposed was a regrouping of the Carlow gentry and a growing determination to fight against internal as well as external enemies.¹⁰ Growing bitterness and frustration with the pace of change resulted in increasingly defiant and militant expressions of Protestantism in the county in 1831—such as the allegations in July that sectarian toasts had been proposed and drunk at a Carlow grand jury dinner.¹¹ O'Connell, who increasingly seized upon events in Carlow as powerful propaganda for his causes, brought the affair to the House of Commons and used it as an instance of Protestant oppression.¹² The Alexanders' traditional liberal politics were now hugely problematic for the ruling elite as they associated the family directly with the opposing

⁶ W.M. Savage (ed.), *Richard Lalor Sheil: sketches, legal and political* (London, 1855), vol. ii, pp 348-9.

⁷ Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society*, p. 356.

⁸ Ryan, *History and antiquities of Carlow*, pp vii-viii.

⁹ *Carlow Morning Post*, 5 May 1831.

¹⁰ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Mar. 1833.

¹¹ *Belfast Newsletter*, 12 Aug. 1831; *Carlow Sentinel*, 1 Aug. 1831.

¹² *Carlow Sentinel*, 1 Aug. 1831.

camp. In addition, the family posed a threat in the power it enjoyed through its wealth and popularity. As society split into two major camps, Hoppen has commented on 'the peculiar fierceness poured over Protestant liberals' by Irish Tories.¹³ For the likes of Henry Bruen, Alexander's reputation and support for reform could easily be employed as powerful weapons by the popular side and so the Milford magnate was targeted by the ruling elite for his liberalism. This was to be seen at the selection of the grand jury at the Carlow assizes on 24 March 1832, where John I endured his most deliberate and pointed political rebuff to date. Ostensibly coached by Bruen, John Whelan, the new high sheriff, arranged his roll call to enable the jury to be filled before those who were deemed undesirable names were reached.¹⁴ In this way, the three main dissenting voices among the Carlow gentry (Horace Rochfort, Walter Blackney and John Alexander) were excluded (despite their presence in the courthouse), for appearing to support a challenge to the *status quo*. Not surprisingly, his character was defended by the *Liberal Carlow Morning Post* in an argument which served only to highlight the status of Milford as a powerbase under attack:

Why has not Mr Alexander, of Milford, been put upon the Grand Jury? Perhaps Colonel Bruen can answer this question. Also, Mr Alexander has always been on the Grand jury; and what is more, if they place him in juxtaposition with others, has always deserved to be upon it. It seems however that his being on the present Grand Jury would not harmonize with the views of him of Oak Park — and of course Mr Alexander was omitted.¹⁵

For the first time since 1818, John I had been deliberately left out in the cold, and over the following months, the wisdom of joining with the forces of militant Protestantism was powerfully brought home to him.

The second major factor which pushed John I into the Conservative camp was his growing disillusionment with Catholic militancy visible on his estate and in his

¹³ Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society in Ireland*, p. 279.

¹⁴ *Carlow Morning Post*, 26 Mar. 1832.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

neighbourhood. This was first displayed in the campaign of resistance to tithes in the locality, the controversy over which 'laid the foundation of strong party feeling in this country, which whole centuries, perhaps shall not be able totally to eradicate', according to the *Carlow Morning Post*.¹⁶ In January 1832, a number of landholders (including a number of small farmers from the Milford estate) called for a meeting in Leighlinbridge 'for the total abolition of the oppressive tithe system'.¹⁷ At the end of the month, Patrick Kehoe (an Alexander tenant of 54 acres in Craanluskey) and his namesake and cousin, Fr Patrick Kehoe, the equally proactive successor to Maher as parish priest of Leighlin, played leading roles in managing the public meeting.¹⁸ However, the failure of John I and the Rochforts to respond to letters of invitation was symptomatic of their growing unease with the developing militancy of the Liberal campaign; indeed, when their absence was brought to Fr. Maher's attention during the meeting, he was clearly insulted. Tellingly, his combative declaration that 'we could do without them' was greeted with laughter and cheers from the crowd.¹⁹

Alexander's embrace of the Conservative cause was more powerfully prompted by his horror of the use of violence on his property by Catholic activists. In early 1832, unrest in the locality took the form of violent arms raids on the homes of Col. Rochfort's Cloydagh and Killeshin yeomanry—the corps closest to Milford which was the largest of the county's six units, comprising of at least 92 members in February 1832.²⁰ Such was the anxiety in the vicinity at this time that William Steuart Trench, later a notorious land agent, claimed from experience that 'many of the resident gentlemen in Queen's County, Carlow and Kilkenny were accustomed to ride armed to the cover's side, and to hunt all day with their pistols in their pockets, lest they should be attacked going home in the

¹⁶ *Carlow Morning Post*, 31 May 1832.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 23 Jan. 1832. At least five attendees were Alexander tenants, the largest holding 23 acres. Milford rental, 1832 (APMH).

¹⁸ *Carlow Morning Post*, 2 Feb. 1832.

¹⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Feb. 1832.

²⁰ William Cosby to Gossett, 14 Feb. 1832 (Yeomanry & Constabulary Index, NAI, CSORP/1832/180).

evening'.²¹ Increasingly referred to in the press as the 'Orange yeomanry', Rochfort's exclusively Protestant corps was possessed of an infamous reputation for sectarian antagonism since the 1798 rebellion and was the most controversial unit in the county.²² In the spring of 1832, the homes of several of these yeomen were raided for arms by newly assertive gangs of Catholic activists, many of them succumbing to the threat of being shot by their attackers.²³ Labelled 'Whitefeet' by loyalists, the attackers regularly crossed the border into Carlow from Queen's County, striking terror into the hearts of Protestants in the neighbourhoods around Milford. As the weeks progressed, however, the gangs began to target the homes of other than known military personnel and to John Alexander's horror, Milford became a target for this posse in April 1832. Recalling unhappy memories of the raid on his cottage by activists in 1793, the sense of shock and terror is unmistakeable in John Alexander's letter to Sir William Gossett the day after the event. He informed the under-secretary that a gang of undisguised Whitefeet, 'strangers from the neighbourhood of the colliery' in Doonane, arrived in Milford around 2 pm on Friday 13 April:

In the middle of the day, 8 or 9 men, well-armed, searched the houses in my immediate neighbourhood & succeeded in taking [arms]. [...] These arms were all in good order and resistance would have been made if the attack had been made in the night but the men were at work from their houses, having no idea of such thing[s] taking place.²⁴

Though several dwellings in 'the street of Milford' were visited, the party (bearing pistols and blunderbusses) succeeded in acquiring only four weapons before proceeding to the Rochfort estate at Clogrennane.²⁵ John I was not only taken aback by the threat of violence, but with the fact that these Catholic belligerents now possessed the confidence and assertiveness to conduct their defiant raids in broad daylight. Alexander concluded

²¹ William Steuart Trench, *Realities of Irish life*, new edition (London, 1869 ?), p. 44.

²² On Rochfort's yeomanry, see *Carlow Morning Post*, 16 May, 4 Jul., 5 and 15 Sep. 1831; 1 Nov. 1834.

²³ See for example Brigadier Major Cosby to Gossett, 17 Mar. 1832 (NAI, CSO/RP/1832/232).

²⁴ *Carlow Standard*, 16 Apr. 1832

²⁵ Ibid; PP 1831-32 (677), *Report from the select committee on the state of Ireland; with the minutes of evidence, appendix and index*, p. 488.

his remarks by claiming that Milford had been 'quite peaceable but I fear it will not long remain so'.²⁶ He could not hide his shock that they raided the estate of a renowned liberal landlord. To his mind, the Catholic confidence he had encouraged and fostered had mutated into an aggressive machine, intoxicated with its new power and with little regard for those who had enabled its elevation. While his liberal principles had deep roots, John I refused to sacrifice his property and prosperity to them.

In reply to his letter, Gosset assured Alexander that he considered the outrage a very serious one and hoped the magistrates might be able to induce some of the locals to identify the offenders.²⁷ Despite the spirit of confraternity to date in the area, Alexander was a pragmatist and held out little hope of receiving such information. From his experiences in the area he believed that

an informer in Ireland is a man that runs the risk of being put to death. An informer has a kind of conscientious feeling, that he is the greatest rogue on the face of the earth, and therefore, he will not do it. [...] A man would be branded with the greatest infamy if he informed; he would commit any crime rather than inform.²⁸

The fact that none of the party was identified attests to the accuracy of his assessment, and possibly to the complicity of Milford Catholics in the affair, or at least an unwillingness to offer testimony against their co-religionists, through solidarity or fear. Indeed, efforts were made at petty sessions to compel Andrew Sleaven's son, a 'respectable young man' according to Col. Rochfort, to swear evidence to identify the Whitefeet, but he refused and was sent to prison for ten months, only being released when he eventually swore that he knew nothing about the attackers of his father's house.²⁹ This event soured relations between landlord and tenant and the harsh treatment of the young man exacerbated divisions at Milford. Despite the community's deep respect for their

²⁶ John Alexander I to William Gosset, 14 Apr. 1832 (NAI, CSO RP Private Index 1832/720).

²⁷ Ibid, Gosset to Alexander, 18 Apr. 1832.

²⁸ PP 1835 (17-19) *Fifteenth report of the commissioners of inquiry into the excise establishment ...malt*, p. 215.

²⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 14 Feb. 1835.

landlord, his personality and decency, the desire of many tenants for change manifested itself in a growing resentment of the legal and political infrastructure which guaranteed his local ascendancy. Significantly, Andrew Sleaven did not register his freehold (the largest on the estate by far in 1832, at 90 acres and a yearly rental of £203) for any subsequent election, in a bid to place himself beyond his landlord's political influence, to avoid becoming a political pawn in a campaign which would place him between his landlord, his community and his priest.³⁰

The third major factor which determined the move towards Conservatism was the personalities of the two men involved: John I and II. The father, something of an alarmist, was clearly actuated by fear and was easily influenced by his beloved son who was committed to fight in the cause of Protestant supremacy. Faced with what he clearly felt was the makings of anarchy which threatened to destroy Milford's prosperity, John I (as in 1798, 1817 and 1827) embraced self-defence and became convinced of the wisdom of identifying himself more categorically with the forces of the country's ruling political elite—those who were duty-bound and capable of suppressing lawlessness and apparent sedition. Although the movement did not accurately reflect his social or political ideals, Conservatism was the only option available to him at this point. Nor was the move a singular one. Fellow miller Simeon Clarke of Hanover House, who acted as chairman at meetings of Carlow Liberal Club in 1830, had become a resolute supporter of Henry Bruen's politics by 1835.³¹

The emergence of a newly disciplined and policy-specific Irish Conservatism pre-dated the efforts in Britain of the Duke of Wellington, John Wilson Croker and Henry Bruen's old friend, Sir Robert Peel who sought to move away from the radicalism of the ultra-Tories as a response to the dominance of Whig policies. Croker, MP for Dublin

³⁰ Milford rental, 1832 (APMH).

³¹ Maurice R. O'Connell (ed.), *The correspondence of Daniel O'Connell*, vol. iv, pp 171-4; Malcomson, *The Carlow parliamentary roll*, pp 81, 84.

University was horrified with recent reform measures and was credited, between 1830 and 1835, with naming and moulding ‘the new Conservative party as the *via media* of British parliamentary politics where moderates could unite to defend Church and constitution against extremes, and conciliate popular concerns with corrective reforms’, as Robert Portsmouth has argued.³² The fellows of Dublin University had formed the Irish Protestant Conservative Society in the spring of 1832 —the title of which makes clear the sectarian solidarity envisaged for Irish Conservatism.³³ While both bodies conceived of Conservatism as a unitary alternative to ultras (Whig and Tory), the Irish version was definitively, militantly, almost obsessively Protestant in its genesis, outlook and objectives.³⁴ Although he came to spearhead new Conservatism (happy to amalgamate moderate Whigs and Tories in the new Conservative party in Britain), the Duke of Wellington was a Tory when it came to Ireland: ‘there is no end to our troubles in Ireland, we [the ruling Protestant elite] shall have to fight for possession of the country’, he wrote in December 1832.³⁵ In Ireland, to be a ‘Conservative’ was to be a staunch upholder of Protestant interests and privileges.³⁶ In Carlow’s liberal press in the early 1830s, a Conservative was synonymous with a Tory, an Orangeman, a tyrant – or any combination of these; he was inevitably supposed to be anti-Catholic and bigoted. Men like John Alexander, actuated by fear and obliged to declare for one side or the other, joined the Conservative ranks as an alternative to anarchy. His son entered more enthusiastically into the sectarian spirit of Irish Conservatism and embraced it as an overtly religious crusade. Conservatism meant a proud declaration of Protestant righteousness over an ungrateful Catholicism which deserved suppression.

³² Robert Portsmouth, *John Wilson Croker: Irish ideas and the invention of modern Conservatism, 1800-1835* (Dublin, 2010), p. 138

³³ Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society in Ireland*, p. 280.

³⁴ Portsmouth, *John Wilson Croker*, p. 180.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 185-6.

³⁶ Hoppen, *Politics, elections and society*, pp 278-81.

The Alexanders' paranoia about their growing powerlessness was exacerbated in late 1832 by the activities of Fr Kehoe among the Milford tenantry in an attempt to harness and wield their political power for his cause. According to an article in the Tory *Carlow Sentinel* some years later, the tenantry, 'urged on by their Priest, the meek and sleek Kehoe [...] pressed forward to the registry and succeeded in registering, although objected to at the time by Mr Alexander who declared they had not value'.³⁷ Consequently, 24 of the Alexander tenants secured the franchise, the vast majority of whom appear to have voted for the successful Liberal candidates in the general election that December, in which Blackney was again returned along with the barrister Thomas Wallace, a Protestant Liberal (see appendix G).³⁸ The personal appearance of John I before the assistant barrister in an attempt to prove 'that most of those claiming to register off his estate WERE NOT ENTITLED TO THE FRANCHISE' was his first public political action which can be construed as opposition to Liberal interests in its nature and intent—a seminal turning point in his political conduct.³⁹ By late 1832, he had placed himself officially in the burgeoning Conservative camp and signalled his preparedness to announce and act upon his new politics. In November, he was one of a group of local gentlemen (men 'who have hitherto advocated liberal principles')⁴⁰ who solicited the nomination of Thomas Kavanagh of Borris for the election.⁴¹ In early December, the *Carlow Morning Post* published a list of the voters for Carlow borough with a description of their political affiliations. Heading the list was 'John Alexander, Milford, Miller, Protestant, Conservative'.⁴² For the first time, John I was designated publicly as an opponent of the popular movement, his home-place, business and religion associated directly with his new political cause. Two weeks later, the newspaper had clearly lost all

³⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 15 Aug. 1835.

³⁸ Malcolm, *Parliamentary roll*, pp 39-44; Kavanagh, *The political scene*, p.2.

³⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Apr. 1834.

⁴⁰ *Carlow Morning Post*, 3 Dec. 1832.

⁴¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 24 Nov. 1832.

⁴² *Carlow Morning Post*, 3 Dec. 1832.

hopes for the family in an article which made clear its disappointment with John I's conversion: 'In him [Kavanagh], we have therefore the true character of the Watsons, the Newtons, the Whelans, the Ducketts, aye and the Alexanders, and all the other petty fry of the county'.⁴³ Already, the family's pedigree and their entitlement to gentry privileges was being questioned. From this point onwards, the Alexanders featured regularly in the county and provincial press as Conservatives, and were abused and heralded in equal measure in the mouthpieces of the opposing sides, the Liberal *Carlow Morning Post* and the Tory *Carlow Sentinel*.⁴⁴

Reasonably, one might infer the influence of John II in this U-turn, but interestingly, his son was away from home at this point, enjoying an extended tour of America for most of 1832 and would not return to Carlow until April of the following year.⁴⁵ On his return, he was outraged by the incursions on his father's authority and privileges in his absence, and he took on the role as agent of the Milford estate as a means through which to aggressively (even wantonly) drive the family's new politics in the years ahead. His father's moves to limit the enfranchisement of his tenantry had the effect of giving John II permission to vent the sentiments he had concealed in the Emancipation debate five years earlier, which saw him move from initial defensiveness to open aggression. As Milford agent in July 1833, he refused Fr Kehoe's request for a half acre of land in his application to build a new National School under the Board of Education beside the chapel in Ballinabranna.⁴⁶ This decision was informed as much by his determination to frustrate the priest's schemes for Catholic advancement in the Milford neighbourhood as by his opposition to an education system which appeared to water down Protestant dogma (being 'a violence to my feelings, my principles, and perhaps you will say to my

⁴³ Ibid, 20 Dec. 1832.

⁴⁴ P.J. Kavanagh, 'Carlow newspapers (1828-1841)' in *Carloviana* (1975), pp 26-8.

⁴⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Apr. 1836.

⁴⁶ NAI, ED1/1/34/4B, 23 Jul. 1833; Fr Kehoe to chief secretary, 29 Jul. 1833, NAI, ED1/1/34/6-7.

prejudices', as he later confessed).⁴⁷ Attempt as he might, John II could not hide his obvious distaste for the project by claiming it constituted a 'further waste of land'.

Also in 1833, the Alexanders assisted with the programme to retard the raiding parties in the locality by facilitating the establishment of a police barracks on Milford bridge—a move which was inevitably construed as a hostile act by his opponents. In the wake of the Liberal successes in the general election of 1832, Carlow was a lawless place; according to the local magistrates and criminal incidents reached worrying levels, with chief constable Captain Battersby in regular and alarmed contact with Col. Sir John Harvey, the provincial inspector general of police in Leinster, noting that only half of the outrages were being reported.⁴⁸ It was a matter of huge concern and regret for John I that Milford Bridge, a key symbol of his life's work was being hijacked for illicit purposes, in its regular use by the Whitefeet to cross the Barrow to avoid the bridges in Carlow and Leighlinbridge, both busy towns with constabulary barracks. On 6 February 1833, Horace Rochfort wrote to Gossett that it would be 'advisable to stop effectually this pass by placing a body of police as near the bridge of Milford as possible. Mr Alexander who lives near has offered a house for this purpose'.⁴⁹ A team of five men was posted to the barracks when it opened on the bridge in late 1833, and it first appears in the surviving Milford rentals in September 1834, where John Alexander charged a rent of £12 to the government.⁵⁰ Subsequent events make it apparent that the siege mentality which John II possessed was vigorously communicated to the new arrivals who were informed of his expectations of their allegiance to his politics.⁵¹ In the eyes of the Milford agent, the

⁴⁷ John Alexander II to Fr Kehoe, 7 Sep. 1833 (NAI, ED1/1/34/8); John Alexander to Rev J. Cooper, 17 Jan. 1874 (LB2, APMH).

⁴⁸ Battersby to Harvey, 9 Jan. 1833 (NAI, CSORP/1833/219); on Harvey, see Jim Herlihy, *Royal Irish Constabulary Officers: a biographical dictionary and genealogical guide, 1816-1922* (Dublin, 2005), pp 155-7.

⁴⁹ Horace Rochfort to Gossett, 6 Feb. 1833 (NAI, CSORP/1833/219).

⁵⁰ Milford rental, 1834 (APMH). Details of the early personnel at Milford barracks are taken from 'Commissioners of audit and exchequer and audit department: Accounts current. Ireland. Constabulary, co. Carlow, 1837-1840' (NAK, AO 19/64/3).

⁵¹ See below, pp 257-60.

police barracks was a valuable defensive addition to the infrastructure of his estate and business and he regarded the men as state-paid defenders of his rights and interests, as personal bodyguards and enforcers; he later purchased a Union Jack flag to be flown over the barracks.⁵² Located physically and visibly at the administrative and commercial hub of the estate, the barracks was inevitably regarded as an Alexander institution. This attitude is alluded to in an article in the *Sentinel* which defended John II's policies and described the barracks as 'a sort of fortress to repress outrage, and check insubordination'.⁵³

In the first two decades of the 1800s, the only regular police presence on the Milford estate had been the baronial high constable, who was sometimes one of Alexander's more prosperous tenants.⁵⁴ With the emergence of agrarian outrages from 1819 onwards, the gentry came to regard the police as tools for upholding the political and social *status quo*.⁵⁵ In 1821, James Tandy, the chief police magistrate for the county, specifically requested the government to fill vacancies in the force with Protestant candidates and it was increasingly characterised as a tool of landlordism in the county as a result.⁵⁶ Following recent disturbances, Henry Bruen wrote to the under secretary on 14 February 1833, when he explicitly stated his understanding of the police as a means of repressing political disturbances which had split the population down religious lines.⁵⁷ Essentially, he envisaged an extended police force as a militantly Protestant institution in its intentions, if not totally in its make-up. Not surprisingly, the local Liberal press was outraged by the plans to enlarge a biased force of 'Orange bayonets'.⁵⁸ While probably welcomed by the nervous Protestant elements of the community in Milford, most of the

⁵² Milford rental, 1849 (APMH).

⁵³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Apr. 1836.

⁵⁴ See Thomas Donahue's salary of £20 as high constable of Idrone West in 1807, in Tony Lyons, 'Carlow grand jury presentments, spring 1807' in *Carloviana* (2013-14), no. 62, pp 196-203, at p. 201.

⁵⁵ *Carlow Morning Post*, 1 Feb. 1819.

⁵⁶ James Tandy to William Gregory, 7 Dec. 1821 (NAI, CSO/RP/SC/1821/1442).

⁵⁷ Bruen to Gossett, 14 Feb. 1833 (NAI, CSORP/1833/219).

⁵⁸ *Carlow Morning Post*, 31 Jan. 1833.

Catholic population there resented the arrival of police as an attempt to restrict their liberties. In a later petition, some of the Milford tenantry described it as 'this new garrison, wholly unnecessary for the preservation of the peace' and claimed that they,

in whose district no outrage or violation of law has occurred, have lately been burdened with a police station, stuck up at the rear of John Alexander's residence, a sort of appendage to the Tory exterminating club of the county [...]⁵⁹

To Fr Kehoe, the local police were aggressors and tithe enforcers and he spoke out against them from the altar of Leighlinbridge chapel as provocative henchmen of tyrannical landlords.⁶⁰

The establishment of the barracks contributed to the rehabilitation of the Alexander reputation in Bruen's eyes. The recent efforts of both Alexanders to distance themselves from the Liberal side convinced Bruen of their new commitment to the Conservative cause and they were brought in from the cold. As the county's wealthiest, best known and respected entrepreneur, with an enviable record as a landlord, Bruen was eager to harness John I's unblemished reputation for integrity, who could add an extra veneer of righteousness to his campaign. The first step in the rehabilitation in Alexander's political fortunes was to reinstate him on the grand jury, which was achieved in March 1833.⁶¹

We also know that Bruen visited Milford estate and milling works to witness first-hand the source of such positive press for the family and the county in general.⁶² While well aware that John I was far from a die-hard Conservative, Bruen still felt he could be useful: 'Mr Alexander still remains the same kind and liberal man that his acts have proved him; but he does not choose to be bought and sold, and has the hardihood openly to say so'.⁶³

Bruen's relationship with John II was more obviously the meeting of like minds and from

⁵⁹ *A statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow*, p. 35

⁶⁰ PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 651.

⁶¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 23 Mar. 1833.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 12 Mar. 1836.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

1835 onwards, he regularly referred to John II in public as 'my respected friend'.⁶⁴

Closer in age to John II (Bruen was older by 13 years), the Colonel became the conservative mentor to the Milford heir. On his return from America, John II proved a zealous and impetuous apprentice to a man who required confident and assertive lieutenants. By the end of 1834, despite all denials to the contrary, it was reported that John II had been appointed secretary to the newly-established 'Conservative club of the county of Carlow' by Bruen.⁶⁵ The younger Alexander was now in an important administrative position among those most actively opposed to Catholic advancement and party to the discussions of the county's most powerful conservative minds. It can be taken for granted that his subsequent actions on Milford estate from 1835 were directly influenced by and reflective of the concerns and recommended *modus operandi* of this body.

Another significant influence on the Milford heir was Bruen's land agent and kinsman, Captain Henry Cary (1792 – 1863), a Meath man and adjutant in the Carlow militia, who was notorious in the county for his heavy-handed approach with the Bruen tenantry and a militant enforcer of his employer's rights.⁶⁶ Bruen admitted that Cary was effectively given *carte blanche* to manage his estate and remove insolvent or obstreperous tenants.⁶⁷ Alexander was unofficially tutored in effective estate management by Cary who viewed a landed estate less as a cooperative than as a possession to be harvested and pruned (particularly of unproductive personnel) as required, which influenced John II's future approach to the management of his father's property. In 1840, in seeking Cary's patronage for his son, John Tyndall snr was aware of the sense of speaking to 'John

⁶⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 2 Dec. 1840.

⁶⁵ Kavanagh, 'The political scene', p. 1; *Carlow Sentinel*, 9 Mar. 1833; PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 564.

⁶⁶ See obituary of Cary in *Carlow Sentinel*, 11 Apr. 1863 where he is referred to as a kinsman of Bruen.

⁶⁷ PP, *Bribery at elections*, pp 623-4.

Alexander of Milford whose interest is all powerful with Captain Carey [sic].⁶⁸ The Alexanders were also bolstered by their connection with Thomas Harris Carroll, the talented editor and chief writer for the newly-Tory *Carlow Sentinel*.⁶⁹ As a former editor of the liberal *Post*, Carroll was also actuated by the zeal of the convert in attempting to ingratiate himself with the traditional rulers of the county by unashamedly and aggressively pushing their agenda in the paper. A self-confessed and unapologetic 'party man', Carroll became a valuable cog in the Tory infrastructure of the county and it was even alleged at one point that his wages were paid by the party itself.⁷⁰ While Bruen and Kavanagh were categorically out of Carroll's social circle, the Milford agent was on a lower social pedestal and within Carroll's grasp of fraternisation. An acquaintance of mutual benefit began in 1834. Consequently, John Alexander II effectively now had his own journalist at his disposal to promote his political credentials, to report on atrocities on his estate, to justify his actions in elaborate prose and refute any dangerous allegations, true or otherwise.⁷¹ This certainly accounts to some degree for the prevalence of Milford-related content and the degree of publicity enjoyed by the Alexanders in the *Sentinel*. In October of 1834, the Alexanders' link with the editor was noticed by the *Post*, who referred to them sardonically as 'his new patrons'.⁷²

John I was certainly guilty of wishful thinking when he commented in 6 June 1834 that 'our country is in a state of quiet now'.⁷³ It was a statement completely at odds with the realities of life at Milford at this time where tension remained high. It is no coincidence that the first eviction took place at Milford at this point, as John II, as agent, began to send

⁶⁸ John Tyndall jnr to John Tyndall snr, 8 Nov. 1840 (Tyndall papers, Royal Institution of Great Britain, RI MS JT/1/TYP/10/3193).

⁶⁹ On Carroll, see Kavanagh, 'The political scene', p. 83.

⁷⁰ PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 661; Kavanagh, 'Carlow newspapers: 1828-1841', p. 27.

⁷¹ See for example, PP, *Bribery at elections*, pp 648, 661. Alexander later made stipulations that no editorial remarks were to be added to his daughter's wedding notice in 1875, 8 Jul. 1875 (LB2, APMH); also, he was able to prevent 'any lengthy obituary notice' being published on his death, *Carlow Sentinel*, 17 Oct. 1885.

⁷² *Carlow Morning Post*, 11 Oct. 1834.

⁷³ PP, 1835 (15-17), *Fifteenth report of the commissioners of inquiry into the excise establishment... Malt*, p. 214.

out a clear message of declining tolerance for arrears and problematic tenants. In June 1834, Richard Lawless and his mother were evicted from their small holding of 2 acres (referred to above as the smallest on the estate in 1825) which carried a high annual rent of £6 16s 6d. They had been tenants since at least 1824, and the rentals show that they had never been in arrears from that time until 1830, when they were just over £1 short.⁷⁴ While quickly dealt with, the ejectment fuelled enmity between landlord and tenant on the estate, and unsettling rumours began to circulate of a plan by the agent son to eject all Catholic tenants and replace them with Protestants. The *Carlow Morning Post* had John II in mind when it reported that a 'gentleman who resides not 100 miles from Milford we will not say, has been actuated by the *charitable and Christian-like principle of the Rev. Marcus Beresford*.'⁷⁵ This reference was to a cleric, Orangeman and landlord in co. Cavan who had recently and infamously declared his wish to a meeting of the Protestant Conservative Society of Ireland in Dublin that 'we will get rid of those bloody Popish rebels from amongst us. [...] We will stock our lands with honest Protestants'.⁷⁶ The association of the Alexanders with such ideas was confirmed in the popular mind when John I and II become official members of the Society at its meeting in Grafton Street on 5 October 1834.⁷⁷ Their colours had been well and truly pinned to the mast. The *Post* used the phrase 'Old Jemmy Conolly is dead' to signify the political changes taking place at Milford which transformed it from an area synonymous with Catholic prosperity, productivity and peace to one labouring under the threats of Protestant bigots.⁷⁸ John I was now described as a 'heartless landlord' and his family as 'Conservative Landlords', 'Orange Conservative *Millers*' and 'unfeeling Aristocrats'.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Milford rentals 1824-34 (APMH).

⁷⁵ *Carlow Morning Post*, 13 Sep. 1834.

⁷⁶ *Spectator* (London, 1834), vol. vii, p. 794.

⁷⁷ *Carlow Morning Post*, 11 Oct. 1834.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 25 Oct. 1834.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 13 Sep, 11 Oct. 1834.

ii. The elections of 1835

It can be supposed from investigations into the 1835 election after the event (where the Oak Park estate office recorded the exact details of all Alexander's £10 freeholders and how they had cast their votes) that Bruen was determined to regain his seat and had made clear to John II his expectations of support from the Milford tenantry.⁸⁰ By December of 1834, 23 of the Milford tenants were registered with a vote for the upcoming election and John II focused his attention on them. To access the socio-political patronage which the formidable Bruen-Kavanagh alliance could provide and to remove any doubts concerning his family's loyalties, John II needed to conduct a successful campaign as agent and landlord-in-waiting by instructing his tenants to obey him and row in behind his mentor at the hustings. It was to be the first real test of John II's abilities as an organiser and a member of the Conservative Club. As the election campaign began in earnest in December 1834, he regularly crossed the estate with his younger brothers, bailiffs and under-agents and called on each of the 22 electors to make clear his expectation that they would vote for the Conservative candidates. Ultimatums were delivered when it was stated that a vote for the Liberal candidates was a vote against the Alexanders which would invite inevitable retribution from their landlord. One of the most serious accusations made by the Milford tenants at this time was that John II 'repeatedly declared [...] (and as secretary to the Tory party, he had a right to know it) that the landlords of the county had bound themselves by oath, to extirpate their Catholic tenants, who dared to vote against their wishes'.⁸¹ Fr Maher was convinced

that the gentlemen of the county were sworn by all means to drive from their lands the Catholic tenantry, and put in their place Protestants, who would vote as they wished. ... If it was necessary I could give the name of the persons who heard Mr Alexander stating that the gentlemen were

⁸⁰ 'Pollbook for the January 1835 and June 1835 elections in county Carlow for the baronies of Idrone east, Idrone west, and St. Mullins' (Bruen papers, NLI, Ms 29,778/4). This source lists all the voters on the Milford estate, the value of their holding and how they cast their votes in both elections.

⁸¹ *A statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow*, p. 33; *Carlow Morning Post*, 13 Dec. 1834.

sworn to crush their Catholic tenants: his own tenants heard him making this statement again and again.⁸²

Bruen dismissed such accusations as nonsense — ‘the thing is absurd on the face of it’.⁸³

While the notion of a formal pact for this purpose between the county’s landlords might have appeared fanciful to outside observers, Col. Rochfort reported to Tory Lord Farnham, immediately before the January election, on the thinking of Carlow’s Conservatives landlords: ‘It seemed to be a general feeling to give every encouragement to Protestant tenants, and if circumstances did not permit any person to get rid of his R[oman] C[atholic] tenants, not to give any of them a lease that could be turned against ourselves’.⁸⁴ Maura Cronin has argued that ‘there is no doubt that Carlow’s traditional elite [...] was spoiling for a fight in the mid-1830s’.⁸⁵ Therefore, it seems that in the heat of battle during the election campaign, inexperience and impetuosity saw John II letting slip details of the landlords’ anti-Catholic prejudices in an attempt to frighten his tenants.

Landlord-tenant relations were souring rapidly at Milford with the vast majority of the tenants (including those who did not have the vote) outraged that the electoral independence and power of free-thinking which had been encouraged and facilitated by John I in 1830 was now being denied them by his son, with threats of material retribution if they dissented. Inevitably, they confided in their parish priest who was appalled by John II’s tactics. The influence of Fr Kehoe was powerful in the area, and he was an equally visible and formidable presence on the estate at this time. One claim was made that ‘his parishioners would, to a man, die for him, from their admiration of his zeal, and his devotedness in the cause of their freedom’.⁸⁶ On one occasion, the two men came

⁸² PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 564.

⁸³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 12 Mar. 1836.

⁸⁴ J.S. Rochfort to Lord Farnham, 22 Dec. 1834 (Farnham papers, NLI, MS 41146/29).

⁸⁵ Maura Cronin, *The death of Fr John Walsh at Kilgraney: community tensions in pre-Famine Carlow* (Dublin, 2010), p. 26.

⁸⁶ *Carlow Morning Post*, 3 Jan. 1833.

face to face and began an argument in the course of which Fr Kehoe told John II bluntly that the Milford tenants 'should not vote' as he directed.⁸⁷

Local opposition to the Tory agenda was carefully managed and promoted by the Independent Liberal club based in Browne St. which had been in operation in the town since early 1831 (patronised by Catholic merchants, large farmers and a small number of radical Protestants and landlords). The Liberals were most politically active in Milford's home barony which was 'the *first* who commenced to organise a baronial club, and had made greater progress towards the attempt of securing the independence of the county of Carlow than any other barony in the county'.⁸⁸ The quandary in which most of the Milford electors found themselves was hugely significant. They faced a situation in which their own political inclinations were secondary to a more pressing decision: whether to adhere to the wishes of their beloved parish priest, or risk upsetting their relationship with their landlord, with whom they had enjoyed an incredibly productive and cooperative relationship to date. Despite its bias, a remarkably perceptive editorial in the *Carlow Morning Post* of 13 December 1834 predicted that trouble was inevitable at Milford because of the tenantry's determination to follow their own political inclinations. The Alexanders were categorised as an 'infatuated' family in the press, under pressure to prove themselves as ultra-Tories and enforce deference from their tenantry.⁸⁹ In particular, rash behaviour was predicted from John II:

When men once yield to despair and become sensible of the utter hopeless of their cause, they cease to be influenced by prudence or decorum; and reckless of consequences, they plunge into every excess to sustain themselves even for a moment. There is something overstrained and unnatural in their efforts, which cannot be mistaken and at once tells the close observer that the last paroxysm has arrived. Such is the condition of the Conservatives of this county: and there cannot be a stronger illustration of it, than that furnished by the conduct of Mr John Alexander of Milford.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 17 Jan. 1835.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 11 Aug. 1832.

⁸⁹ *Carlow Morning Post*, 13 Dec. 1834.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

It was a highly pressurised and anxious time for the once jovial and fun-loving 32 year old who was now known on the estate as a fiery and impetuous personality — ‘a young man of ardent temperament’, according to his tenants.⁹¹ Even before the election had taken place, John Alexander II had come to personify Tory extremism in the county and Milford was held up as a paradigm of the abuses which ‘Tory wealth and power’ could effect.⁹² It is also important to note that a clear differentiation was drawn between John I and II. While John II was the unmistakeable aggressor, John I was accused of closing his eyes to the provocative and incendiary behaviour of his son and agent: ‘We cannot think that Mr Alexander is such a recreant to his former professed liberal opinions — nor so blind to his own interest, or so reckless of the injury that such a course must inflict on society at large, as to even contemplate the coercion of the very men in whose minds — it may be said— he himself planted the seeds of independence’, the *Post* argued in December 1834.⁹³ Indeed, from this point onwards, John I acquired a new nickname in the locality, ‘Blind Alexander’ (as opposed to ‘the son Jack’), which neatly summarises how through fear and exasperation, he stepped into the Tory camp, ignoring both the pull of his entrenched liberal leanings and the provocative behaviour of his heir.⁹⁴ Instead of conniving at his son’s offensive policies, John I viewed them as the lesser of two evils and he was determined to present a united family front to the public, however disheartened and despondent he must have been inwardly at how events had altered his principles.

Carlow county was one of the most publicised, violent, and controversial constituencies in Ireland between 1835 and 1841, and identified as one of the ‘leading contenders in the corruption stakes’ by Hoppen.⁹⁵ In his estimation, it ‘was both a comparatively unruly

⁹¹ *A statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow*, p. 33.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Carlow Morning Post*, 13 Dec. 1834.

⁹⁴ Outrage papers, Co. Carlow, 3 Nov. 1835 (NAI, 3/47).

⁹⁵ Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society in Ireland*, p. 77.

county in general and noted for the intensity of its electoral disturbances'.⁹⁶ It would be hard to overstate the impact of the elections held between 1835 and 1841 on all strata of human interaction in Carlow society. It was the most lawless period of the county's history in the nineteenth century, with 1835 and 1841 standing out significantly as the most violent years. Due to the elections of 1835, Carlow was 'thrown back half a century in peace and prosperity' according to one local authority.⁹⁷ Events at Milford can be taken as a microcosm of proceedings across the county where elections channelled the prejudices, energies and frustrations of the population into a competition where they would be definitive winners and losers, with the concomitant waves of triumph, despair and enmity rippling through the community. The elections negatively impacted and often determined the nature of the relationships between employers and employees, landlord and tenants, teachers and pupils, merchants and customers, and parents and children. For most individuals in the county, political inclination became a fundamental feature of identity. Wounded by some teasing slight, eight year old Henry Bruen III (1828 -1912) saw fit to open a letter to his father in London with the assurance: 'My dear Papa, I am not a Radical'.⁹⁸

Both sides agreed on the fact that Carlow appeared peculiarly circumstanced in the intensity of its political rivalries. On the Liberal side, the *Carlow Morning Post* believed that Carlow suffered worst at the hands of the gentry: 'We solemnly declare that there exists more cruelty, more tyranny, more hypocrisy, more bow-legged vulgarity among a few shoneens in this county than in all the counties of Ireland put together'.⁹⁹ In stating the case for coercion in his own county, the Liberal Dr. Robert Mullen of Meath testified that landlord interference with the electorate appeared to be most oppressive in Carlow,

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p, 394.

⁹⁷ Thomas Finn quoted in *Carlow Sentinel*, 20 Feb. 1836.

⁹⁸ Henry Bruen III to Henry Bruen II, 5 Apr. 1837 (Bruen papers, NLI, Ms 29775/3).

⁹⁹ *Carlow Morning Post*, 28 Jun. 1832.

‘more than in any other county of Ireland, I believe’.¹⁰⁰ On the other extreme, Carroll believed that ‘there is no county in Ireland circumstanced like Carlow; it is so completely under spiritual control and vassalage’.¹⁰¹ The intensity of affairs drew the attention of Daniel O’Connell to the county. ‘I wish I could get to Carlow. I am most anxious to be in Carlow’, he wrote to the secretary of the county’s Liberal Club on 4 January 1835, typifying the emotive interest he would take in the county’s electoral affairs over the next six years, which he prioritised defeating Tory candidates (‘to prevent a Tory getting in for the county’)¹⁰² rather than the election of talented local candidates with a deep understanding of the electorate.¹⁰³ He was certainly motivated to a significant degree by a personal animus against Bruen.¹⁰⁴ As a bastion of Tory strength, he coveted a Liberal seat in Carlow as a great prize for a member of his family and a massive boost for the reforming cause.¹⁰⁵ Accordingly, he put forward his eldest son Maurice (along with Maurice Cahill) as one of the reforming candidates for the county in 1835. It was his increasing role in Carlow’s electoral politics that led *Fraser’s Magazine* to describe it as ‘O’Connell’s pet county’, and the *Evening Packet* informed its readers in 1839 that ‘Carlow has hitherto been the seat of O’Connell’s empire’.¹⁰⁶

Polling was to begin on Tuesday 13 January 1835. Although there were only 22 voters on the Alexander property, it became obvious to Fr Kehoe —given that threats against the Catholic population were most overt in the Alexander powerbase — that his attentions were best focused there.¹⁰⁷ After mass ‘in the chapel at Milford’ on 11 January, he

¹⁰⁰ PP, 1835 (475), *Second report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the nature, character, extent and tendency of orange lodges, associations or societies in Ireland; with the minutes of evidence, and appendix*, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 668.

¹⁰² O’Connell, *Correspondence of Daniel O’Connell*, vol. v, pp 246-7.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Donal McCartney, ‘Parliamentary representation and electoral politics in Carlow’ in *Carlow: history and society*, pp 481-500, at p. 496.

¹⁰⁵ O’Connell, *Correspondence of Daniel O’Connell*, vol. v, pp 246-7.

¹⁰⁶ *Fraser’s Magazine for town and county: January to June 1841* (1841), vol. xxiii, p. 124; *Evening Packet*, 7 Mar. 1839.

¹⁰⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 10 Jan. 1835.

directed the freeholders 'not to vote by no means for Mr Kavanagh and Mr Bruen'.¹⁰⁸

With the help of his cousin, Patrick Kehoe (the most politically active of the Milford tenants on the liberal side, who had decided not to register for the franchise in a patent bid to place himself outside Alexander's range of influence during elections) the priest rode in his gig across the estate rounding up the freeholders one by one (managing to gather 20) to bring them to the safety of the parochial house in Leighlinbridge where they were fed and instructed for the next couple of days. According to James Byrne, Fr Kehoe's Catholic servant (who later gave evidence to a select committee against his employer), 'they might walk about the hall door and the lawn, but he would not allow any of them to go down in the streets at all [...] for fear they would be taken up by the police. [...] Mr Kehoe was in dread'. Certainly, most of the group were fervent supporters of Fr Kehoe and his cause and were willing recipients of his hospitality, but others may have been less than enthusiastic. Fears of incurring the wrath of their neighbours ('they were afraid of the mob; they were afraid of the country' according to Byrne) mixed with fears of landlord vengeance. Although the priest was labelled 'Rev Kidnapper Kehoe' by his opponents, the practice of 'cooping' freeholders was also engaged in by landlords.¹⁰⁹ At Borris House on 6 January, evangelical Lady Harriet Kavanagh recorded: 'Fifty of the freeholders in here to stay till the election, the [formerly Catholic] chapel prepared for their dormitory'.¹¹⁰

On the morning of Wednesday 14 January the twenty Milford freeholders began the seven mile walk into Carlow town, with their priest 'at the tail of the procession'.¹¹¹ Fr. Kehoe treated the entire party to breakfast at Nolan's hotel opposite the new courthouse and then met with Fr Maher (Administrator of Carlow Cathedral since the death of Bishop Doyle),

¹⁰⁸ Unless otherwise stated, details are taken from the evidence of James Byrne, PP, *Bribery at elections*, pp 464-71.

¹⁰⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Nov. 1837.

¹¹⁰ Diary of Lady Harriet Kavanagh, 7-10 Jan. 1835 (Kavanagh papers, PRONI D 3235/2/1).

¹¹¹ PP, *Bribery at elections*, evidence of T.H. Carroll, p. 661.

who also took a deep interest in how his old parishioners at Milford tenants voted. John Alexander II was also present, reputedly in the polling booth itself, where he came face to face with each of his tenants as they stepped up to record their vote aloud before the deputy sheriff. Despite their landlord's cautions ("Tom, I see you and I'll remember you" — "Jem, don't forget that I am your landlord"), all twenty of the freeholders under Fr Kehoe's influence voted for the Liberal/Repeal candidates, O'Connell and Cahill.¹¹² Alexander had been publicly defied and humiliated; his hopes of impressing his Tory peers with a deferential tenantry dashed and he swore immediate vengeance. According to one source, 'at the moment the tenant gave the vote against his wishes, he swore solemnly then and there, extending his arm towards the Bible, that he would put him out of his farm for doing so'.¹¹³ On making a furious exit through the hallway of the courthouse, 'he appeared a little excited' and made a rash statement which he would bitterly regret for the rest of his life. According to Maher, Alexander

in the hearing of other persons, stated, that so help him God, extending his arm — here I interrupted him, saying "You will repent of any rash vows you make now". [...] After the interruption he again repeated, that "So help me God, I will extirpate themselves and their families; if it were in 20 years to come, I will have revenge of them".¹¹⁴

The latter phrase became notorious as it was the single most outrageous statement by any figure on the Tory side in this period. It was regularly repeated in the local press in the months and years ahead, and was eventually brought to the attention of the select committee of the House of Commons on bribery that August. It is cited by Hoppen in his definitive study of Ireland's electoral history between 1832 and 1885 as an extreme instance of the landlord coercion and electoral intimidation that was widespread at this time across the country.¹¹⁵ Its utterance was never publicly denied by John II, who

¹¹² *Leinster Independent*, 20 Jun. 1835; the votes cast by the Milford tenantry are recorded in 'Pollbook for the January 1835 and June 1835 elections in county Carlow for the baronies of Idrone east, Idrone west, and St. Mullins' (Brien papers, NLI, Ms 29,778/4).

¹¹³ PP, *Bribery at elections*, evidence of Fr Maher, p. 565.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 563.

¹¹⁵ Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society*, pp 147-9.

realised the futility of refuting a statement made in such a public place. In his own evidence to the Carlow Election Committee in August, despite some attempts at word-weaving, he conceded his offence:

Did you not say you would be revenged on all those tenants who had voted against your father's principles?— *I cannot say I used exactly those words.*

Did you state to that effect?— *I might have stated something to that effect.*

Upon your oath, did you not state to that effect?— *In one instance I did.*

At the election in 1835?— *I did.*¹¹⁶

Similarly in 1853, when on the campaign trail for the seat of Carlow borough, he stated 'he was not for one moment going to deny that 18 years ago, in the heat of political turmoil in this town, he did use some expressions which were perhaps unwarrantable, and long since regretted'.¹¹⁷ However, it was his actions in support of his statement which led to even greater notoriety for the millers of Milford.

Following Bruen and Kavanagh's successful return (reflecting the 'utter submission' of their tenants in Hoppen's estimation)¹¹⁸ Col. Rochfort wrote a gleeful letter to Peel claiming: 'It is not a chance victory, for owing to the gross misconduct of the priests, the Protestant gentlemen to whom the soil belongs are determined not to give a lease to a Roman Catholick [sic], but to encourage the Protestants 'til they have a numerical majority of electors'.¹¹⁹ Peel replied that he 'sincerely rejoiced in the victory that was achieved in Carlow. I wish other counties and towns had followed so spirited an example'.¹²⁰ Given the delight of the Conservative side and the bitter disappointment of their opponents, it would be hard to overstate the hurricane of tension and violence which swept through the county.¹²¹ Contemporary newspapers and five thick files of 'Outrage

¹¹⁶ Extract of the evidence of John Alexander II given in *A statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow*, p. 38

¹¹⁷ *Belfast Newsletter*, 19 Jan. 1853.

¹¹⁸ Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society*, p. 160.

¹¹⁹ J.S. Rochfort to Peel, 1 Feb. 1835 (Peel papers, BL, Ms 40413, f. 14).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, Peel to J.S. Rochfort, 1 Feb. 1835.

¹²¹ Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society*, p. 160.

Reports' in the National Archives detail the extent of the intimidation and aggression which occurred in the lead-up to and in the wake of the election with attacks on people, property and livestock. John Byrne of Hacketstown was threatened by an armed mob of three to four hundred people for voting for Bruen and a Carlow inn-keeper named Whitmore had his post-chaise broken to pieces for conveying some of the voters in the Conservative interest.¹²² The stable of the innkeeper John Cummins of Bagenalstown was burned down on 6 February for a similar offence, killing three of his five horses.¹²³ In anonymous notices, attempts were made to portray Bruen and Kavanagh as spiritually and physically corrupt, their features and ailments held up for public ridicule.¹²⁴ It was their Catholics adherents who bore the brunt of the frustrations of the Liberals and radicals, and who were subjected to the most intense abuse and violence.¹²⁵ In February, police Inspector General Sir John Harvey noted how it was 'worthy of remark that the animosity and fury of the R.C. peasantry appears to be directed principally (both in this and other counties) against such of the Roman Catholics as have voted with their Protestant landlords upon the late occasion. The Protestants are not nearly so much the objects of persecution.'¹²⁶

The influence of the local Catholic clergy on their congregations' religious and social thinking was openly acknowledged by all parties in the county. The January election of 1835 marked the most significant and effective harnessing of this influence for political ends and it sent shockwaves throughout a bruised Protestant community. After the January election, Thomas Kavanagh wrote to Peel in a peremptory fashion, urging him 'not to suffer to pass unminded and unremedied the outrageous practices of Irish priests at elections. P.S. The result of future Irish elections will much materially depend on this

¹²² Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1835 (NAI, 3/2 and 3/4).

¹²³ *Ibid*, 3/107/11.

¹²⁴ *Leinster Independent*, 21 Jan. 1837; Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1835, 25 Jan. 1835 (NAI, 3/5).

¹²⁵ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1835, 25 Jan. 1835 (NAI, 3/5).

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 3/107/18.

being done.’¹²⁷ Henry Bruen claimed that ‘there is scarcely a parallel case in the history of contested elections to that which has occurred in the county of Carlow’, and claimed that priests had threatened to ‘clap a pair of horns’ or turn into four-footed beasts any Catholic freeholder who voted for the Conservative candidates.¹²⁸ He believed that all the subsequent tensions and controversies at Milford could be traced to the fact that ‘Father Kehoe turned politician’.¹²⁹ The *Sentinel* advised the landlords to take assertive action against the clergy: ‘When the priests assume this power, and trample on the freedom of election, it is time that the Irish gentry should seek to wrest this mischievous power from their hands’.¹³⁰

While the vast majority of the Milford freeholders voted (willingly or otherwise) with their priests, there were two exceptions: the brothers Patrick and Gregory Neill, who obeyed their landlord’s instructions and voted for the Conservative candidates. Their actions infuriated their neighbours and priests and just a couple of days after the election, Patrick Neill was targeted for especial abuse for his treachery to the popular cause. His story provides a fascinating case study of the risks incurred by the tenant who chose to vote in accordance with his landlord’s wishes. Neill was listed as a tenant of a 17 acre farm in Ballinabranna when John Alexander purchased the property in 1811.¹³¹ A literate man who was capable with figures, he comes across in the rentals from 1824 to 1830 as an upwardly mobile, prosperous and respectable tenant who was on very amicable terms with his landlord. By 1822, Neill was working as a contractor for Alexander and Col. Rochfort in repairing local roads funded by grand jury presentments, and John I testified to his faith in Neill’s abilities and character.¹³² His position in the local Catholic community can also be gauged by his selection as one of three Alexander tenants (along

¹²⁷ Thomas Kavanagh to Peel, 12 Mar. 1835 (Peel papers, BL, Ms 40417, f. 35).

¹²⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 24 Jan. 1835.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 12 Mar. 1836.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 2 Jan. 1836.

¹³¹ Wm. Atkinson to John Alexander I, 26 Dec. 1810; Ballinabranna rental, 1825 (APMH).

¹³² Grand Jury presentment book 1822, barony of Idrone West (Carlow County Library); Statement of John Alexander I to Carlow grand jury, March 1825 (PPP).

with Andrew Sleaven and Patrick Kehoe) to serve as trustee for the new chapel grounds in Ballinabranna.¹³³ Such events allowed him to assume a position of undoubted consequence and authority in the local community. Registering for the franchise was approached as an important facet of this ascent and he succeeded in gaining the vote in September 1830, with the support of John II.¹³⁴ In voting for Horace Rochfort in 1830, it appears he was handsomely rewarded, which cemented his determination to liaise with the Alexanders in future political campaigns. A survey in the Alexander papers shows that his farm trebled in size in October 1830 to over 52 acres: 29 in Ballinabranna and 23 in Ballygowan, close to Milford demesne.¹³⁵ In the early 1830s, he was high constable for the barony and process-server for the Milford estate office, which more immediately identified him with his increasingly unpopular Protestant landlords, at a time when the payment of tithes was actively opposed by many of his neighbours. It was probably not coincidental that his house was one of those attacked by the Whitefeet at Milford in 1832, from where they took two guns and one pistol.¹³⁶

As the Alexanders' politics shifted between 1832 and 1834, Neill travelled with them and assured them of his political support. However, he was no unthinking sycophant. His cooperation was given in the clear expectation of advancement and he approached politics as a system to be manipulated for personal gain. Significant privileges included the acquisition of new land (it was believed in the community that 'he gets leave to take what land he likes') to lesser ones such as permission to draw turf from the estate bogs and borrow sacking from the mills.¹³⁷ His status symbol of choice was the insertion of a large and expensive wooden pew in Ballinabranna chapel which was largely unfurnished. A few of the more affluent members of the congregation had purchased formal pews for

¹³³ Application for Ballinabranna national school, 1833 (NAI ED/1/34/4B).

¹³⁴ *Carlow Morning Post*, 23 Sep. 1830.

¹³⁵ 'A return of all the lands in possession of Pat Neill under John Alexander esquire', Oct. 1830 (Map book, APMH).

¹³⁶ John Alexander I to Gossett, 14 Apr. 1832 (NAI, CSORP Private Index 1832/720).

¹³⁷ PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 651.

their families, a situation ‘which provided opportunities for social point scoring’, according to Thomas McGrath.¹³⁸ Fixed to the floor, Neill’s pew assumed an air of immediate permanence and importance. He claimed he had it built ‘at his own expense, which had cost him £10 [...], and that it had required 21 men to carry it into the chapel’.¹³⁹ The alleged sum was extravagant—the bulk of a local labourer’s annual wages and greater than the annual rent paid by half of the Alexanders’ tenants.¹⁴⁰ Neill clearly regarded it as a worthwhile investment indicative of his resources and position of pre-eminence in the community. His material aggrandisement continued with the construction of a new farmhouse in 1834 which had been largely paid for by the Alexanders.¹⁴¹ To many of the other tenants, it was a physical symbol of Neill’s growing ingratiating with their landlord’s politics and his simultaneous alienation from the community at large.

Neill was identified as a cunning opportunist who shamelessly milked the prevailing political conditions for personal gain. During his time as parish priest at Milford, Fr Maher knew Neill as a parishioner and neighbour and claimed he was an ‘actor’ in the locality, playing whatever role best served him: ‘I have known him many years intimately, and the part which he has acted’.¹⁴² Fr Kehoe dismissed him as ‘the most ignorant brute in the country [...], as one who is tampering with his landlord, as one who is waiting to see on which side the scales may turn, and I will suspect that man to be a renegade and an apostate.’¹⁴³ It was rumoured that Neill’s vote had been purchased by John II in late 1834 at a cost of £70 and that he was expecting an even greater stipend

¹³⁸ McGrath, *Religious renewal and reform*, p. 58.

¹³⁹ Robert Jebb, *Cases, chiefly relating to the criminal and presentment law, reserved for consideration, and decided by the twelve judges of Ireland, from May, 1822, to November, 1840* (Philadelphia, 1842), p. 180.

¹⁴⁰ In 1835, 47 of the 97 listed tenants on the estate paid an annual rent less than £10. Milford rental, 1835 (APMH).

¹⁴¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 27 Sep. 1834, 12 Mar. 1836.

¹⁴² PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 566.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp 650, 652.

after the January election. According to Fr Kehoe, 'his landlord bribes him in every possible manner' and had introduced political corruption to Milford:

Pat Neill goes about to the other freeholders, striving to tempt them, as the devil tried to tempt the Saviour, and says, 'All these things will Alexander give you if you will worship him'. 'I expect', says Pat Neill, 'to have a higher post after this election, for I will have 150/ a year, and then you may step into my present post'.¹⁴⁴

For John Alexander II, the alliance was an equally pragmatic one. He appreciated that Neill's allegiance could be easily bought and that Neill might encourage others to follow suit. It was also a case of Catholic promotion which enabled him to reject any allegations of sectarian oppression on the estate.

Not surprisingly, the Neills did not travel to Leighlinbridge with Fr Kehoe on the Sunday prior to the election, but made their own way independently to Carlow where they voted for Bruen and Kavanagh. Retribution for their treachery was swift and significant. The following morning at 9 o'clock, Neill found that his pew had been torn up from the chapel floor, attacked with a hatchet and 'the ruins of it strewed about the fields and roads in many fragments'.¹⁴⁵ Dramatically, part of it had been tied up in a tree near his house in the shape of a triangle or gallows, and when T.H. Carroll came to the scene to report on the incident (undoubtedly sent for by John II) Neill informed him that other parts had been construed into the shape of a coffin underneath.¹⁴⁶ In his report, Carroll suggested that Fr Kehoe had connived at the crime committed by 'an infuriate mob of the fine peasantry [...] Of course the priest was well pleased, or they dare not have done it' — and claimed that the pew was 'the handsomest seat in the entire chapel'.¹⁴⁷ Outraged, Neill

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 651.

¹⁴⁵ Details of the attack on Neill's pew taken from Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1835 (NAI, 3/107/17); PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 646; Jebb, *Cases, chiefly relating to the criminal and presentment law*, p. 180.

¹⁴⁶ PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 646.

¹⁴⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 17 Jan. 1835.

reported the crime to the police at Milford barracks and Sir John Harvey had heard about the incident by 20 January.¹⁴⁸

Although Bruen and Kavanagh were declared elected, John Alexander II was furious that he could claim no part in their return. With Tory fortunes in the ascendant in the county, a change in the way rent was customarily collected at Milford was the first indication that their landlord's son was instigating a scheme of retribution. In theory, the landlord was entitled to two annual payments of half a year's rent, payable at the end of March and September, but this practice was 'unusual' at the time and the Milford tenants generally paid the entire annual sum in March.¹⁴⁹ Immediately after the January election, John II demanded the payment of the hanging gale for the first time in the history of his family's ownership of the property. Six weeks later, on the very day the March rent became due, he served the 20 electors who had voted against his wishes with *latitats* (because the rent was technically in arrears) adding legal expenses to the sums due.¹⁵⁰ In addition, John II obtained writs from the superior Court of King's Bench rather than the Civil Bill courts, putting each tenant to the much greater legal expense of £2 15s in each case, amounting to a total of over £40.¹⁵¹ This was seen as a petty and harassing abuse of the legal process at a time of 'great agricultural distress', particularly when eight of the *latitats* were served for debts of less than £10 which were recoverable at the time by a Civil Bill process for a much smaller expense of between three to five shillings.¹⁵² The examiners at the subsequent bribery inquiry, in paraphrasing Fr Maher's evidence on this matter, posed 'that Mr Alexander, in place of resorting to the cheapest and speediest remedy provided in the Civil Bill Courts, with a view to crush his tenants and carry his menaces into effect,

¹⁴⁸ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1835 (NAI, 3/107/17).

¹⁴⁹ PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 564.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 563.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*; Milford rental, 1835 (APMH).

had course to the most expensive process which the law would furnish'.¹⁵³ By applying to their priests and the community at large, the tenants 'raised the money by loan from their friends, and thus got out of the hands of their landlord', according to Fr Maher, who claimed that he lent £50 of his own money without any security (out of a stated annual income of £80) to the Milford tenants at this time, which makes it clear that the clergy were willing to use their personal and parochial assets to effect political gains at Milford.¹⁵⁴

When John II was confronted with accusations of legal persecution, he claimed ignorance of the jurisdiction of the assistant barrister — a ridiculous claim from a land agent and former high sheriff of the county.¹⁵⁵ The actions were consciously deliberate and punitive. In his assessment of John II and his actions at this time, P.J. Kavanagh has questioned whether they were the acts of a keen and thorough businessman: 'It's just possible that some of his alleged acts of revenge may have been motivated by economic rather than political reasons'.¹⁵⁶ However, the timing and personnel involved are more than coincidental and his admissions of fault make it clear that these were singularly and comprehensively political acts. Outside the party of 20 freeholders, John II singled out other defiant tenants for deliberate harassment, particularly Patrick Kehoe, one of the key organisers on the estate. As was common at Milford, Kehoe generally paid his rent (£54 1s 10d in 1835) by sending in his corn.¹⁵⁷ However, when the March gale day approached, Kehoe was sent an unusual letter from a clerk at the mills, ordering him to withdraw his money for his produce from the office. Despite replying that he wished to continue the practice of paying with corn, Kehoe was compelled to take his money, and deposited it with his brother in Bagenalstown for safekeeping. A few days after the rent

¹⁵³ PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 563.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, pp 580-1.

¹⁵⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 4 Aug. 1835.

¹⁵⁶ Kavanagh, 'The political scene', p. 59.

¹⁵⁷ Milford rental, 1835 (APMH).

was due and having been forced to withdraw his money from the mill office, he too was served with a writ for non-payment. There were also two ejectments of small tenants on the estate at this time: 'Mic' Ryan (eight acres in Ballinabranna) and John Cummins (5 acres in Ballygown) who were ostensibly evicted on account of arrears.¹⁵⁸ Interestingly, Cummins was replaced by a Protestant tenant, William Beard. Indeed, from the surnames of the seven new tenants on the estate between 1835 and 1841 (Steuart, Foster, Warren etc.) it appears that John II pursued a policy of recruiting Protestant tenants where possible.¹⁵⁹

It was at this time that John I made a serious error of judgement by allowing his son to set a ball rolling which served only to further antagonise an already embittered tenantry.

Having joined his father as a valuator under the tithe composition bill, John II convinced him soon after the January election that the time had come, as landlord, to demand payment which had gone into arrears—due since November 1834.¹⁶⁰ John I appears to have buried his head well and truly into the sand at this stage about the divisions on the estate. He was now 71 years old and appears to have been led more by his concerns over his son's political disappointments and public humiliations, than by a steadfast adherence to his early political principles. In April, just after the rent had all been paid, he unwisely tried to recover the tithes after 'repeated friendly applications' (according to Henry Bruen), which 'his tenantry had declared several times most positively, that they never would pay'.¹⁶¹ While the notion of being responsible for delayed or overdue payments was anathema to John I, his son approached the tithe issue as part of his wanton scheme of revenge. Accordingly, in early June 1835 (in the fortnight prior to the second election of 1835), John II took control of the tithe affair by again employing legal manoeuvres

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Milford rentals, 1835-1841 (APMH).

¹⁶⁰ *Carlow Sentinel*, 8 Aug. 1835, 16 Apr. 1836.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 2 Apr. 1836, quoting the speech of Henry Bruen and 'Petition of John Alexander, relating to the county of Carlow election', House of Commons, 23 Mar. 1836.

against 20 defaulters — not surprisingly, the 20 enfranchised freeholders on the estate.¹⁶² They were served with legal processes (again at a cost of £2 15s each) which they were obliged to pay on top of the tithe. However, John I almost immediately regretted his son's harsh actions, and conceded that the legal charges he had occasioned were 'too high'.¹⁶³ He made moves to soften the financial blow to his tenantry—the only instance during this period when his public actions appeared to indicate a difference of opinion with his son and agent—by arranging for them to 'take the advice of a counsel professing very liberal opinion', who apparently advised them to pay the demand.¹⁶⁴ The tenants' view of this as deliberate and vengeful harassment was confirmed when, in two cases, John II served the documents in person, 'the common bailiffs having shrunk from the discharge of the odious duty'. The subsequent appointment of Pat Neill as tithe proctor for the estate was ostensibly to avoid such an occurrence in the future.¹⁶⁵

By this stage, apart from the Bruens and Kavanaghs, the Alexanders were the family most readily referenced in the local, regional and national press as symbols of Tory hegemony and oppression in the county —arguably outdoing the former two in terms of controversy. By this notoriety and in the gentry's actions of defending one of their own against Liberal slurs, the Alexanders' status among the Protestant elite was significantly elevated and assured. Bruen would certainly have admired John II's passion and show of strength. In a letter to the *Dublin Evening Post*, Fr Maher claimed that John II, 'who has the management of the estate, is fully entitled to the first place amongst our Conservative aristocrats, if the strongest determination to persecute the unfortunate people, amongst whom his father has realised a large fortune, can procure him that distinction'.¹⁶⁶ Thomas J.J. Murphy of Leighlinbridge wrote a furious letter to the *Leinster Independent*

¹⁶² *Leinster Independent*, 13 Jun. 1835; *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Apr. 1836.

¹⁶³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 2 Apr. 1836.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Leinster Independent*, 13 Jun. 1835.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 18 Apr. 1835.

dismissing him as ‘a despotic landlord’, a shameless ‘autocrat’ and a ‘mock patriot’. In a move that was to become an increasing feature of the demonization of the family, Murphy questioned John II’s social status and pedigree and suggested that the ‘little gentleman’ and ‘merciful little hero’ was acting above and beyond his station.¹⁶⁷ Bruen himself employed violent methods of retribution against his tenantry automatically and unapologetically; after the election of 1841, one of his tenants was so afraid of Bruen’s vengeance that he tried to explain his vote for the Liberal candidate by claiming ‘the Liberator’s staff had recourse to large doses of laudanum’.¹⁶⁸ Bruen was genuinely amazed, as K. Theodore Hoppen has argued, when criticised ‘for evicting Carlow farmers with large arrears on electoral rather than economic grounds’.¹⁶⁹ The ledgers he had prepared at Oak Park before the election (with printed columns to record the name, religion, value of freehold and votes cast by each of the barony freeholders— including those at Milford) shows that he wanted to profile treacherous tenants.¹⁷⁰ In 1836, Bruen informed the House of Commons that he found the public interrogation of his estate policies unfair and inappropriate: ‘I once more protest, in the name of the landlords of Carlow, against such attempts to call them to account as to how they manage their private affairs’.¹⁷¹

John II’s management of his affairs and the sway of sectarian principles at Milford was criticised —albeit indirectly — by government officials in April 1835. The reprimanding and removal of sub-constable Joseph Bates from Milford barracks for a sectarian jibe against Fr Maher in a case that came to be known as ‘the whistling investigation’, was a significant triumph for the priest who had long bemoaned the partisan nature of policing

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 1 Aug. 1835.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 12 Mar. 1842.

¹⁶⁹ Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society*, p. 145.

¹⁷⁰ ‘Pollbook for the January and June 1835 elections in county Carlow for the baronies of Idrone east, Idrone West and St. Mullins’ (Bruen papers, NLI, Ms 29778/4).

¹⁷¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 12 Mar. 1836.

and justice in Carlow.¹⁷² Col. Sir John Harvey was deeply concerned about this state of affairs, noting anxiously after the January election in 1835 that ‘there were strong reports in England that the Carlow police had interfered actively and partially’.¹⁷³ In Harvey, Fr Maher found an officer with a sympathetic and proactive attitude to Catholic grievances and when he became aware of the later whistling incident at Milford, Harvey was determined to use it as a test case and set a cautionary example for policemen who unwisely displayed political feeling in their professional duties.¹⁷⁴ The controversial case of the whistling peeler of Milford essentially put the area’s notoriety as a garrison of Tory prejudices on trial.

Bates was a Protestant, a native Carlovian, and a well-educated and eloquent young man (based on his surviving correspondence) who joined the county constabulary in 1833. When posted to Milford, he was clearly influenced to engage in partisan policing by the landlord of his barracks who flattered him and his colleagues with assurances of their importance to the Protestant crusade. On the evening of Sunday 12 April, on one of his regular reconnaissance trips through the Alexander heartland, Fr Maher and a party of friends passed Milford barracks where the sub-constable began whistling ‘The Protestant Boys’ and proceeded to ‘stamp violently on the ground [...], extending his arm towards Mr Maher and his friends, and threatening them in a violent manner by striking his hands one against the other.’¹⁷⁵ The key factor in Maher’s complaint was that Bates, who should have manifested a strict political neutrality, had been trying to bait him over the recent defeat of his preferred political candidates, by whistling a defiant and unapologetically Protestant and Tory tune. One of the many ways in which political and sectarian prejudices manifested themselves in everyday life at Milford was in the singing

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 2 May 1835; File on the prosecution of sub-constable Joseph Bates, 1835 (NAI, CSORP/1835/1548). Unless otherwise stated, incidental information on the case of sub-constable Bates is taken from this latter source.

¹⁷³ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 30 May 1835 (NAI, 3/21).

¹⁷⁴ Harvey to Gossett, 1 May 1835 (NAI, CSORP/1835/1548).

¹⁷⁵ Bates file, 1835 (NAI CSORP/1835 /1548).

of such popular party-political songs and verses. Among the labourers and farmers at Milford, songs with a more assertive religious and political agenda were well known by both contending communities, such as 'The Protestant Boys', 'The Boyne Waters' and 'Father Maguire'.¹⁷⁶ However, Samuel McMurthry, head miller in Milford flour mill, claimed that the melody whistled by Bates was appropriated by both sides of the political divide. According to Bates himself, there were five or six different names for the tune, some Catholic and some Protestant and that it was 'no uncommon tune in the neighbourhood of my station'.¹⁷⁷ While denying he had performed the tune as a Protestant-Tory anthem, he also offered an unintentional insight into his true political persuasion by admitting that he was well aware of Fr Maher as a dominant political personality in the area. He claimed:

Nothing was further from my mind than party politics or fractious tunes at the time. I am aware such proceedings would not be tolerated in policemen in this county, and even had I been so disposed, I certainly would not select the presence of Rev Mr. Maher for such a display.

This makes his claim of political ignorance in the priests' presence highly unlikely at best. It appeared Bates was guilty of protesting too much, and had elucidated his true motivations in an attempt at rubbishing them.

Following a hearing on 29 April, Harvey offered a resounding condemnation of Bates's behaviour and went on to recommend a serious and exemplary punishment for Bates.¹⁷⁸ Under-secretary, Sir William Gossett offered his own stinging rebuke that Bates's behaviour 'was certainly very reprehensible and offensive if intentional. [...] Bates, who could whistle 'The Protestant Boys' must have known full well it was a party tune and his explanation is a mean subterfuge'.¹⁷⁹ The sub-constable was accordingly removed from

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, Bates to Battersby, 29 Apr. 1835.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, Gossett to Harvey, 6 May 1835.

Milford and his home county for a new station in distant Co. Louth.¹⁸⁰ A moment of religious enthusiasm and high spirits evidently encouraged by John II's coaching had cost him dearly. By extension, Alexander's policy of employing the legal authorities to push his political agenda had been criticised and punished by the government of the day.

In the same month, the Liberal campaign achieved another success when a petition (largely engineered by the political priests) was lodged in April against the return of Kavanagh and Bruen citing the 'forcible abduction of voters, and by unfair and fraudulent schemes and practices'.¹⁸¹ After a detailed hearing, the January result was declared void on 29 May.¹⁸² Chief Constable Thomas Trant reported to Battersby from Carlow town that 'very great excitement exists here since the certainty of an election was made known here on the 29th. Political and religious prejudices, theretofore high, are considerably heightened'.¹⁸³ Given a second chance, efforts were doubled on both sides. The Conservatives were desperate to hold on to their victory, while the Liberals and Radicals were determined to take advantage of the momentum in their favour and push through. In May, Pat Neill's notoriety increased exponentially when he was summoned by Bruen and Kavanagh (kept up to date on his plight by John II) to travel to testify as a witness against the petition. It is reasonable to assume that he was handsomely rewarded for his services but it also tells of his dogged determination to ignore his neighbours' intimidation. On his return from London 'where he had been doing the dirty work of the Conservatives as a witness' according to the *Leinster Independent*, and as the second election approached, Neill actively canvassed for Kavanagh and Bruen in the locality and served his landlord's latitats on his neighbours.¹⁸⁴ On the night of 12 June, at approximately 3 o'clock in the morning, two valuable horses at pasture on his land in Ballygowan 'were maliciously

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, Harvey to Gossett, 13 May 1835.

¹⁸¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Apr. 1835.

¹⁸² Kavanagh, 'The political scene', p. 8.

¹⁸³ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow 1835 (NAI, 3/23).

¹⁸⁴ *Carlow Sentinel*, 13 Jun. 1835; *Leinster Independent*, 13 Jun. 1835.

killed by their throats being cut in the most savage manner'.¹⁸⁵ Given the intensity of such events at Milford, Neill became an infamous figure in the provincial Liberal press with full articles dedicated to his actions.¹⁸⁶ The police and the government clearly feared for his safety and appointed two sub-constables from Milford barracks to protection duty at his house in Ballinabranna, which inevitably exacerbated the local view of that body as a partisan force.¹⁸⁷ Because of the violence of the crime and in the hope of loosening tongues, Battersby recommended that government offer a reward and a sum of £30 was sanctioned by Col. Harvey and Gossett.¹⁸⁸ Although this was significantly more than a year's wages for the Milford labourers and mill-workers, no further information was forthcoming from the community. These events generated significant sympathy for the Alexanders in Protestant circles and Carroll reported how the county gentry established their own reward fund for information on the atrocities at Milford.¹⁸⁹

During the run-up to the June election, John Alexander II's behaviour became even more controversial. Stories circulated that he dared 'radicals' to meet his party on the steps of the courthouse on the morning of the contest.¹⁹⁰ It was further alleged that he and his brothers presented arms at a party of Liberal electors at Milford drawbridge to prevent them crossing the canal there on their way into Carlow.¹⁹¹ John II also attempted to exert his influence on the staff in the mills and abuse his powers as an employer for political ends. On Friday 13 June, three days before polling began, he visited the malthouse and called for Martin Brennan, whose father Michael had voted for the reforming candidates in January.¹⁹² Brennan was an illiterate young man who, like many of the sons of the Milford tenants, had found employment in the mills, where he had been working since

¹⁸⁵ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1835 (NAI, 3/25).

¹⁸⁶ For example, see the article, 'Pat. Neil [sic] of Milford', *Leinster Independent*, 13 Jun. 1835.

¹⁸⁷ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1835 (NAI, 3/47).

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 3/25.

¹⁸⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 13 Jun. 1835.

¹⁹⁰ *Leinster Independent*, 20 Jun. 1835.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 15 Aug. 1835.

¹⁹² Milford rental, 1835 (APMH).

1827.¹⁹³ According to John II, Brennan ‘conducted himself well and satisfactorily; I can recommend him as a good working and attentive man’. Despite this fact, Alexander told him bluntly that he would no longer employ him if his father voted against his wishes again, alleging that he would not allow the son’s wages to be used as a support for the family. Brennan attempted to stand up to his employer by telling him ‘that he could not help it but hoped his father would never give his vote to Mr. Bruen, who turned thousands to the road’. Days after the election, Brennan was duly dismissed along with another mill employee on the same grounds. However, he was not cowed by events and approached John II on 21 July for the customary character reference (which was duly issued — a ringing endorsement of Brennan’s character and abilities) and sought the reason for his dismissal, to which John II replied ‘that the whole county knew it was for his, [Brennan’s] father’s vote at the last election’. Here was blatant evidence of prejudice, intimidation and political harassment at Milford. For the first time, politics had interfered with the fair and tolerant management of the mills. Casting off the reputation of benefactors and friends, John II cemented the new reputation of his family as aggressors and tyrants.¹⁹⁴

Two days after John II warned Brennan, Fr Kehoe set out to whip up the passions of the Milford tenantry against the Tory candidates. During mass and dressed in his surplice, he delivered a sensational, merciless and incendiary speech from the altar which clearly painted the election as a fight between Catholicism and Protestantism.¹⁹⁵ In lambasting Bruen, Kavanagh, the Protestant clergy and the local police, Kehoe reserved especial ire for Patrick Neill’s treachery in liaising with his landlords, and directed public opinion against him (see appendix H). Given the potency of the language used and the passions it inevitably provoked, a lengthy quotation from the speech is in order here:

¹⁹³ All the details of Brennan’s case are taken from PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 565.

¹⁹⁴ On Brennan’s dismissal, see also *A statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow*, p. 34.

¹⁹⁵ PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 713.

Is there any one here who will barter his soul for his landlord? There is one wretch that has done so. Do you know who I mean? I mean Pat Neill, the hypocritical apostate lickspittle, Pat Neill and his brother. [At these words there was great laughter and some groans.] [...] the most ignorant brute in the country, now exults in being the lickspittle of his landlord. Now see how he makes his apostate gain; he has a horse worth 10*l.*, and gets 20*l.* for it, and so for everything else. I say, Pat Neill, you are a detestable hypocritical apostate lickspittle, a ruffian and a miscreant, to be held up by the finger to scorn and detestation and contempt; and what are you the richer than any honest freeholder after all when your debts are paid? [...] Oh the wretch! But do not barter your soul and sell your country, your religion and your God, for Alexander, or any other tyrannical landlord.

He then directed his attention to the Alexanders themselves, and in portraying the family as newly-arrived aggressors who were unworthy of the land which they had come to own, he encouraged his audience's subscription to a racial narrative of Catholic disinheritance:

And who are these bloody landlords, these tyrannical despots? Why, they are fellows whose names were not known when your ancestors possessed the land they now possess; but a time will soon come that will oblige them to prove what right and title they have to their possessions. Well, good people, will you now be true to your religion, your country, and your God, in spite of the tyranny of your landlords, in spite of Alexander and his son, the two who first obliged their tenants to pay blood-stained tithes. [...] I am told that two Conservative brats, sons of this Alexander, are now at the Cross below terrifying the freeholders as they are coming to mass, but I will teach these chaps not to terrify honest freeholders.

These 'brats' can be identified as Lorenzo and George Alexander (aged 25 and 21 respectively), who were acting in the interests of their elder brother; George was at that time a student of law at Trinity College, Dublin.¹⁹⁶ They were reported to have gone through the busy streets of the village, threatening that unless the electors 'would vote as their landlords would wish, they (the landlords) would bring ruins and desolation on the neighbourhood'.¹⁹⁷ However, the most quoted lines from Fr Kehoe's extraordinary harangue were his concluding remarks, an impassioned and sanguinary call to action:

These Orange Conservatives are very confident, like the Devil when he tempted our Saviour in the wilderness; but we will strike fear and terror into their hearts on Tuesday. I hope it will not be necessary to draw the

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, pp 565-6. Fr Maher names them as Lorenzo Alexander (1810 – 1867) and George Alexander (1814- 1893); *Alumni Dublinenses*, vol. i, p. 8.

¹⁹⁷ PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 565.

sword, for I hope the very sight of the scabbard will be enough to frighten them. But I tell you, boys, if the Conservatives gain this election — they cannot gain it — but if by perjury, threats and violence, they do gain it, if they do trick us out of our representatives on this, as they did at the last election, and be beat, more blood will flow than there is water in the River Barrow.¹⁹⁸

Shorthand notes of the speech were made in the chapel by a Protestant named Carter Hall, a 27 year old native of Devonshire who was staying in Milford House at this time. A recent graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, Hall had previously spent three sessions as part of a team of parliamentary reporters for the *Times* and *Morning Journal* and was the younger brother of Samuel Carter Hall, the celebrated English author and editor whose publication, *Ireland &c.* in 1840 would include the most extensive and celebrated tribute to Milford mills.¹⁹⁹ (The connection between the families is unclear but Hall had probably made the acquaintance of fellow Trinity student, George Alexander.) While Fr Kehoe wrote one letter denying the speech, its veracity was never vigorously contested by the Liberal side. Indeed, Fr Maher appeared to disapprove only of the language rather than the sentiments employed, conceding it was ‘conveyed in very scurrilous phraseology [...] very unbecoming of any Christian clergyman’.²⁰⁰ Seeing a valuable opportunity to expose the intimidations of the Catholic clergy, John II immediately submitted Hall’s notes to Carroll at the *Sentinel* office. The speech was first published in the edition of 27 June without the use of personal names as Carroll and Malcomson, the newspaper’s proprietor, were nervous of infringing libel laws. However, this was not good enough for John II who next visited Carroll and Malcomson at their offices and insisted that the text be published in an uncensored state and indemnified the paper, its owner and editor from legal or financial responsibility if a case was pursued.²⁰¹ Accordingly, the speech was published in full in the *Sentinel* on 4 July.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 652.

¹⁹⁹ On Hall, see *Alumni Dublinenses*, vol. ii, p. 356, and his evidence in PP, *Bribery at elections*, pp 712-3.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 598.

²⁰¹ Ibid, pp 648-9.

Both John I and John II were among the vast numbers who made the trip to Carlow town for the second election which began on Monday 15 June. Despite the heavy military presence and the supervision of Col. Sir John Harvey, excitement had reached boiling point and the crowd broke into and occupied the courthouse before the official nomination process began.²⁰² When order was restored, the Alexanders sat with the Conservative candidates and were obliged to sit through Fr Maher's speech in which he reminded his animated audience of John II's threats in the same building five months previously.²⁰³ Having to watch his son being publically harangued in this fashion surely made a great impact on John I—as a father—and probably accounts to a significant degree for his support (largely articulated by silence and inaction) for his son's political activities. When the poll closed, the Liberal candidates, local Protestant landlord Nicholas Aylward Vigors and Alexander Raphael (a London Jew, selected by O'Connell with controversial consequences)²⁰⁴ were declared elected, with a majority in excess of 50 votes each. It is not clear when the Milford tenantry voted, but all 20 who had voted for the Liberal side in January repeated their actions—this time without any public reaction from their landlord. On Tuesday 16 June, along with his brother, Patrick Neill again cast his vote for Bruen and Kavanagh. That evening at 8 o'clock, his turf rick in Ballygowan, valued at £4, was maliciously set alight.²⁰⁵

However, the popular side had little time to revel in their success. A select committee of the House of Commons, with the title 'Bribery at elections' was appointed in March to investigate claims of intimidation and abuse across the country, and eight witnesses from Carlow offered their evidence in July and August.²⁰⁶ Although Fr Maher was inaccurate

²⁰² *Carlow Sentinel*, 20 Jun. 1835; Kavanagh, 'The political scene', pp 8-11.

²⁰³ PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 563. Not surprisingly, the text of Maher's speech was not printed in the *Carlow Sentinel's* coverage of the nomination on 20 Jun. 1835.

²⁰⁴ On the O'Connell/Raphael controversy, see Patrick M. Geoghegan, *Liberator: the life and death of Daniel O'Connell, 1830-1847* (Dublin, 2012), pp 75-77.

²⁰⁵ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1835 (NAI, 3/26).

²⁰⁶ PP 1835 (547), *Report from select committee on bribery at elections*. The evidence from the Carlow witnesses amounts to over 15 per cent of the published proceedings.

and misleading at times (for example, in his descriptions of the Alexander estate as ‘very large’ and John I as ‘exceedingly violent’), he came prepared with several documents which provided a detailed exposé of the abuses enacted at Milford. His personal knowledge of the area and the people (from his time as parish priest) shone through and he provided 40 pages of provocative evidence.²⁰⁷ This was counter-balanced by testimony from Henry Bruen (who in an unthinking moment described Catholic activists as ‘great savages’) and Carter Hall, who spoke about Fr Kehoe’s infamous speech at Leighlinbridge in June.²⁰⁸ Thomas Harris Carroll also testified on two days, defending John Alexander II and providing the text of Fr. Kehoe’s speech to the committee.²⁰⁹

In his evidence about Milford on 31 July, Fr. Maher advised the bribery committee that John Alexander II was also in London and could be called before them. However, John II had travelled over on another mission: to support a petition from Carlow Conservatives disputing the latest election results, claiming that numerous radical voters did not meet the necessary qualifications of value. Although it did not publish its findings or minutes of evidence (unlike the Bribery committee), it is clear that both John II and Lorenzo Alexander testified on oath before this committee on 1 August.²¹⁰ For the details of his evidence, we must rely on brief references in contemporary newspapers and the single surviving quotation from John II’s testimony already given above.²¹¹ He conceded his threats against his father’s tenantry on political grounds and that their actions had been met with heavy-handed demands for rent but went on to allege the insufficiency of value of many of the tenancies to entitle them to vote. For some of the cases, John II claimed they did not even have a £2 interest in their holdings.²¹² The proceedings of these two separate and simultaneous enquiries into election controversies ensured that events at

²⁰⁷ PP, *Bribery at elections*, pp 563, 565. See Fr Maher’s evidence, pp 562-203.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, Bruen’s evidence, pp 618-634; Hall’s evidence, pp 712-3.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, Carroll’s evidence, pp 634-54, 660-84.

²¹⁰ *Freeman’s Journal*, 4 Aug. 1835.

²¹¹ *A statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow*, p. 38; see above, p. 247.

²¹² Ibid, p. 34.

Milford and Carlow gained extra notoriety in London and in the corridors of government in August of 1835. On 19 August, Vigors and Raphael were unseated as 105 Liberal voters were struck off the poll, 80 of whom claimed qualification in the barony of Idrone West, where Milford estate and the most active Liberal club in the county were located.²¹³ Twelve of the voters on the Alexander property were disqualified, all on grounds of insufficient value, including Michael Brennan whose son Martin had been fired from Milford malthouse.²¹⁴ It was a resounding triumph for the Conservative cause and at last, John Alexander felt that he had contributed significantly to the victory, and he was prominent among ‘a numerous cortege of [Bruen’s] friends, who are all in high spirits after their labours’.²¹⁵ As news filtered back to Carlow, the Protestant elite celebrated in no uncertain terms. Young barrister-in-training, George Alexander, took a break from his studies in Milford House to record his delight inside the cover of his Latin lexicon: ‘On the 18th day of August 1835, Vigors & Raphael resigned their seats, leaving Bruen and Kavanagh and the unpriested independent electors of the county of Carlow in the glorious majority of 114 !!! Hurra for Carlow!’²¹⁶

However, it was the scandal which greeted Fr. Kehoe’s speech which dominated coverage of Carlow’s affairs. John II made optimum use of it as valuable propaganda, not only to highlight clerical intimidation but also to deflect attention away from his own abuses. He printed and distributed large quantities of handbills of the text in Carlow and brought several copies to London—allegedly enough for all members of parliament—some of which ended up in the hands of members of the enquiry committees, and the speech was mentioned in the House of Commons on 7 August.²¹⁷ The *Sentinel* revelled in the fact that the speech was now ‘a state document’ and it was reprinted in several British

²¹³ Kavanagh, ‘The political scene’, p. 12.

²¹⁴ ‘Pollbook for the January and June 1835 elections in county Carlow for the baronies of Idrone east, Idrone West and St. Mullins’ (Bruen papers, NLI, Ms 29778/4).

²¹⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 22 Aug. 1835.

²¹⁶ Notes in *Graecum lexicon manual, primum a Benjamine Hederico ...* (London, 1790) in APMH.

²¹⁷ PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 598; *Leinster Independent*, 15 Aug. 1835; *Carlow Sentinel*, 8 Aug. 1835.

publications, like *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, *Fraser's Magazine*, and the *Times* which seized upon it as extraordinary evidence of an 'emergency' in the affairs of the country.²¹⁸ Characterising it as 'an appeal to brutes, and from a brutal nature', it brought Milford and the names of John Alexander and Pat Neill before a nationwide readership.²¹⁹

The mood of the electorate on Milford estate in late 1835 was one of utter dejection.

Their numbers had been more than halved, reduced to 10 voters, two of whom were the pro-landlord Neill brothers. Carroll wrote that they had warranted their landlord's aggression and the defeat would rightly teach them respect and deference for their social and political betters:

The men of Tomard and Ballinabranna will now know a little better than ever they did, that they have not a freehold interest of ten pounds in their holdings, and that along with their power of voting, they have now lost the only interest which was of true value, "the interest of their landlord".²²⁰

Having been encouraged and facilitated to assume political power in 1830, it had now been wrested from them by the same individual, who had manipulated the infrastructures of parliament to advance his own hypocritical and perjurious agenda. In their petition of 1836, they pointed out to parliament that John II had been willing to use their votes at the January and June elections (despite knowing they were fraudulent), if they had voted Conservative. They hoped

that your Honourable House will hardly be able to refrain from expressing deep indignation at the thought of a scene like this — your petitioners registered at the instance, and by the exertions of Mr John Alexander, Reformer, in 1830, disfranchised by the swearing of the said Mr John Alexander, Tory secretary, in 1835. Today, he urged his petitioners to vote for a Tory persecuting landlord; and having failed in the attempt, tomorrow he swears that your petitioners were not qualified to vote at all, thereby attempting to make a committee of your Honourable House, a party to his sworn, and openly avowed, project of exterminating your

²¹⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 14 Nov. 1835; *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (London, 1835), vol. xxxviii, Jul. –Dec., pp 718, 720-4.

²¹⁹ *The Times*, 20 Oct. 1835.

²²⁰ *Carlow Sentinel*, 15 Aug, 5 Sep. 1835.

humble petitioners, whose virtue and love of independence he could not subdue.²²¹

Having tasted victory, John II maintained his pressure on the tenantry as a consequence of their recalcitrance during the June election. Admittedly filled with ‘anxiety to appease a landlord’s anger’, the Milford tenantry took the unprecedented step of paying their rents in full at the estate rent office on gale day, 29 September.²²² Despite this fact, he again pressed for the outstanding tithe payments (due on 1 November). In most cases, the sums due were significantly less than £2 but latitats were served on 13 tenants —as before, with bills issued through the more expensive Court of Exchequer— by John II himself, along with Patrick Neill and his son John as his bailiffs.²²³ According to anecdote, when the locals in Milford spied them approaching their dwellings, they ran away through the fields to avoid being served, often leaving their homes and crops unattended for days at a time where they ‘were met by Alexander, who pounced on them like a Tiger from his jungle’.²²⁴ At an anti-tithe meeting in Leighlinbridge on 6 December 1835, a resolution was passed which signalled out John Alexander I for ‘the most harassing and vexatious proceedings against his tenants’. The ‘vast assembly’ ended with three cheers for O’Connell and the liberal press, ‘and three groans, deep and loud, for Alexander’.²²⁵ Twenty extra policemen had been assembled at Milford barracks in case proceedings became violent.²²⁶

The Milford voters also pursued redress at a parliamentary level and on 4 March 1836, Robert Wallace (Whig MP for Greenock and a campaigner for electoral franchise reform) presented a petition in the House of Commons signed by 19 of Alexander’s tenantry —

²²¹ *A statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow*, p. 34.

²²² *Ibid.*, p. 33; *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Apr. 1836.

²²³ *Leinster Independent*, 12 Dec. 1835.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19 Dec. 1835.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1835 (NAI, 3/52).

16 voters and three substantial farmers, including Patrick Kehoe.²²⁷ The petition was widely circulated in Carlow and printed handbills of sections of the text were still being confiscated by police that December.²²⁸ The Milford tenants described the Alexanders' campaign as 'a war of extermination [...] by every means which Tory wealth and power and the fell spirit of political and religious bigotry, can command'.²²⁹ While the actions of John I and John II were blurred into one, ultimate blame was attributed to the father. For the first time, John I was accused of a lack of integrity, of sectarianism and of abusing a power as landlord that he had only recently come to enjoy. His powerbase (to which the petitioners evidently felt they had contributed) had been polluted by his political agenda which had launched an

inhuman experiment, ostentatiously avowed and openly acted upon, of extirpating from the land of their birth, a Catholic tenantry, whose only offence is their love of Reform, their love of freedom, and their unshaken adherence to the religion of their fathers. That this experiment, which has banished peace and contentment from their once happy homes, is now being made by one whom your petitioners recollect to be without a single acre in the county [...], that his prosperity in which your petitioners once rejoiced, but which they are now forced to contemplate with other feelings, has made the arbiter of their fate, him who has sworn their extermination; his legal persecution has changed the character of the district, has made the hitherto peaceable and orderly reckless of life and fortune, has shaken all confidence in the laws, and loosened the bonds of society.²³⁰

In a speech which drew considerable support (in cheers and exclamations) from his colleagues, Wallace presented the petition ('one of a most extraordinary character') and argued that 'those proceedings were quite unconstitutional, and deserving of the reprehension of this house and of the whole country'.²³¹

²²⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 12 Mar. 1836; *A statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow*, pp 32-9.

²²⁸ 'Persecution of the honest, independent reforming freeholders of the county of Carlow! Excessive cruelty of John Alexander, of Milford, towards his tenantry. Extracts from their petition to the House of Commons' in *Outrage reports, Co. Carlow*, 1836 (NAI, 3/124).

²²⁹ *A statement of persecutions on the part of certain Tory landlords in the county of Carlow*, p. 33.

²³⁰ *Ibid* p. 35.

²³¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 12 Mar. 1836.

In return, Alexander was staunchly defended by Col. Bruen in the House.²³² Ironically, as the first Carlow landlord to be named and shamed in parliament, Alexander's stock in ascendancy circles increased exponentially as other landlords rallied to his cause.²³³ In the eyes of many Conservatives, he had been selected as 'a fresh hare' by the Liberals as Francis Bruen (brother of Henry) put it, as an easier, more vulnerable target in the gentry hierarchy.²³⁴ Similarly, Thomas Finn, a friend of Col. Rochfort's and a ferocious critic of clerical involvement in politics (despite his brother's marriage to O'Connell's daughter), criticised Fr Kehoe's directives against the Alexanders, labelling him a 'sacerdotal savage, who would not, if he lived for a century, be able to do as much good, as John Alexander has done in one single year of his life'.²³⁵

To defend his name, John I took the expensive step of preparing his own petition. This was presented to the House on 30 March, again by Wallace (enlightened somewhat in the interim about Alexander's liberal record, probably by Bruen) who now referred to him as 'a gentleman of the highest respectability, and much beloved and esteemed in his neighbourhood'.²³⁶ In his polite and almost diffident text, John I communicated his 'great astonishment' at the public accusations made against him, and emphasised that his greatest aim was to restore his good name and reputation:

The petitioner humbly but earnestly prays for public inquiry into the particulars of these statements, as he is anxious of having an opportunity of refuting such calumnies against his character; at present the petitioner [is] unwilling to intrude on the House, except as far as necessary for the vindication of his character.²³⁷

At no point did he muddy the waters by referring to his son's political activities, his tenants' accusations of threatened evictions, actual dismissals from the mills or the issue of religious prejudice. While the petition could be seen as disingenuous, over-simplistic

²³² *Ibid*, 16 Apr. 1836.

²³³ *Ibid*.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, 12 Mar. 1836.

²³⁵ *Ibid*, 20 Feb. 1836.

²³⁶ *Ibid*, 2 Apr. 1836.

²³⁷ *Ibid*.

and superficial, it certainly is evidence of John I's moral and emotional anxiety, of his fears for his legacy and his awareness of the damage inflicted on his reputation by the actions of his beloved eldest son.

The notion of John I being booed at a public meeting (as he was at Leighlinbridge in December 1835) was unthinkable only five years before and illustrates the degree to which his reputation had fallen. In many ways, he was the greatest victim of the electoral hurricane that terrorised his estate between 1835 and 1841. As the Alexander heir increasingly manipulated the reins of power to prove his worth to the Tory cause, public discourse increasingly focused on how he differed from his father and highlighted the vast change in the area's reputation:

We would recommend this young man to abandon these favourite pursuits, and betake himself to those habits of industry, by which his father, with the aid of Catholic friends, contributed to secure for him an independence, and by which means this once respected father gained the esteem, the confidence, and good will of all his neighbours, with whom he ought still be anxious to live on terms of friendship, as he must be aware, and should not forget, that these neighbours afforded him, in no small degree, the means, as well as the opportunity of realising this very property, which his son appears now so eager to convert into a theatre of persecution.²³⁸

As the elder Alexander, as titular landlord and employer and as a member of the grand jury, the responsibility for policies, abuses and retaliations ultimately rested with John I. In many ways, his father's good name and legal authority were exploited to browbeat the Milford voters into submission. Through Carroll, John II harnessed his father's formidable reputation by claiming that disobedience from any of his tenants would be an act of gross ingratitude to John I, 'a vast number of whom partake of his bounty'.²³⁹ His father's responsibilities as a tithe collector and his record as an exemplary employer were held to ransom by John II to serve his own political agenda, with little thought for the damage it would inflict on his reputation. According to the *Leinster Reformer*, John I was an overly indulgent father who had been corrupted into hypocrisy 'by the impetuosity we

²³⁸ *Leinster Reformer*, 16 Dec. 1840.

²³⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 20 Sep. 1834.

apprehend of his children, who seem anxious to enter upon this fashionable and modern system of persecution, so extensively practised for some time back by the tyrant landlords of this county'.²⁴⁰

That domination over the tenantry took precedence for John II over care for his father's reputation is easily seen in the case of tenant Thomas Donohue. Donohue had taken on his late father's farm at Clochristic and paid his rent according to a verbal agreement reached between John Alexander I and Donohue snr in 1820, which superseded a lease of 1812. However, by 1838, John II was demanding the original rent which had not been paid for 17 years. Although legally justifiable and successful in securing deference from the tenant, it had the effect of breaking his father's word of honour. Threatened by John II's solicitor, Donohue toyed with the idea of taking John I to court, but eventually decided to pay the increased rent. Donohue's stated reaction to the case says much about the collapse of John I's reputation on the estate: 'He might better submit to the first loss than risk the issue of a law suit upon such an uncertainty as the *old chap's* oath, for if he [John I] were only half as proficient in that way as Master John, he was sure of defeat'.²⁴¹ Ironically, Fr. Maher was one of only a few voices who seemed uncomfortable with this state of affairs, and sought to defend John I's reputation. To the committee on bribery, he made distinctions between the conflicts he had with the son and the healthy relationship he had formerly enjoyed with the father:

He [John II] is the eldest son: I mention this, lest suspicion might fall on a gentleman whom I did not mean to charge, namely, his father, though I believe his father agrees with him fully in opinion in all his proceedings, yet the father himself has not acted in this manner to the same extent, although he has been exceedingly violent, certainly.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ *Leinster Reformer*, 16 Dec. 1840.

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, 26 May. 1838.

²⁴² *PP, Bribery at elections*, p. 564.

iii. Returning 'evil for evil': counter-measures against the Alexander powerbase and subsequent election campaigns, 1835-41²⁴³

There were four further vigorously-contested county elections between 1837 and 1841. On the death of Thomas Kavanagh, his seat was won by Vigors, in February 1837 (see appendix G). Six months later, both county seats were won by Liberals— John Ashton Yates joining Vigors as a county representative. This turn of events drove the county's Conservatives into aggressive action which saw Bruen regain his seat on the death of Vigors in 1840, and he was joined by fellow-Tory Thomas Bunbury of Lisnavagh in the general election the following year, during a campaign which was referred to as a 'reign of terror' by both sides of the political divide.²⁴⁴ John II was described as being 'remarkably active' in politics during this period.²⁴⁵ The crests and pits of parliamentary campaigns account for much of his activities during these years and he was in the vanguard of Conservative organisation in the county. Although eager to avoid rash action as in January of 1835, he appears to have been remarkably energised by the controversies of the time and displayed a growing confidence in his political worth to the Conservative cause. His activities were even brought to the attention of O'Connell on a visit to the county in January 1837, when Fr Maher singled John II out as the most tyrannical Tory landlord in the county, who 'had gone further in proportion to his means than even the gallant Colonel [Bruen] whose services in the cause had already been acknowledged'.²⁴⁶ On the eve of the February election of 1837, Alexander defied his opponents by personally attending a Liberal meeting in Leighlinbridge chapel where his father was 'harangued from the altar' by Fr Kehoe.²⁴⁷ John II continued to attend at the hustings and displayed confidence in the rectitude of his partisan strategies. He seems to have advised

²⁴³ *Leinster Independent*, 28 Nov. 1835.

²⁴⁴ *The reign of terror in Carlow, comprising an authentic detail of the proceedings of Mr. O'Connell and his followers* (London, 1841).

²⁴⁵ *Leinster Independent*, 15 Oct. 1836.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 21 Jan. 1837.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 25 Feb. 1837.

his uncle John Handy of Barraghcore Mills (married to his father's sister, Emily) in this regard as there were reports that Catholic workers were dismissed from that premises in 1838. As Handy had 'heretofore maintained a character for liberality', the negative influence of the Alexanders was given as an explanation for his behaviour.²⁴⁸ In December 1840, John II's personification of Conservative confidence was referred to in a 'Rockite notice' posted on Leighlinbridge chapel. In summoning local Catholics to the Liberal banner, its unknown author compared him to the Orange monsters of 1798 in local folklore:

Will you remain inactive whilst the depraved, the corrupt and the besotted portion of the Catholics are assisting such men as young Alexander of Conservative publicity and Sir Thomas Butler, descendant of Sir Richard Butler of '98 notoriety and the viperous offspring of Robert Rochfort, to realise the Penal code [?]²⁴⁹

Indeed, his infamy appears to have retarded his political and social elevation in one important respect: his failure to be nominated to a commission of the peace.²⁵⁰ In 1843, it was widely anticipated that he would be made a magistrate by the Tory Lord Chancellor in Dublin Castle, Lord Saint Leonards. It was an office of undoubted authority and local influence which would have greatly advanced his schemes of gentrification. When he failed to make the list, the *Sentinel* was furious on his behalf and claimed that 'a great portion of the gentry have been treated with a degree of neglect and ingratitude, which to many appears incomprehensible'. It posited that John II had been deemed 'too Conservative for the place-hunting officials, whose doctrine is "Don't embarrass the Government"', and that the climate of the times had made it 'of too embarrassing a nature, or too impolitic, under existing circumstances, to recognise the services of true-hearted Conservatives, who will neither trim with the times or seek for popularity by those stage tricks to which politicians have recourse occasionally'.²⁵¹ It was a huge

²⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 3 Feb. 1838.

²⁴⁹ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1841 (NAI, 3/799).

²⁵⁰ *Carlow Sentinel*, 15 Apr. 1843.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, 15 Apr. 1843.

disappointment for Alexander, who would in fact never be appointed to the office. Forty years later, he attempted to explain this —somewhat implausibly— to his heir by claiming ‘I have always refused to become a magistrate’ because it interfered with his other duties.²⁵²

However, his efforts were better appreciated on the local stage and his greatest contribution to the Conservative campaign was in the field of land valuation and in disputing tenant qualifications at registry meetings. Despite the regular questioning of his credentials in this regard by the Liberal press, he was celebrated in 1836 as the most diligent and active Conservative valuator in the county.²⁵³ Hoppen has commented on the immense political worth to Toryism of assiduous valuers and John II’s efforts were greatly appreciated by Henry Bruen, who was after Kavanagh’s death the undisputed leader of the Carlow gentry.²⁵⁴ For example, in the bleak January of 1838, another young Conservative activist, William Robert Lecky reported John II’s diligence and leadership to Bruen, pointing out that they were to take breakfast in Milford House the following morning before setting out on a long day’s valuation, ‘as John Alexander seems to think we might now be able to get over some of the Mountain [the upland western extremes of Ballinabranna townland]’.²⁵⁵ Although he met with angry crowds at the registry hearings and was hissed at by opponents, John II realised that his role as valuator provided sterling and invaluable assistance to the Conservative campaign.²⁵⁶ As a consequence of this publicity and his success in reducing the Liberal electorate, John II’s standing with Bruen rose exponentially. He was invited to attend a ‘Great Conservative Entertainment’ for Belfast’s two MPs (including James Emerson Tennent) on 22 January 1841 where a toast was proposed to ‘Colonel Bruen, Mr Alexander and the Conservative electors of

²⁵² John Alexander II to John Alexander III, 22 May 1884 (LB3, APMH).

²⁵³ *Leinster Independent*, 29 Apr. 1837; *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Jan. 1836.

²⁵⁴ Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society in Ireland*, p. 281.

²⁵⁵ W.B. Lecky to Henry Bruen, 24 Jan. 1838 (Bruen papers, NLI, Ms 29775/3).

²⁵⁶ *Leinster Reformer*, 4 Apr. 1840.

Carlow'.²⁵⁷ In his speech on Bruen's behalf, Alexander praised his mentor and referred to his own important work as a valuator and promoter of unity among Carlow's Protestants:

In Carlow we have been placed in circumstances of peculiar difficulty; attacked by Popery and her assistants, superstition and perjury; but, by a determination to do our duty, by steady perseverance and union; and by a close attention to our registries for the last eight years, we have now gained one of the most glorious and decisive triumphs on record.²⁵⁸

For his part, Bruen was extremely grateful for the Alexanders' loyalty and efforts and was eager to promote their profile by acknowledging their credentials as landlords and elevated members of the county elite. In an extremely symbolic act of patronage around this time, Bruen presented the family with 'a superb head and horns' of an ancient Irish elk which his workmen had uncovered on his demesne at Oak Park.²⁵⁹ Bruen, a reputed expert on the species, was well aware of the importance of the remains as a status symbol in many of the country's big houses—an 'obligatory feature in Irish baronial halls' according to Valerie Pakenham.²⁶⁰ As a gift from Bruen himself, it was sure signal to John II that Milford's development as a powerbase had made a powerful ally.

At this time, dealing with criticism, opposition and attacks on their political agenda became a routine part of life for the Alexanders. Even a cursory glance at their diary in 1836 makes it abundantly clear how their preoccupations had changed after the elections of the previous year and how their powerbase was being assaulted. On 3 February, John II attended as a witness in Dublin at Patrick Neill's plea for compensation for his pew.²⁶¹ On 28 June, his father appeared in the Four Courts accused of fraudulent commercial dealings—a politically-motivated charge which had been vindictively invented; exactly a week later, John I sat in Carlow courthouse where a claim of assault on his coachman

²⁵⁷ McComb, *The repealer repulsed*, p. 133.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ H.D. Richardson, *Facts concerning the natural history &c. of the gigantic Irish deer* (Dublin, 1846), pp 18-19.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 19-20; Pakenham, *The big house in Ireland*, p. 49.

²⁶¹ Jebb, *Cases, chiefly relating to the criminal and presentment law*, p. 180.

(attributable to party spirits) was rejected.²⁶² The following month Lorenzo Alexander was targeted for his aggressive role in the elections and ‘narrowly escaped with life’ with some Protestant companions, during a stoning attack at Castledermot fair.²⁶³

From 1834, the *Carlow Sentinel* had detected ‘evil intentions towards that respectable family’.²⁶⁴ Perhaps the most benign expression of anger was in the regular attacks on the family’s questionable pedigree in the county hierarchy and their pretensions to gentility. In one article in 1836, the *Leinster Independent* ridiculed John II on the grounds of his father’s profession, referring to him as ‘this jolly miller [...] you are a pretty scion of the *illustrious* house of Alexander’, or alternately ‘this fellow — this *gentleman*— this meal maker’.²⁶⁵ In another editorial, John I was criticised for abusing a power he was ill-fitted to wield:

Does this up-start miller, who, by the most fortuitous circumstance, has secured for himself the possession of an estate, intend driving the people to madness? Does he wish to get up a Whitefeet system in the county of Carlow, for the furtherance of his darling object — Orangeism in its stead?²⁶⁶

Fr Maher was equally determined to undermine the Alexanders’ aristocratic pretensions, and claimed the tyrannies of Carlow landlordism were limited to a sect of “*novi homines*”, the Beresfords, Bruens and Brewsters, the Alexanders and Newtons, and these men who had not the fee simple of an acre in Carlow or elsewhere, when the poor creatures whom they have ejected lived in the greatest peace and comfort on the land of their birth’.²⁶⁷

²⁶² *Leinster Independent*, 9 Jul. 1836.

²⁶³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 27 Aug. 1836.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 18 Oct. 1834.

²⁶⁵ *Leinster Independent*, 15 Oct. 1836.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 28 Nov. 1835.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 21 Jan. 1837.

Many reports hinted that exclusive dealing might be a proper way to bring Alexander to his senses: if John I could not be chastised politically, a blow might at least be inflicted on his pockets.

Such conduct on his part is not calculated to bring *grist to his mill*. We know if the people wished to retaliate, and return evil for evil, there is no man —without the violation of any law — more within their reach than this same Mr. Alexander; he is depending in spite of his newly acquired wealth, on the public for the consumption of his flower [sic] in Dublin, Carlow and elsewhere.²⁶⁸

From an early stage, economic retaliation had been considered by both sides as a political weapon.²⁶⁹ Following a suspect purchase early in 1835, Fr Maher became renowned for asking shoemakers in Carlow market if they used 'Conservative leather' and would fling their products back at them if they answered in the affirmative.²⁷⁰ Even before the elections of 1835, the *Post* predicted that exclusive dealing might become the most effective weapon in the hands of a beleaguered tenantry:

The [*Sentinel*] says, the popish farmers will find it [in] their interest to send their corn to Milford or wherever they can get the best price for it? Granted — and so they ought, and so we advise them; but the sinews of war must come from somewhere [...] and where are they to come from? Certainly only from the consumer, by the purchase of the manufactured article. So therefore, the Conservative Miller, be him who he may, has acted judiciously by discountenancing exclusive dealing, and he would be acting still more wisely, if he never joined the Conservative Society, or never attempted to get rid of the poor Roman Catholic tenantry from off his estate, to make way for Protestant colonies.²⁷¹

After the January election of 1835, local Catholic activists contemplated economic offensives and Milford mills were seen as legitimate targets for retaliation. It is hardly coincidental that in the weeks after John II's demand for rent and tithe in April 1835, the revenue police headquarters in Carlow town received a tip-off that Milford's malthouse was in possession of illicit malt (which has bypassed the legal requirements and on which duty had not been paid). On 18 May, a party of Carlow's revenue police (which

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 28 Nov. 1835.

²⁶⁹ See for example, *Carlow Morning Post*, 11 Oct. 1834.

²⁷⁰ PP, *Bribery at elections*, p. 711.

²⁷¹ *Carlow Morning Post*, 25 Oct. 1834.

increasingly displayed a pro-Catholic bias) went to survey the malthouse and were allegedly obstructed by workers and management.²⁷² The subsequent case, 'The Crown V. John Alexander Esq. of Milford', was 'urged on by party spirit, and maintained by flagrant prevarications', according to the *Sentinel*.²⁷³ With a possible penalty of £700, it generated significant public interest and was heard in a crowded Court of Exchequer in the Four Courts on 28 June of the following year. Although the jury unanimously found in Alexander's favour without leaving the box, it suggested to him—and to external observers—that the Milford enterprises were under attack for political purposes.²⁷⁴ There is also evidence to suggest that Milford's malthouse workers were pressurised by Fr Kehoe not to attend their workplaces during crucial stages in the malting processes in the early summer of 1835, when hundreds of pound of barley was to be turned or lost, which would have had a significant financial impact on the business. Henry Bruen informed the House of Commons that it was this chicanery which had resulted in the dismissal of Martin Brennan and his colleague from *John Alexander & Co.*²⁷⁵ While it is clear, as argued above, that these men were penalised by John II for the political actions of their fathers, Bruen's charge against Fr Kehoe may carry some weight, because the priest had previously condoned exclusive dealing in Ballinabranna chapel and posted up 'black lists' of merchants and traders to be avoided.²⁷⁶

One of the most appalling insults thrown at John I in late 1835 was that he was a 'bloodstained Orange miller', following the suspicious death of Fr John Walsh on 31 July, at Kilgraney near Borris while riding his horse home.²⁷⁷ Although he was most likely the victim of a riding accident, a controversial and arguably corrupted inquest concluded that the priest had been murdered, and fingers were pointed at Protestant activists in the

²⁷² On Carlow's revenue police, see below pp 302-3.

²⁷³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 2 Jul. 1836.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 16 Jul. 1836.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 12 Mar. 1836.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 31 Jan. 1835.

²⁷⁷ See Cronin, *The death of Fr John Walsh at Kilgraney*, pp 11-16.

Kavanagh powerbase. The storm of sectarian fury which this tragedy produced was soon directed against the Alexanders and was utilised by their opponents to blacken their names and reputations — political, social and mercantile. On 23 August, a printed handbill ('To the patriots of Leighlinbridge', signed by 'Apprizer') was posted on the chapel gates warning locals against associating or trading with the Alexanders. Remarkably, the family was accused of being accomplices to the 'murder' of Fr Walsh:

Who is he who prefers the accumulation of petty lucre to the freedom of his fellow man? A bloodstained Orangeman.

Who is he who continues to support a priest-destroying miller? The serf who disposes of his flour and bran [...]

Who are they that declare and are fixed in their determination never to purchase nor defile their hands with the bread, flour or any other commodity vended by the Orange manslaughterers or their supporters? An insulted people.²⁷⁸

Fr Kehoe's parish church had clearly become the forum by which animosity was most safely vented against the Alexanders, and this avenue of retaliation was persisted in for a number of months. On 11 January 1836, a less sophisticated but more sensational accusation was made by means of a short handwritten notice. Doggedly affixed to the chapel wall with nine wax seals, the author succinctly but mercilessly attacked his enemy's business and sowed seeds of doubt regarding the renowned quality and integrity of the products of *John Alexander & Co.*, then at an international high:

Murder, Muder [sic], OO
A new method of exterminating
Papists invented by
John Alexandre [sic] of
Milford to poison his
Flour and oatmail [sic].²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1835 (NAI, 3/31).

²⁷⁹ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1836 (NAI, 3/14). Report written on 15 Jan. 1836.

The original was removed by the constabulary the following day and forwarded to Sir John Harvey with a note from chief constable, William Fitzgibbon, that John Alexander was 'a highly respectable individual'.²⁸⁰ Similarly, the *Sentinel* ran to his defence and alleged that the lower levels of local society would be devastated if the intended attack on Alexander's prosperity was successful: 'Poor hounds! Where else will they receive such value for their money, and if the stirabout eaters, to whom this *order of the day* is addressed, should obey it, will they not starve for their folly?'²⁸¹ This would have been cold comfort for John I, whose reputation as a landlord, a humanitarian and now as a virtuous miller was now in tatters in the eyes of much of the local population— almost completely as a consequence of his son's clumsy programme of promoting Conservative political principles.

Other retaliatory tactics were planned against the Alexanders and their adherents by the disgruntled elements of the community ranging from ostracisation to assault and potentially, murder. Not surprisingly, Patrick Neill bore the brunt of much of the anger on the estate in persisting in serving latitats and supporting legal proceedings to disenfranchise other Catholics at local registry meetings. Edward Hughes, one of the eight remaining reforming electors on the Milford estate was overheard voicing his anger against his neighbour in late October: 'You ought to be hanged, because you sold your country and your clergy for gains of trifles, and the curse of God will fall upon you and your family for doing so'.²⁸² Drastic action was planned to caution him against disseminating dangerous Tory sentiments among a resistant Catholic tenantry and workforce.²⁸³ In late October, Neill received an extraordinary letter to his house in Milford, which suggested that a conspiracy was afoot, with the intention of killing him. In a public house in Leighlinbridge, the correspondent, 'L.A.'

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 29 Aug. 1835.

²⁸² Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1835 (3/47).

²⁸³ Ibid.

heard a few of respectable men in appearance speaking about you concerning the registry, and one of them said 'it is like that the election did not caution him, on account of the way his horses were treated'. The other said 'it was no matter, never fear, I know a few that has him spotted for to do his job, and will put him in a way that he will not be a latitat server or a news carrier for blind Alexander or the son Jack, that swore all before them in 'Lunding'. [...] Dear Neal, I hope you will keep good hours, and be very cautious of yourself and be aware of the people you will be speaking to, for I am sure that they are determined to put an end to you, which I would be sorry for.²⁸⁴

The letter was written on 27 October, and exactly a week later, Neill handed it in to Constable Valentine at Milford barracks. From the author's postscript ('only I am in dread of my own life, I would certainly go forward and prove all'), his evident affinity with Neill and the sardonic descriptions of the conspirators, it is almost certain that one of the Alexander sons penned the letter of warning. It may have been John II himself, given that his initialled signature looked remarkably like 'L.A.', or more probably, Lorenzo Alexander, as his elder brother would hardly have patronised public houses in Leighlinbridge at this time. While this threat against Neill never materialised and may have emanated from a group of frustrated electors seeking solace in their cups, it was taken seriously by police headquarters in Carlow town which sanctioned the continuation of the police guard from Milford barracks at Neill's house. It also lends further valuable insight into the unique position of Neill in his community and the serious state of tension in the area, when the contemplation of murder, even in bravado, was considered a justifiable political action.

Staff at Milford House and the estate offices were increasingly subjected to abuse and aggression by their Catholic neighbours. A stable-boy of John Alexander's (probably a Catholic) known as 'turn-coat Doyle' was the subject of significant antipathy in early 1836, and the impression in the surviving evidence is that he had upset the local Catholic population by accepting employment there.²⁸⁵ Another such individual was Doyle's

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ *Leinster Independent*, 9 Jul. 1836.

superior, John Hart, the Alexanders' coachman who was the victim of a serious assault in June 1836. A Protestant and ex-soldier (who had served at Île aux Noix in Canada, the destination for many Protestant migrants from Milford), Hart had arrived in Milford in 1835 and impressed John I with his diligence and skill with horses.²⁸⁶ A 'stout fellow' of considerable physical strength, he would have been no easy victim.²⁸⁷ It was his self-confidence, along with his association with the Alexanders and Doyle, which got him into trouble. At 10 o'clock on the night of Sunday 5 June, Hart walked with Doyle and two other estate employees to Dargan's public house in Tomard where a large crowd had gathered for a cockfight. Sensing animosity against them from the crowd, Doyle made an early exit from the house. However, as Hart and his two companions left the tavern for Milford House at 2 o'clock the following morning, they were pursued by a group of eight or nine men, including James Byrne who shouted, 'We have not *turn-coat* Doyle, but we have got his master and that will do just as well'.²⁸⁸ Hart attempted to resist but the attack was so severe that he was 'quite certain they would have murdered me, if assistance had not fortunately arrived'.

John I reported the assault to the local police the following day, and Byrne and another man were summoned before the magistrates at petty sessions on 9 June.²⁸⁹ From his cell in Carlow gaol on 11 June, Byrne wrote a memorial to Carlow's chief magistrate, Captain Samuel Vignoles, seeking bail. With evident eloquence and confidence, he expressed certainty that his community would rally behind him and could present bail for him 'to any amount your Honor [sic] shall request' —a powerful indication of the strength of the passions at play in the locality; Byrne was ultimately cleared of the assault charge against

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*; Samuel McMurthy to John McMurthy, 28 Jul. 1836 (McMurthy, letters, Clarington Museum and archives).

²⁸⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 11 Jun. 1836.

²⁸⁸ *Leinster Independent*, 9 Jul. 1836.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid*.

Hart.²⁹⁰ He was tried at the Summer assizes and sentenced to two months' imprisonment on a charge of rioting.²⁹¹ All of these proceedings were observed in court by John I on the grand jury. It was an embarrassing legal defeat for the Alexanders— a fact acknowledged by the *Carlow Sentinel* when it failed to make any reference to the court case in its edition of that week. All the parties involved —the landlord, the victim and the alleged offenders— knew that something more was on trial than a drunken assault at a cockfight. Chief Constable Fitzgibbon was puzzled by the incident and felt that the stated facts were masking some ulterior motive to the crime; he delayed his report to his superiors explaining that 'there appeared some mystery to hang over the case'.²⁹² This mystery is undoubtedly the animosity which some local men were expressing against John Alexander's employees in retaliation for their master's perceived crimes against the community.

This vendetta also affected the life and work of William Walsh, the Milford gamekeeper. Already unpopular for having taken on the cottage and small landholding of the evicted Lawless family as outlined above, Walsh had three shots fired at him during the course of his duties at Ballinabranna on 11 April 1837, by a party of men which the resident magistrate suspected had been brought in from Queen's county to create a disturbance on the estate.²⁹³ The incident certainly unsettled Walsh who began to fear for his safety and became significantly more nervous and trigger-happy in his duties. Two years later, he occasioned embarrassing publicity for his employers when he shot a local boy in the leg while allegedly in the act of poaching.²⁹⁴ The boy's father reported the case to the resident magistrate, and much hay was made of it as yet another instance of heavy-handed violence from the Alexanders and their retainers. The *Freeman's Journal* reported it as a

²⁹⁰ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1836 (NAI, 3/38).

²⁹¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Jul. 1836.

²⁹² Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1836 (NAI, 3/38).

²⁹³ On Walsh's residency in the vacated Lawless cottage, see Milford rentals, 1835-6 (APMH); Informations of William Walsh sworn before Vignoles, 11 Apr. 1837 (PPP); Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1837 (NAI, 3/64).

²⁹⁴ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1839 (NAI, 3/2639); *Carlow Sentinel*, 20 Apr. 1839.

party-political act with the headline ‘Another Orange Outrage by Gamekeepers’, and made certain to mention that Walsh was ‘belonging to Mr Alexander, of Milford’.²⁹⁵ Walsh was obliged to surrender himself and was cautioned for his rash and dangerous action by significant negative publicity —attention which may have cost him his job, as he is no longer listed on the estate rental for 1841 and may have been another casualty of electoral tensions in the area.²⁹⁶

Political divisions were accompanied by a notable rise in sectarian animosities on the estate — a significant development since Alexander’s purchase of the property. From the mill yard in July 1836, Samuel McMurthry wrote to his cousin in Canada explaining the impact of politics on local life, and making clear in which side of the divide he stood: ‘The country is middling tranquil at present but at election times the priests has [sic] all the influence over the people in this country. They made all Mr Alexander’s freeholders vote against his wishes.’²⁹⁷ There was a palpable sense of anxiety and paranoia amongst the Protestant tenants and workers at Milford, who manifested dedicated loyalty to their landlord/employer. Unease and militant retrenchment along religious lines can be seen in the application for gun licences made at this time by many inhabitants of the area. In 1835, 14 individuals on the estate were granted licences to keep arms at either the June or October quarters sessions — amounting to a total of 42 pieces, including guns, double-barrelled guns, carbines, bayonets, blunderbusses, cases of pistols, swords and daggers.²⁹⁸ An analysis of the names and situations of the applicants is indicative of the levels of Protestant fear and paranoia in the area at the time, and how this trickled down from employee and landlord to labourers and tenants. Apart from the Neill brothers (so publically in league with their landlord), there was only one Catholic applicant: James

²⁹⁵ *Freeman’s Journal*, 16 Apr. 1839.

²⁹⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 20 Apr. 1839; Milford rental, 1841 (APMH).

²⁹⁷ Samuel McMurthry to John McMurthry, 28 Jul. 1836 (McMurthry, letters, Clarington Museum and archives).

²⁹⁸ PP 1836 (255), *Arms (Ireland). Return of names and residences of each person in Ireland to whom licenses have been granted to keep arms*, p. 7

Hughes for a double-barrelled gun. Significantly, seven of the other applicants were Protestant tenants or employees of the Alexanders (millers Samuel McMurthry and James Fleming, clerk Peter Lee, maltster brothers William and George Newsom etc.), and the three Alexander brothers (John II, Lorenzo and George) took out licences on 14 pieces, which made for a veritable arsenal in Milford House comprising a gun, two double-barrelled guns, two carbines, two bayonets, five cases of pistols and two swords.²⁹⁹ This process of armament at this particular time is proof that violent confrontation between the two major political parties was hugely anticipated on the estate.

Disputes between tenants of an agrarian nature also began to assume a religious bent. In September 1837, a Protestant tenant named William Bolton was angered by local people ‘trespassing’ through his lands on an old grand jury road which had since been added to his farm, alleging that his fences and wheat were being damaged. When he confronted Michael Dillon and his fourteen year old son in the act of taking this short cut on their way to mass in Ballinabranna, Dillon replied that ‘they would do so as long as they pleased, for the time was passed when Protestants could do as they liked’. Obviously enraged by this statement, Bolton proceeded to attack Dillon’s son with a pitchfork by which the young man sustained significant injuries.³⁰⁰ Similar acts of religious intolerance were enacted in Ballinabranna schoolhouse where young Dillon was a pupil —hitherto a powerful symbol of interdenominational cooperation on the estate and in the county, but now yielding to the inexorable pressure of political tension. On Wednesday 15 February 1837, schoolmaster John Conwill allegedly instructed his Catholic pupils to run out and cheer for the freeholders of Vigors, the Liberal candidate, who were passing the school, while two Protestant brothers named Matheson were told to remain in their seats. The master left two older pupils in charge while he accompanied the group on their journey into Carlow. When the pupils re-entered the building, one of them ‘demanded of

²⁹⁹ For James Fleming as miller at Milford, see *Dublin Evening Mail*, 15 Aug. 1851.

³⁰⁰ *Carlow Sentinel*, 2 Sep. 1837.

Alexander Matheson, "How did you like that"; and collaring him said, "I will shake the puddings out of you".³⁰¹ According to T.H. Carroll who testified on the case to a select committee, they were then assaulted on their way home from school and refused to return to the building. From that point onwards, no Protestant pupils attended Ballinabranna national school.

iv. Milford as a Conservative estate, 1837-41

Some of the defiant Milford tenantry remained undaunted by John II's threats and exactions and were determined to have their voices heard. By the election of February 1837, all 12 disenfranchised tenants at Milford had regained their votes and the estate electorate totalled 24.³⁰² However, the harassments of John Alexander II had clearly had an effect and an increasing number of voters decided not to resist his wishes. This can be seen in the increase of 20 per cent in the votes cast for Conservative candidates by Milford voters between January 1835 and August 1837 (see Table 7.1 below). More remarkably, the Liberal vote fell by 33 per cent; the discrepancy can be accounted for by the increasing percentage of enfranchised tenants who determined to avoid choosing between landlord and priest by steering clear of the hustings altogether—a figure which rose from 0 to 13 per cent. Clearly, enthusiasm for fighting for the reforming cause was waning.

Of the original 20 Liberal voters (from 1835), only 11 remained consistent in their opposition to Alexander up to 1837. Only 16 were willing to sign the petition to parliament in 1836 which was organised by the county Liberal Club. Of the four non-signatories, one had left the estate in the interim. Two others, the Horohan brothers,

³⁰¹ PP, 1837 (543), *report from the select committee on the new plan of education in Ireland; together with the minutes of evidence, an appendix and index*, p. 535.

³⁰² Milford rental, 1837, giving details of the votes cast by each tenant (APMH).

Table 7.1 Voting patterns of the Alexander tenantry, 1835-37³⁰³

	Jan 1835	June 1835	Feb 1837	Aug 1837
Total Electorate	22	22	24	24
# Votes cast for Conservative Candidate	2	2	5	7
# Votes cast for Liberal / Repeal candidate	20	20	17	14
# Non Voters	0	0	2	3
% Vote for Conservative candidates	9%	9%	21%	29 %
% Vote for Liberal / Repeal Candidates	91%	91%	71%	58%
% Non-Voters	0 %	0 %	8 %	13%
Total	100%	100%	100 %	100 %

Patrick and Edward, had clearly begun to reconsider their position. Although they voted against Alexander's wishes in the February 1837 election, Edward voted with him in August while Patrick thought it wise not to vote at all. The final non-signatory, Matthew Magrath (the tenant of 33 acres in Craanluskey at an annual rent of almost £40) made a more definite switch in sides and voted with his landlord in the Conservative interest in both elections of 1837. His treachery was immediately compared to that of Patrick Neill in the locality, and for this, Magrath's pew from Ballinabranna chapel suffered the same fate as that of his neighbour: taken through a window on the night of 19 February, broken up and left in a field a considerable distance away.³⁰⁴

Tenant Patrick Kehoe's actions in 1836 further indicate the decline in fervour for resistance to the Alexanders among many of the tenantry. Observing that some voters were unwilling to sign the tenant petition to the House of Commons, he added his own name and also felt it wise to register for the franchise that year, even though it exposed him to his landlord's ire; his decision to put his head above the parapet was clearly intended to boost morale. If there was a scheme to register new voters in the Liberal interest on the estate after the defeat of 1835, it failed miserably. Only three other men

³⁰³ Pollbook of 1835 (Bruen papers, NLI, Ms 29778/4); Milford rental, 1837 (APMH).

³⁰⁴ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1837 (NAI, 3/38).

succeeded in registering their votes for the 1837 elections, one of whom decided not to vote while another voted Conservative in the February election.³⁰⁵ This shift was due to a combination of election weariness, a degree of political apathy among the younger generation of Milford, and a growing conviction of the unassailable hegemony of the Alexander powerbase. It could also be clearly seen in the effective collapse in resistance to tithes on the estate. Despite the opposition of all 20 Liberal voters to the charges in April 1835, all had paid in full when faced with Alexander's legal sanctions. By December, only 13 of these were willing to make public their opposition at the meeting in Leighlinbridge.³⁰⁶ In April 1836, there were only four tithe defaulters on the estate (including Patrick Kehoe), and all were eventually forced to pay (along with full costs) when prosecuted by the Court of Exchequer.³⁰⁷

In particular, the younger generation of small, lease-less landholders, below the older, lease-holding tenants, appear to have been less willing to suffer for Liberal principles and were more willing to submit to Alexander's threats and/or promises. This can clearly be seen in the imprisonment in 1837 of two young Milford men for the attempted abduction of their Alexander-opposing uncles during the election campaign of August of that year.³⁰⁸ The abductees, Michael Brennan and Pat Nolan of Tomard, were regular attendees at Carlow's Liberal Club, had consistently voted for the Liberal candidates since 1835, and had suffered on this account — Brennan's son had famously been dismissed from his employment in Milford malthouse. Brennan was informed that his nephew would receive £100 from Alexander if he voted for the Conservative candidates, while Nolan's nephew John (a cooper and small tenant of three acres in Ballinabranna) informed his uncle that John II had threatened to take his land from him if his uncle voted

³⁰⁵ Milford rental, 1837 (APMH).

³⁰⁶ *Leinster Independent*, 12 Dec. 1835.

³⁰⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 30 Apr. 1836.

³⁰⁸ On this case, see *Carlow Sentinel*, 21 Oct. 1837;

against him.³⁰⁹ In both cases the increasing tendency to accede to Alexander's wishes is apparent and cooperation between landlord and tenant was seen as desirable. In John Nolan's act of physically restraining his uncle (shouting 'you old rogue') can be seen the increasing unpopularity of the die-hard Liberals at Milford for the suffering they were causing for the estate population in general. Dogged as ever, both Brennan and Nolan reported the incident to the Liberal Club in Carlow and brought successful cases for common assault against their nephews at Carlow Quarter Sessions in October, where both nephews were sentenced to three months imprisonment and a fine of £5. The defending barrister was correct in deeming it an extremely important case and he stated his fear that events at Milford had the makings of a local civil war which might be extrapolated across the county, if not immediately checked:

Here was uncle against nephew, and cousin against cousin; every domestic tie broken for factious purposes — in fact, if such a case were persevered in, the social elements would be dissolved in this unfortunate county. [...] It was bad enough to have the aristocracy and the people divided; but in this case the evil was ten-fold — for here were the people instigated and coerced to make war upon each other.³¹⁰

During the by-election of December 1840 (looked upon by Carlow Conservatives as a real test and a crucial opportunity to regain at least one seat for the Tories), it became clear that Frs Kehoe and Maher had underestimated the Milford tenantry's slide towards Alexander. On Wednesday 25 November, they convinced the Liberal candidate, Hon. Frederick Ponsonby (member of a Whig dynasty, brother of the bishop of Derry and Raphoe and brother-in-law of former Prime Minister, the 2nd Earl Grey) to personally canvass the Milford voters.³¹¹ John Alexander II came on the scene by accident and 'immediately broke into the mob and seeing one of his father's tenants surrounded by the whole body like a stag at bay, he took him forthwith under his protection'.³¹² According to the *Sentinel*, all the tenants present told Ponsonby that they would vote with Alexander

³⁰⁹ *Leinster Independent*, 21 Oct. 1837.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹¹ Malcomson, *Carlow parliamentary roll*, p. 49.

³¹² *Carlow Sentinel*, 28 Nov. 1840.

and the candidate was ‘evidently mortified at the reception he met with on the Milford estate’.³¹³ While exact statistics on how the Milford tenants voted on this occasion are unavailable, it would appear that even more voted with their landlord than in 1837 and that John II had regained his authority over his voting tenantry —one newspaper account alleged that at least 14 tenants voted for the Conservative candidates.³¹⁴

The general election of 1841 followed just seven months later and was an equally fractious affair. Bruen and Bunbury contested the election against John Ashton Yates and O’Connell’s son and namesake. At a public meeting in Leighlinbridge in early July, those Milford tenants who had voted Conservative the previous December were brought forward through the crowd by a curate, and they pledged they would never vote against O’Connell again.³¹⁵ However, it is likely that many of these felt under pressure to appease the crowd and may not have followed through at the hustings. Cooping was engaged in to an unprecedented level. It was alleged that all of the Milford voters from Tomard were carried off on the morning of 25 June 1841 by armed parties who told them that ‘Mr. O’Connell had sent them, and that death would follow the slightest resistance’.³¹⁶ Arriving in the county to canvass for his son, Daniel O’Connell snr described his canvass of voters in Idrone West as ‘a total failure’ and on 13 July, he commented on the Conservative sway which made him ‘apt to despond. The majority this day may be either way. It is likely it may be in favour of Bruen because he has forces in every barony whereas our gigantic strength is in one, Rathvilly’.³¹⁷ O’Connell threw himself enthusiastically into the election campaign, declaring ‘My great object is to make Carlow the Clare of the Repeal’.³¹⁸ Following the election, O’Connell was the subject of a sketch entitled ‘A Brown (Bruen) study’ showing him in gloomy contemplation on

³¹³ *Ibid.*

³¹⁴ *Freeman’s Journal*, 8 Jul. 1841.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

³¹⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 26 Jun. 1841.

³¹⁷ Kavanagh, *The political scene*, p. 20; *Correspondence of Daniel O’Connell*, vol. vi, p. 105.

³¹⁸ *Correspondence of Daniel O’Connell*, vol. vi, p. 78, 29 May 1841; Oliver MacDonagh, *The Emancipist: Daniel O’Connell 1830-47* (London, 1989), pp 196-8.

receiving news of Bruen's victory.³¹⁹ In his final years, the local press claimed that he tried to ignore the place 'as Carlow is not one of his *favourite counties*, since young Dan's defeat in 1841'.³²⁰

In the run up to the 1841 election, the Alexander brothers proved as zealous as ever. John II and Lorenzo were prominent at public meetings and in canvassing for Bruen, and were apparently conspicuous in Carlow town on the nights before the election. The *Kilkenny Journal* alleged that John II's behaviour was deliberately provocative and that he 'attempted some outrage upon the people of Carlow', which resulted in an attack which left him 'almost dead on the spot'.³²¹ Although this incident was denied, it is clear that John II was sufficiently energised to consider the use of physical force during the campaign which came to a head as polling began on Tuesday 13 July. It was claimed that 100,000 people were in the town and a heavy military presence was observed on all streets.³²² One eye-witness wrote an account to John Tyndall of a scene at the hustings inside Carlow courthouse which testifies not only to the increase in the Conservative vote but also to John II's prominence in the local campaign:

I was in court this day and saw all the Barony Boys, 160 in number (all RC to a man) polling for Bruen and Bunbury. John, I saw one glorious sight, a voter coming up on O'Connell's tally and voting for Bruen and Bunbury, all from the looks and power of his landlord who was standing at my side. Immediately after voting, his landlord was crossing the table to fold him in his arms as the prodigal son, when he was stopped by one of the opposite party — now Sir, the fight commenced, now you might behold John Alexander, Sir T. Butler, Newton to[o] fighting like men for the cause, nothing serious occurred but the Conservatives came off victorious.³²³

His standing with Bruen was at an all-time high and he was very publically identified with Bruen's return —the latter's most celebrated electoral success. Surviving

³¹⁹Image on the website of the British Museum, at http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=151942001&objectId=734079&partId=1, accessed 12 Jan. 2014.

³²⁰ *Carlow Sentinel*, 10 Jun. 1843.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 3 Jul. 1841.

³²² *Ibid.*, 17 Jul. 1841.

³²³ Philip Evans to John Tyndall, 13 Jul. 1841 (Tyndall papers, Royal Institution of Great Britain, RI MS JT/1/TYP/11/3565).

correspondence testifies to his familiarity with the MP and to his role as adviser and sentinel for Bruen's interests while the latter was away in London.³²⁴

His family's growing profile in 1835-41 was reflected in the pages of the local Tory newspaper where the Alexanders were written about in a more reverential manner. They appeared to enjoy a more extensive social life which served to solidify their reputation as gentry figures rather than millers. It is hardly coincidental that on 12 February 1835, John I attended his first levee at Dublin Castle, hosted by Tory Lord Lieutenant, Thomas Hamilton, 9th earl of Haddington.³²⁵ For the first time in 1836, Milford House was referred to formally in the press as 'the seat of J. Alexander esq.' and increasing attention was paid to the family's visitors and their social activities in the 'Fashionable Intelligence' columns.³²⁶ Links with nobility, such as the regular visits at Milford by their kinsman, Sir William Clarke of Rossmore, Co. Cork (the husband of Mrs Christian Alexander's niece)³²⁷ were reported on, as were family travels overseas.³²⁸ The transportation of 'an old offender' for seven years for stealing Lorenzo Alexander's handkerchief in 1841 speaks volumes about the family's perceived position in society.³²⁹ Oil portraits were commissioned of John and Christian Alexander —probably at the behest of their eldest son, as necessary markers of gentility. The Alexanders wanted the best and their chosen artist—in a statement of both means and taste—was the distinguished Martin Cregan, who at this time 'occupied the foremost position as a portrait painter in Ireland', according to Strickland.³³⁰ In 1840, Cregan completed his painting of John I, and an insight into the sitter's vision for the portrait may be gauged from the large sheet of parchment in his left hand: an account or plan of some description

³²⁴ Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 1841, copy of a letter from John Alexander II to Bruen, 7 Sep. 1841 (NAI, 3/14245).

³²⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 13 Feb. 1835.

³²⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 24 Sep. 1836.

³²⁷ Joseph Foster, *The Royal lineage of our noble and gentle families, together with their paternal ancestry* (London, 1884), vol. ii, p. 87.

³²⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 9 Nov. 1839.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2 Jan. 1841.

³³⁰ Walter G. Strickland, *A dictionary of Irish artists* (Dublin, 1913), vol. i, p. 223.

(see appendix J1). As a memorial to his legacy and contribution, John I clearly wanted his portrait to depict a man of enterprise and commerce rather than a sedentary country gentleman, a fact which is confirmed by the note he had inscribed on its rear recording how he had 'Founded Milford in 1790'.³³¹

In the late 1830s, the family sought social associations with Protestant Carlow and partook of the contemporary fascination with private societies.³³² John I and both of his eldest sons became members of the Carlow Knot of Friendly Brothers of St. Patrick, alongside many prominent members of the gentry such as Col. Bruen, Sir Thomas Butler, William Browne and Lord Downes.³³³ Lorenzo Alexander was initiated into the long-established Carlow branch of the Freemasons on 27 Dec 1838 and was joined by his elder brother a fortnight later.³³⁴ In April 1847, the register for Lodge 116 places John Alexander among co-members he was unlikely to fraternise with in wider society, including a butler, a grocer and a hotel manager.³³⁵ Without a doubt the Alexanders were by far its most prestigious members and it seems to have been employed as a channel of Protestant networking, as a means to solidarity and camaraderie of the right sort. In the case of Carlow, despite the movement's apolitical philosophies, a scan of the personnel involved testifies to the local Lodge being an exclusively Conservative domain: Henry Cary and Carroll of the *Sentinel* were prominent members.³³⁶ It was undoubtedly an environment in which John II felt he could shine and he perhaps envisaged himself as the

³³¹ Neither of these portraits appears in Strickland's list of Cregan's works, *ibid*, pp 224-33, but the artist's name is recorded on the rear of both. On a contemporaneous merchant's (John Keogh) similar inclusion of an accounting ledger in his formal portrait, see Griffith, 'Social mobility and the middling sort', p. 1.

³³² W.E. Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants in mid-Victorian Ireland* (Oxford, 1994), p. 192.

³³³ 'A memorial of registry of the Society or Knot called the County Carlow Principal Knot being one of the Knots of the Society of the ancient and most benevolent Order of the Friendly Brothers of Saint Patrick', March 1839 (PPP).

³³⁴ 'List of members belonging to the Carlow Lodge', 25 Mar. 1844 (Grand Lodge of Ireland archives, Correspondence folder 1 116(A), Carlow, 1825-59); 'Form of registry of Freemasons', Carlow Lodge no. 116, 2 Apr. 1847 (Carlow County Archives, P2/46); *Carlow Sentinel*, 29 Dec. 1838.

³³⁵ 'Form of registry of Freemasons', Carlow Lodge no. 116, 2 Apr. 1847 (Carlow County Archives, P2/46).

³³⁶ *Ibid*; Lodge 116: minute book, 1838-1861 (Grand Lodge of Ireland archives).

gentry's figurehead in the Lodge. He and Lorenzo were raised to the degree of Master Mason in the summer of 1839.³³⁷

Also at this time, Protestantism became a defining feature of the family and all the Milford institutions. In the 1830s, Bibles were a hugely popular gift between family members—a number of which survive with the inscription 'The Milford Prayer Meeting Room' which suggests that a more formal and diligent approach to religious observances and services was made in Milford House during this period.³³⁸ By 1839, John II was a member of the Protestant Association and was the provincial member for Carlow on its committee (Bruen was one of the vice-presidents) and he would espouse a militantly Protestant outlook in all his dealings for the rest of his life.³³⁹ As employer and patron, a person's religion was a deciding factor for John II in determining whether or not he would assist or promote them. When John Tyndall approached him in February 1842 seeking preferment for his son and namesake, it is clear that his Protestantism was regarded as one of his finest credentials in Alexander's eyes: 'He said he would be glad to have it in his power to serve a Protestant man, especially such a one as you were', the father reported to the son.³⁴⁰ However, John II's religious fervour was best demonstrated in his attempt to create a mini-Protestant colony at Bilboa at the western end of the estate. Alexander was greatly inspired by the efforts of Henry Bruen I who had established a Protestant community at 'his new town of Nurney' on his estate (with a church, in whose graveyard he was buried) as part of his 'dream of a flagship Protestant settlement', according to Thomas King.³⁴¹ Similarly, the Rochforts had Cloydagh church close to their demesne and John II greatly desired a Protestant church on his estate as a status symbol and physical monument to his beliefs and policies. By 1846, a total of £1,100 had been

³³⁷ Lodge 116: minute book, 1838-1861 (Grand Lodge of Ireland archives).

³³⁸ Many of these remain in the APMH and library at Milford House.

³³⁹ *Publications of the Protestant Association* (London, 1839), pp iii-iv.

³⁴⁰ John Tyndall snr to John Tyndall jnr, 1 Feb. 1842 (Tyndall papers, Royal Institution of Great Britain, RI MS JT/1/TYP/10/3265).

³⁴¹ Malcomson, *Carlow's parliamentary roll*, p. 27; Thomas King, 'Carlow town and its hinterland in the eighteenth century' in *Carlow: history and society*, pp 457-80, at p. 469.

raised, which included contributions from India and the Lord Lieutenant in 1843.³⁴²

Advertisements for the consecration of the church in 1846 heralded 'the formation of a Protestant district', and the Bishop of Ossory and Leighlin performed the ceremony on 27 March of that year.³⁴³ It was very much a vanity project for John II and a source of immense pride which occupied much of his time and interest for the rest of his life. Before the church was even completed, he listed it as a facility on the estate in advertisements of farms at Milford in a bid to attract Protestant tenants.³⁴⁴ Undoubtedly, it enhanced the strength and perception of his estate as a Protestant institution that typified 'the Tory oligarchy of the Co. Carlow'.³⁴⁵

The Alexander powerbase, although severely tested by this decade of political tumult, was ultimately strengthened by the storms. The nature of the Alexander's authority at Milford had moved from the centre of a theoretical cooperative to the apex of a more formal hierarchy where their dominion was assured. By 1841, it was regarded as a staunchly loyal, Conservative and Protestant powerbase with a largely Catholic population. John II had succeeded in establishing the political and social worth of his family which was independent of the importance of Milford mills. With the birth of the Prince of Wales in November 1841, he seized the opportunity to fuse the political and commercial prowess of his family in an event to showcase Milford as a centre of loyal, Protestant Carlow. On the evening of Friday 12, he utilised the impressive physical infrastructure of his father's business premises to great political effect. He invited all of the mill workers and labourers on the estate to 'the Great Flour Mill' where he had arranged for musketeers to line its ramparts and fire a *feu-de-joie* in celebration of the young prince. Several volleys were greeted with cheers from the workforce who were then treated to barrels of Guinness 'Double X porter, and the evening was spent in

³⁴² *Carlow Sentinel*, 22 May 1841, 13 May 1843.

³⁴³ *Ibid*, 28 Mar. 1846.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 4 Mar. 1843.

³⁴⁵ *Leinster Independent*, 26 May 1838.

rejoicings becoming loyal and dutiful subjects'.³⁴⁶ Relations with the local Catholic community had improved somewhat but would never return to the heights of respect and mutual cooperation enjoyed during the early stewardship of John I. Its inhabitants had attempted to assert their political independence and although some remained committed to this course, many others yielded to their landlord's authority and voted as he wished; the rewards for doing so became abundantly apparent to all. Whatever tensions lay beneath the surface were increasingly suppressed and gave Alexander the appearance of victory in the electoral battle. Indeed, for John II, appearances were paramount and at the close of 1841, it appeared that he had won and that his powerbase had triumphed.

³⁴⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 20 Nov. 1841.

Chapter 8

Financial challenges and political gains: Milford, 1830-60

‘An accomplished gentleman— a kind and considerate landlord — an enterprising merchant’.

The *Belfast Newsletter* on John Alexander II in 1853¹

i. John Alexander & Co.: 1830–50

The rise in the Alexanders’ political profile could not, as events turned out, have occurred at a more opportune moment. It countered many threats posed to their financial status between 1830 and 1860 and secured their longevity in the ranks of the Carlow gentry. Without a solid and active political identity, the family could easily have ridden the crest of the milling wave and fallen into obscurity when that industry was threatened and declined during those years. As politically active gentlemen, they were guaranteed a position in the county hierarchy while their businesses were challenged by accident, legal disputes and broader economic winds.

Hints of the future demise of *John Alexander & Co.* can be detected in the company’s history between 1830 and 1850. The malting trade was the area in which the company faced its first major challenge. The trade had been in serious decline nationally since the establishment of Milford malthouse and in 1821, James Conolly estimated that the consumption of malt in Ireland had fallen to 500,000 barrels from a peak of 12 million

¹ *Belfast Newsletter*, 7 Jan. 1853.

around 1790.² Significant tightening of malting regulations in 1827 and 1828 which assimilated Irish and English laws, met with serious opposition from Irish maltsters who claimed that they made the effective running of their businesses impossible and eliminated any potential for profit.³ As well as an increase in the number of minutely detailed stipulations about the malting process, manufacturers were now faced with more vigorous inspections and 15 new penalties for errors or omissions in the obligatory barley stock accounts which could incur fines totalling £2,000.⁴ In June 1829, convinced that the new regulations were unworkable and could destroy Milford malthouse, John I led a meeting of 15 Carlow maltsters who prepared resolutions to be presented to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.⁵ In strong language, he claimed that by failing to legislate effectively against malt smuggling the act effectively facilitated it; in fact, the act was familiarly known in the country as “the measure for making smuggling easy”.⁶ With a harbour thus provided for illicit malt, many ‘persons little better than paupers’ could purchase cheap stocks of malt of dubious origin without paying any duty and then establish themselves as licensed maltsters. John I felt strongly enough about the amended laws to travel to London to seek an interview with Henry Goulburn. However, the Chancellor rejected his suggestions and in Alexander’s own words, the meeting was ‘without any beneficial effect, and my words to him were, that all fair maltsters would be compelled to leave the trade’.⁷ When only minor amendments were made to the legislation, he was determined to be master of his own destiny and refused to allow his enterprise to fall victim to poor governance. Remarkably, he closed his malting

² PP, 1821 (668) *Report from the select committee to whom the several petitions complaining of the depressed state of the agriculture of the United Kingdom were referred*, p. 313.

³ 7 and 8 Geo. IV, c. 52.

⁴ PP 1835 (17-19) *Fifteenth report of the commissioners of inquiry into the excise establishment ...malt*, pp 11-15.

⁵ *Carlow Morning Post*, 25 Jun. 1829.

⁶ *Halls, Ireland*, vol. i, p. 406

⁷ PP 1835 (17-19) *Fifteenth report of the commissioners of inquiry into the excise establishment ...malt*, p. 195.

operations at Milford for a period in October 1833.⁸ He then spent almost a month in London giving evidence to the commissioners, trying in vain to convince the Treasury and the Board of Excise that the new system was ruinous to the conscientious trader. He returned home in low spirits, convinced that the malting arm of his concerns was doomed to failure: 'This country is overrun with smuggled malt, not only by licensed houses, but in many of the outlying districts the farmers are hard at work'.⁹ He wrote despondently to Henry Feath, the manager of the *Beamish & Crawford* malting concerns in Cork that he had 'given up all idea of continuing the trade'.¹⁰ While it is hugely unlikely that the move was a mere stunt, it created significant publicity (given the national stature of the Milford maltings) and the closure was seized upon by many activists as proof of the legislation's faults.¹¹

On 6 June 1834, John I gave evidence to a parliamentary inquiry in London into the malt excise and his evidence was quoted in a later debate on the issue in the House of Commons.¹² He claimed that the number of licensed maltsters in his district had increased from three or four in 1796 to between 30 and 40 in 1834—largely as a result of the increase in smuggled malt. He pointed to the collapse of both his own concern and the price of malt across the country. As a result of the new legislation, a barrel of malt now sold in Dublin for between 18 and 22 shillings: 'I could not make any profit; unless I got 28s, it would hardly pay me. [...] I wish to see the trade upon a fair footing; I wish no monopoly, but I wish them to pay the duty fairly'.¹³ However, despite the recommendation of the inquiry that malt duties should be reduced, a bill to amend the legislation was postponed in August 1836 and no substantial changes were made.¹⁴ The

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 195, 4 Dec. 1833.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp 199, 201.

¹² *Ibid.*, evidence of John Alexander, pp 213-216; *Freeman's Journal*, 12 Aug. 1836.

¹³ PP 1835 (17-19) *Fifteenth report of the commissioners of inquiry into the excise establishment ... malt*, p. 215.

¹⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 12 Aug. 1836.

excise raid on Milford malthouse in May 1835 outlined above (although politically motivated as retaliation against the aggressions of John II)¹⁵ exacerbated the impression of the enterprise as one under threat. Although the *Carlow Sentinel* reported that the case was met with ‘disgust and indignation’ by John I’s supporters and that it had ‘no parallel in the annals of the Four Courts’, it showed that the government —this time through its ancillary forces— could destabilise Milford’s financial base.¹⁶ When a subsequent raid turned violent, John I’s fears for his business increased exponentially. The new legislation subjected the malthouse to regular, minute and occasionally hostile inspections from the increasingly suspicious revenue police, whose southern headquarters were located in Carlow town.¹⁷ Just before midnight on Sunday 14 January 1837, the door of Milford malthouse was broken open by George Barker, the supervisor of excise, sub-inspector Wilkins and a party of 57 revenue police.¹⁸ Armed with a search warrant, they declared ‘that they had an information that smuggled malt was on the premises’ and surrounded the manager and the workmen with their guns and bayonets. Alexander’s workmen claimed that the police used threats, violence and bad language before Patrick Mahon (a young, illiterate maltster from Clochrisc, who had worked in the malthouse for six years) was stabbed with a bayonet by an agitated policeman, while in the process of defending the malthouse manager. Mahon remained in the county infirmary for a week recovering from his wounds. John Alexander was outraged and reported the incident the following day to the police at Milford who forwarded information to Chief Constable William Fitzgibbon in Carlow. On learning that no illicit malt had been discovered, Fitzgibbon was satisfied that Mahon had been attacked ‘without provocation’ and reported to under-secretary Thomas Drummond that the revenue police had ‘acted in the

¹⁵ See above, pp 279-80.

¹⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 2 Jul. 1836.

¹⁷ Lewis, *Topographical dictionary of Ireland*, vol. i, pp 261-2; *Carlow Sentinel*, 8 Feb. 1862.

¹⁸ Unless otherwise stated, details of the raid of the revenue police in January 1837 are taken from documents in the possession of Mr John Sheehan which comprise the sworn information of Patrick Mahon, Matthew Ennis, John Forde (all of Milford malthouse) and policeman John McConnell; and the information of George Newson, 20 Mar. 1837 (PPP).

most outrageous manner'.¹⁹ Drummond and the Lord Lieutenant took especial interest in the case and immediately sought information from the head of the revenue police, Lt. Col. William Brereton.²⁰ The authorities in Dublin Castle wanted to hurry the case to a conclusion given the embarrassing possibility that the raid had been an outpouring of anti-Protestant sentiment by zealous members of the revenue police.²¹ The Irish government's deliberate policy of Catholic recruitment in all branches of the police establishment in the mid-1830s was met with Conservative claims in Carlow that the certain members of the revenue police were actively biased against Protestants.²² It appears that Alexander also saw the wisdom of dropping the case. While it is clear that the police had been more culpable than any of his employees, John I wished to kill the negative publicity which the case had engendered and neutralise the impression of Milford malthouse as a den of criminal activity.²³

By this stage, however, Alexander had been approached by Arthur Guinness II to exclusively supply Milford malt to his Dublin brewery — a providential commission which single-handedly saved his business, according to John I. The contract may owe something to Guinness's working relationship with James Conolly in many capacities since the turn of the century — most recently in 1825 as vice presidents of Dublin's Chamber of Commerce— but it also speaks of Milford's significant reputation.²⁴ On 11 December 1833, Guinness testified to the excise inquiry that John Alexander, who 'had long been one of the most extensive maltsters in Ireland, has suspended his trade on his own account, and is now working his malt houses, on commission for my firm'.²⁵ Two of the country's most successful entrepreneurs had been forced to use their own initiative to

¹⁹ Fitzgibbon to Drummond, 15 Jan. 1837, Outrage reports, Co. Carlow 1837 (NAI, 3/17).

²⁰ Ibid, Brereton to Drummond, 20 Jan. 1837.

²¹ Malcolm, 'The politics of policing Ireland', pp 59-61; *Carlow Sentinel*, 10 Mar. 1838.

²² *Carlow Sentinel*, 13 and 27 Apr. 1839.

²³ The memorials by Alexander's employees against McConnell bear the note, 'Case compromised with consent of the crown' (papers in the possession of Mr John Sheehan).

²⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 11 Mar. 1825.

²⁵ PP 1835 (17-19) *Fifteenth report of the commissioners of inquiry into the excise establishment ...malt*, p. 212.

unite and overcome dangerous legislation and prove their commercial expertise. It was a startling lesson in precarious economics for John I. Although the contract was a very significant one (it was common for up to 10,000 barrels of malt to stand at Milford before being sent to the Guinness brewery), the heyday of Milford malthouse and its supremacy in the trade was well and truly over. This marked the first major step in the decline of *John Alexander & Co.*²⁶ Nationally, the number of malthouses dropped from 2,216 in 1785 to just 388 (albeit more technologically advanced) fifty years later.²⁷ By the 1850s, although it had other contracts beside the one with Guinness, Milford malthouse was only modestly profitable (e.g. producing malt with a value of £6,000 in 1859) and it was never again the money-pot it had undoubtedly been in the 30 years after 1796.²⁸ In 1851, Lorenzo Alexander informed a valuator that 'the malthouses have not done now more than ⅛ of the business of 1843; from the year 1846, upper floors of malthouse [are] used as stores'.²⁹

By contrast, the milling branches of *John Alexander & Co.* remained remarkably successful in the early 1840s. By that time, the company purchased corn at eight stores it operated throughout Carlow and the neighbouring counties, including depots in Carlow town, Tullow, Newbridge, Athy, Goresbridge and Kilkenny city.³⁰ From there, the grain was transported to Milford for grinding and then distributed for home consumption (to Dublin via the Barrow and the Grand Canal) or export. *John Alexander & Co.* was heavily engaged in overseas trade and imported vast quantities of cheap wheat when the domestic harvest was poor; in 1838, it imported 2,300 tonnes of foreign wheat for the Belfast Flour Mills.³¹ From less than a million quarters on an annual basis up to 1818,

²⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Jul. 1836.

²⁷ Cullen, *An economic history of Ireland since 1660*, p. 123.

²⁸ APMH, 'Journal of *John Alexander & Co.*', 1856-68 (APMH).

²⁹ Valuation office house books, NAI, OL 5.0010.

³⁰ *Halls' Ireland*, vol. i, p. 406; *Carlow Sentinel*, 19 Apr. 1834, 9 Nov. 1850, 27 Nov. 1858; Letterbook index of *John Alexander I*, 1800 (APMH).

³¹ *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 Dec. 1838.

Ireland was also exporting over three million quarters of grain and flour by 1838.³²

Significant quantities of Carlow grain were sent to London and Liverpool in the early 1840s where they earned high prices.³³ Milford continued to rely heavily on the export market, especially for its oatmeal and flour. In the early 1840s, the Halls reported that John I ‘largely manufactures oatmeal, the character of which stands very high in the principal mart —Manchester, where it bears the best price’ and that ‘a large quantity of flour is exported to England’.³⁴ Indeed, ‘Milford Mills Oatmeal’ enjoyed such renown that retailers considered themselves lucky to be an official stockist. From 1843, renowned Catholic baker and miller, Bernard Hughes (originally manager of Belfast’s Public Bakery, who was provided with capital by John Alexander to establish his own enterprise)³⁵ announced in the press that he was one of only three bakers in that town to be directly supplied with the celebrated commodity by *John Alexander & Co.*: ‘The superior quality of CARLOW OATMEAL, over any other offered in this market to the public, is admitted by all who have ever used it, and can only be known to those who have not used it, *by comparison*.’³⁶

Following his recent experiences in the malting trade, John I came to realise how the prosperity of his corn mills was also at the mercy of government legislation, which could endow or threaten his company. Cheap imports of American flour and grain certainly had the potential to deconstruct Milford’s economic ascendancy. As far back as 1807, James Conolly had complained to John Foster that ‘our corn trade has been terribly cut up by the vast import of flour into England from America’.³⁷ Two years later he stated to Edward Wakefield that this importation should be stopped, ‘and the Irish miller would then have

³² Cullen, *An economic history of Ireland since 1660*, p. 109.

³³ Halls, *Ireland*, vol. i, p. 405.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 406-7.

³⁵ Jack Magee, *Barney: Bernard Hughes of Belfast, 1808-1878. Master baker, Liberal and reformer* (Belfast, 2002), p. 18.

³⁶ *Ibid*; *Belfast Newsletter*, 8 Dec. 1843.

³⁷ Conolly to Foster, 1 Jul. 1807 (Foster Massereene papers, PRONI, T2519/4/376); Conolly to Foster, 15 Sep. 1807 (*Ibid*, T2519/4/413).

that trade'.³⁸ His prediction proved to be correct but created a precarious legislative advantage for Irish milling that could not last indefinitely. American imports also had a remarkable freight advantage over their Irish competitors. In 1821, Conolly had highlighted the anomalous situation to a select committee whereby flour could be delivered to Liverpool from America at a lower freight cost than from Milford mills — 'from which there is a water carriage the whole of the way from the mill-door to Dublin, and which water carriage has cost at least 400,000l'.³⁹ Like Conolly, John I had always been very eager to perpetuate the protection of the industry and regularly attended meetings in Carlow which sought to improve the Corn Laws or resist harmful changes.⁴⁰ In 1827, he heartily supported a government bill to ban the importation of foreign flour across both islands and in February helped to prepare a petition to the House of Commons in support of the measure from the 'corn millers of Ireland unanimously agreed to at a general meeting convened in the city of Dublin'.⁴¹ The petition expressed the manufacturers' absolute reliance on the legal protections they had enjoyed for several decades. Although couched in deferential and careful language in their plea for 'justice and sound policy', the petitions encapsulate the sense of anxiety and defensiveness felt by Irish millers when any changes to their position were contemplated. They reminded the government that Ireland was Britain's only certain source of grain in times of war, that 'the erection of a corn mill has been invariably followed by the introduction or extension of cultivation in the neighbouring districts', and expressed the view that they would be 'irreparably damaged' if the ban was ever rescinded.⁴² This would be a gross breach of faith and a poor reward for their large capital investments in industry and agriculture. Their pleas for Irish milling were successful on this occasion and the ban was

³⁸ Wakefield, *Account of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 436.

³⁹ PP 1821 [668] *Report from the select committee to whom the several petitions complaining of the depressed state of the agriculture of the United Kingdom were referred*, p. 319.

⁴⁰ See for example *Carlow Morning Post*, 18 May 1820.

⁴¹ 'The humble petition of the corn millers of Ireland', Feb. 1827 (NAI, CSORP/1827/1393).

⁴² *Ibid.*

consolidated in new legislation in 1828 (9 Geo. IV, c.60), while the Duke of Wellington urged politicians ‘to consider what would be the consequence of cutting off from that country the only source of her industry —the only manufacture, with one exception, which remained to her’.⁴³

However, the fight to retain this privilege was to become a perpetual one in the ensuing years. The notion of repealing the Corn Laws was first mooted in 1839 and it inevitably became a hot political issue in Carlow, with many seeing it as a battle between wealthy millers and strong farmers on the one hand, and impoverished labourers and the destitute (in dire need of cheap flour) on the other. As with so much else in local society, the issue was split down political lines between Conservatives and Liberals. The *Carlow Sentinel* harangued ‘the enemies of the Corn Laws’, and local petitions against repeal were dominated by ‘the signatures of a great many of the landed proprietary’ and strong farmers who claimed the measure would create massive unemployment, social anarchy and increase their poor law burdens.⁴⁴ Liberals opposed these petitions and called for the immediate abolition of the protections, while anonymous notices began to appear in Leighlinbridge threatening violence against those who signed petitions against repeal.⁴⁵

In January 1840, the unthinkable happened when the Whig politician, Henry Labouchere, as President of the Board of Trade introduced a bill to the House of Commons to repeal the prohibition on the importation of foreign flour into Ireland.⁴⁶ In an outraged editorial, the *Carlow Sentinel* —clearly showing the influence of John Alexander — claimed that Irish millers were to be ‘robbed of the fruits of their industry’.⁴⁷ Indeed, the journalist used ideas which were identical to John I’s views of how Milford mills had affected their environs: ‘the surrounding districts, which before were a mere waste were improved and

⁴³ Robert Macaulay, Samuel Parsons, John Alexander jun., *Proposed alteration in the Corn Laws: Flour Importation (Ireland) Bill* (London, 1840), p. 7.

⁴⁴ *Carlow Sentinel*, 9 Feb., 16 Feb. and 23 Mar. 1839.

⁴⁵ *Leinster Independent*, 16 Feb. 1839; Outrage reports, Co. Carlow, 6 Jul. 1842 (NAI, 3/4087).

⁴⁶ Macaulay, Parsons & Alexander jun., *Proposed alteration in the Corn Laws*, p. 9.

⁴⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 8 Feb. 1840.

cultivated— land like any other productive commodity, became valuable’. However, at 77 years of age, John I evidently did not feel up to the fight and appointed his son to act in his stead. It may have taken some persuasion for Alexander to convince John II to involve himself in a campaign which would directly identify him as a merchant or manufacturer— denominations he had taken great care to evade. However, given the political undertones of a project which was of direct benefit to many landlords (the *Sentinel* defined the body of Irish millers as ‘influential, respectable and essentially Conservative’)⁴⁸ and in deference to his father’s wishes, he consented. In February, he attended a meeting of Irish flour millers and was chosen to lead a deputation to London, of which he stated: ‘Our object is to create friends’.⁴⁹ He was accompanied by Samuel Parsons and Robert Macaulay, extensive millers from Newry and Crumlin respectively, and they managed to secure an interview with Labouchere on 13 February— the day before his proposed bill was to be read in the Commons for a second time. Having listened attentively to their forceful case against the measure, Labouchere ‘held out no hope that the measure would be withdrawn by the government’, but agreed to delay proceedings after the second reading.⁵⁰

By May, seven petitions had been presented to the House in favour of the measure while 123 had been received against it.⁵¹ The delay in passing the bill into law was greeted as a ‘triumphant result’ by the deputation. Alexander, Parsons and Macaulay met again in Morley’s Hotel in central London on 18 May to prepare a 14 page pamphlet entitled *Proposed alteration in the corn laws: Flour importation (Ireland) bill*. It outlined their position and ostensible successes (‘respectfully offered to the consideration of both Houses of Parliament’), and was published soon afterwards. The text relied heavily on the content of former petitions as the authors summarised the position of Ireland’s milling

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 16 Apr. 1842.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 14 Mar. 1840.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 22 Mar. 1840.

⁵¹ Macaulay, Parsons & Alexander jun., *Proposed alteration in the Corn Laws*, p. 10.

magnates by arguing that their efforts and investments had transformed Ireland into an exporting country since 1790, supplying England with corn and flour with a value of over £23 million between 1814 and 1834.⁵² The overall tone of the document was one of relief tinged with apprehension that the fight was not yet over. When the bill was defeated in the House of Commons on 22 June by a small majority of 11 votes, John II's efforts were eulogised in Carlow and he became the unexpected champion of his father's trade. He even took Sir David Roche (MP for Limerick and an extensive miller) to task for his comment that many opponents of the bill were flour smugglers. Identifying himself as an Irish miller, Alexander wrote to Roche complaining that he had 'cast an unmerited stigma upon those for whom I have the honour to act as well as upon myself, inasmuch as it imputes to us a participation in practices beneath the character of a gentleman, and unworthy of a merchant or an honourable man of business'.⁵³ While it is ironic that John II's only published work relates to his heritage as a corn miller, the whole episode did much to increase his public profile in Carlow and he would have welcomed his increased popularity as a defender of landed and largely Conservative wealth in Ireland. The *Sentinel* claimed

that the Irish people in a great measure owe their delivery from this mighty infliction to the indefatigable efforts of John Alexander, jun., Esq. of Milford in this county, the principal delegate of the Irish millers in London, for we assert to our own knowledge, that during the last four months his labours have been unremitting in all parts of Ireland [...].⁵⁴

However, the measure was eventually passed in 1846 during the Great Famine and its impact on Milford mills and John II's reaction to it —as framed through the context of that crisis— will be outlined below.

Apart from his efforts to resist the repeal of the Corn Laws, John II's greatest contribution to the success of *John Alexander & Co.* was undoubtedly his campaign to bring a railway

⁵² Ibid, p. 9.

⁵³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 11 Jul. 1840.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 27 Jun. 1840.

line to the Milford works which would open up an improved avenue of trade and communication with Dublin and Waterford. John II was 34 years old when he first became financially involved in a railway company and it was to remain an obsession for the rest of his life.⁵⁵ In November 1836, the Great Leinster and Munster Company planned to bring Carlow's first railway right through the Alexander estate; the commercial fame and importance of the Milford works had obviously played a role in the provisional planning of the line.⁵⁶ Having convinced his father of the commercial propriety of investing in the scheme by 1837, John II subscribed £6,000 to the Dublin and Kilkenny Railway's estimated expense of £783,400— a huge sum, amounting to three years of the Milford rental, to a new and unproven commercial enterprise.⁵⁷ Although parliamentary approval was granted to this line in 1837, the company did not proceed with their plans.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, John II's funds were sunk into alternative ventures. Progress was slow and it was not until 1844 that approval was granted to the Dublin and Cashel Railway (a branch of the Great Southern and Western Railway) to construct a line from Dublin to Carlow.⁵⁹

County engineer John Walker outlined the best possible route to Kilkenny and from this early stage a station was envisaged at Milford, the first stop outside Carlow town, which was clearly a consequence of John Alexander's canvassing for his family's mills. When speaking at meetings in the Conservative Clubhouse about the best route for the line and in commissioning surveys, Alexander worked hard to ensure that the line passed through his neighbourhood.⁶⁰ In November 1845, the Great Southern and Western Railway published its (ultimately successful) proposal for the line which was to pass through the

⁵⁵ Interview with John Alexander V, 27 Mar. 2000.

⁵⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 21 Nov. 1835.

⁵⁷ PP, 1837 (95), *Railway subscription contracts deposited in the private Bill Office of the House of Commons, session 1837*, pp 315-22.

⁵⁸ William Ellis, 'Railways and county Carlow' in *Carloviana* no. 37 (1989/90), pp 18-20, at p. 18.

⁵⁹ Martin Nevin, 'Opening of Carlow railway station' in *Carloviana* (2006), no. 55, pp 56-8, at p. 57.

⁶⁰ *Carlow Sentinel*, 11 Oct. 1845.

townland of Ballybannon, one mile to the east of Milford Mills.⁶¹ Plans at this stage included a proposal to build a branch (of one mile in length) from the main line westwards to 'Milford quarries and flour mills [...] which are the finest in Ireland'.⁶² That the station-house in Ballybannon was to be named 'Milford', says much about its *raison d'être* and John II's role in its establishment. John II's role as a significant shareholder in the line was noted as a valuable bargaining tool in Carlow's favour by the county gentry.⁶³ He was undoubtedly the chief exemplar of 'railway mania' in its landlord class and was a figure of national significance in the campaign for railway advancement. By 1848, the local magistrates and grand jurors were appealing to him to use his knowledge, connections and obvious influence in this field to obtain the best deals for Carlow — a power he denied having but clearly relished.⁶⁴

The first train pulled into Carlow town on Wednesday 29 July 1846 with Sir John MacNeill (engineer of the line and Professor of Engineering at Trinity College) and William Dargan (one of the line's two contractors) aboard.⁶⁵ With so much progress made and enthusiasm at fever pitch, Alexander was eager to keep the momentum going and bring the line further south to Milford. A new company, the Irish South Eastern Company was founded in October to extend the line from Carlow to Bagenalstown and then on to Kilkenny (at an estimated cost of £200,000) with John II as a proprietor and one of its nine directors.⁶⁶ Dargan, who had been patronised by John II's father in previous decades was duly granted the contract and eventually joined Alexander as a co-director of the company in 1852.⁶⁷ Alexander also worked closely with MacNeill on the project's progress and the line from Carlow to Bagenalstown — with Milford as the only

⁶¹ Ibid, 15 Nov., 6 Dec. 1845.

⁶² Ibid, 6 Dec. 1845.

⁶³ Ibid, 16 Nov. 1844.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 11 Mar, 1848.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 1 Aug. 1846.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 10 Oct. 1846; Henry Glynn, *A reference book to the incorporated railway companies of Ireland* (London, 1847), p. 20.

⁶⁷ Mulligan, *William Dargan*, p. 95.

intermediate stop—opened on 24 July 1848.⁶⁸ From this date onwards, *John Alexander & Co.*—the only private company in the county to be serviced by its own railway stop (albeit unofficially)—increasingly used the railway as its major means of cargo transportation. Although no exact information survives about the company's usage of the railway, it surely mirrored the shift in human traffic away from the waterways: the number of passengers on the Grand Canal fell from 120,000 in 1846 to less than 22,000 five years later.⁶⁹ In the half-year to 30 June 1850, 19,489 passengers patronised the Irish South Eastern Railway; revenue from 'goods, cattle, parcels, mail' accounted for a quarter of its £1,584 total receipts.⁷⁰ By September 1851, the Carlow to Kilkenny connection was enjoying weekly traffic (of passengers and merchandise) worth £163; this had increased to £225 the following year.⁷¹ However, Milford station did not act only as an economic stimulus. Marie T.J. Hennessy has noted how the station consolidated the area's sense of identity as a modern centre and other infrastructural developments for Milford followed in its wake.⁷² A sub-post office was established on Milford bridge soon after the station opened; by 1855, Milford was receiving 153 letters a week through the railway network.⁷³ Due to the efforts of John II, this rural location continued to develop as a centre of commerce and social activity with all the hallmarks of an urban setting, with manufactories, a police barracks and now a railway station and post office.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 95; Wynne to Harness, 24 Jul. 1848 (NAK, MT/6/5/133).

⁶⁹ Oliver Doyle and Stephen Hirsch, *Railways in Ireland: 1834-1984* (Dublin, 1983), p. 11.

⁷⁰ PP 1851 (12) *Railways. Return showing the number of passengers conveyed on all the railways in England and Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, respectively during the half-year ending the 30th June 1850*, pp 10-11.

⁷¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 23 Sep. 1852.

⁷² Marie T.J. Hennessy, 'Milford station: along the tracks of time' in *Carloviana* no. 36 (1988), pp 3-7.

⁷³ The first printed reference to Milford post office occurs in the *Carlow Sentinel*, 21 Dec. 1850; PP, 1854-55 (445) *Report from the select committee on postal arrangements (Waterford &c.); together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, appendix and index*, p. 180.

ii. John II as landlord of the Milford estate, 1843-50

In the summer of 1843, Milford was on the brink of enormous change. The death of John I on 16 August, aged 79, signalled the end of an era. His family had arguably reached the zenith of its power: any of its subsequent successes (political and social) tended to be balanced by declines in power in other areas (commercial and agrarian). Fellow miller, Samuel Haughton, lamented John I as an industrialist whose greatest achievement was ‘that great commercial establishment with which his name was linked, who was famous for his commercial industry and integrity, and who departed full of years, meriting and receiving the respect of all’.⁷⁴ This was the obituary John I would have preferred, outlining his role as the visionary behind Milford mills and as a patron for an industrious community. The *Sentinel* had a different focus and failed to refer— even in the briefest of comments—to his mercantile endeavours.⁷⁵ It emphasised his position as a ‘country gentleman’ and it is easy to imagine his eldest son signing off on this sanitised account.

In his will and in a letter to ‘my beloved son’ (inserted with the will, to be read after his death), John I made explicit his wish that John II would assume responsibility for the management of the mills.⁷⁶ Following his inheritance, John II developed a greater respect for his father’s achievements, the ‘great mercantile establishment raised by his perseverance, and his genius for the development of industry in his native land’— efforts especially appreciated during John II’s future career as an MP.⁷⁷ However, in 1843 he had other ideas and his earliest significant step as the new master of Milford was to distance himself even further from his mercantile heritage. Within three years of his father’s death, he had diluted his responsibilities in *John Alexander & Co.* by signing an indenture of co-partnership with two of his younger brothers on 24 August 1846.⁷⁸ While

⁷⁴ *Carlrow Sentinel*, 22 Jan. 1853.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 19 Aug. 1843.

⁷⁶ Copy of the will of John Alexander I, 25 Jan. 1830 (APMH).

⁷⁷ *Carlrow Sentinel*, 29 Jan. 1853.

⁷⁸ ‘Abstract of title’, p. 43 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

retaining a proprietary role as figurehead and titular boss, John II entrusted the management of all the Milford premises to his right-hand man Lorenzo, while James Alexander was sent north to oversee the running of the Belfast Flour Mills. While this arrangement inevitably resulted in a three-way division of the company's profits and was a significant and irreparable dilution of the single-minded and comprehensive manner in which his father had run the concerns, John II clearly embraced it as a satisfactory solution which released him from the practical running of businesses for which he had little interest or aptitude. Although he was referred to in the press in 1852 as 'the principal in one of the most eminent milling forms in the country', and while he was prepared to campaign for the retention of millers' privileges and the financial prosperity they protected, the notion of being primarily designated as one of their number was anathema to him.⁷⁹

Instead in the 1840s, he devoted his time and attention to the management and improvement of Milford estate: the part of his inheritance which constituted just over one per cent of his father's estimated gross annual income, but which promised to promote his identity as a country gentleman on the rise in the hierarchies of the county's landed elite.⁸⁰ However, his actions as the Milford landlord in the mid-1840s were inspired by more than pragmatic political and social considerations. His landed estate was the area in his portfolio of assets where he felt most confident that he could make a significant contribution. His years as the Milford agent in the 1830s, his friendship with Henry Cary (the agent at Oak Park) and his activities as land valuator for the Conservative cause had been an education in estate management, administration and policy-making and he was more than *au fait* with the relevant legal and clerical infrastructures. His actions were demonstrably those of an individual with a keen and genuine interest in horticulture,

⁷⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 25 Dec. 1852.

⁸⁰ On the Alexanders' estimated gross income c. 1840, see pp 70-71 above.

husbandry and agrarian improvements and in this light the decision to focus his attentions there was an understandable—even sensible—one.

Milford estate was in a very healthy position when he inherited in 1843. The estate office had received 99 per cent of its rental the previous year, and although arrears had been rising steadily since 1839, it had every appearance of solvency and productivity. The Milford tenantry continued to be prosperous in the early 1840s and in the early years of the Famine, some very much so: for example, Patrick Hughes held a 68 acre farm in Ballygowan, employed servants in his house and enrolled many of his children in boarding schools.⁸¹ In his programme of improvement, John II hired John Ginty, a capable and progressive steward, while the agency was given to another of his brothers, George Alexander (who was practising at the bar and living in Fitzwilliam Square in Dublin).⁸² So valued were the services of a reliable steward that the Milford incumbent was granted an annuity in the early drafts of John II's will.⁸³ In March 1845, he was an enthusiastic supporter of 'his sincere and valued friend', Philip Jocelyn Newton of Dunleckney Manor in his bid to establish a dedicated farming society for the baronies of Idrone East and West to share expertise, hold shows and competitions and drive improvements in west Carlow, just as the Great Famine struck.⁸⁴ Alexander acted as the chairman of the inaugural meeting of the Idrone Agricultural Society the following month, having cut short a walking tour in the Scottish highlands to be present: 'I cannot forego the pleasure of serving my tenants', he claimed.⁸⁵

This new farming departure saw him investing significant amounts of time and money on developing 'Craan Farm', his flagship holding of 54 acres in the townland of

⁸¹ Information on the Hughes family is taken from an obituary of Patrick's son, William who died in 1905. M.R., "Father William Hughes, S.J.: a belated obituary" in *The Irish monthly*, vol. 33, no. 388 (Oct., 1905), pp 541-556.

⁸² 'Copy of the settlement on the intermarriage settlement of John Alexander Esq. with Miss Esther Brinkley', 17 Oct. 1848 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917); *Carlow Sentinel*, 23 Oct. 1847.

⁸³ John Alexander II to Mr Keily, 27 Aug. 1874 (LB2, APMH).

⁸⁴ *Carlow Sentinel*, 19 Sep. 1857.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Craanluskey, and installed his steward in 'Craan House'.⁸⁶ It was being referred to in the local press by 1847 as 'the Model Farm near Milford'.⁸⁷ His first major project from 1846 onwards was an attempt at a thorough system of drainage across the estate. He spoke at public meetings in this regard and announced his intention to spend over £1,000 at Milford under the *Land Drainage Act* in 1847; interestingly, Henry Bruen mentioned the same sum for his much larger estate.⁸⁸ Alexander's progressiveness can be judged by the fact that only five landlords in the county had applied for funds by the end of that year, and in October the Idrone Agricultural Society awarded him their medal for his efforts— 'drainage being the basis of all improvements'.⁸⁹ Incoming tenants in the late 1840s signed tenancy agreements which stipulated that at least half an acre of land per annum was to be drained according to a plan laid down by his steward or agent, until the whole farm was thoroughly improved.⁹⁰ Under the *Land Improvement Act* (also of 1847), he applied for loans from the Commissioners of Public Works to improve both the land and housing on the estate.⁹¹ In 1851, his efforts were inspected and judged to have been 'most successfully carried out'— one of only 13 proprietors in the county to receive official approval that year.⁹² In 1853, a group of 38 of his tenants stated that 'many of us, [...] when we became your tenants, lived in small thatched cottages, now dwell in comfortable slated houses, built at your request, the expense of which were generously allowed to us by you'.⁹³

Significant attention was also paid to improvements in his livestock and an indication of this new emphasis can be seen in John II's advertisements of vacant land at Milford as pasturage— which was also a reaction to falling domestic grain crops in the wake of the

⁸⁶ Milford rental, 1848 (APMH); *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Mar. 1843.

⁸⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Mar. 1843, 23 Oct. 1847.

⁸⁸ 10 & 11 Vic. c.38; *Carlow Sentinel*, 12 Jun. 1847.

⁸⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 and 30 Oct. 1847.

⁹⁰ 'Memorandum of an agreement between John Alexander Esq. and William Kenny', 1 Jan. 1848 (APMH).

⁹¹ 10 Vic. c. 32; *Carlow Sentinel*, 25 Dec. 1852.

⁹² *Carlow Sentinel*, 25 Dec. 1852.

⁹³ 'Address to John Alexander Esq', 1853 (Rathdonnell papers, PRONI, MIC 632 G6/9/143).

repeal of the Corn Laws.⁹⁴ Around 1845, he was the second landowner in the county to import bulls ‘of the purest breed’ from England, and Milford’s breeding and milking cows were winning prizes by 1848.⁹⁵ The cultivation of green crops— for which his father had been praised in the 1830s— was also heavily promoted and improved on the estate and John II’s steward proved himself an excellent leader in this field. Even in 1847 with the partial potato failure and despite ‘the depression of the time’, Milford’s produced bountiful harvests: Ginty’s turnip and carrot crops alone exceeded 150 tonnes which made the ‘model farm’ the most productive by far in the area.⁹⁶

John II clearly expected his tenantry to follow suit and leaseholders were especially encouraged in this regard. Alexander’s first cousin, Lorenzo Weld Hartstonge (who was heavily involved in the local agricultural society) claimed that John II distributed an annual reward pot of ten guineas between 1845 and 1857 to those tenants who were successful in competitions.⁹⁷ In 1853, one tenant named Cummins received £1 10s from John II on top of his prize money for taking first place in a stock competition (for a cow-in-calf which he valued at £30); his total winnings amounted to more than one quarter of his annual rent of £8.⁹⁸ There is also evidence that a certain amount of healthy competition as well as a degree of jealousy existed among tenants on the estate in these years. In 1849, Lorenzo Alexander explained that Mary Grannells had been accused of trespassing by the neighbouring Ryan family (holders of a weed-covered farm ‘wholly neglected— if not waste—owing to their idleness, carelessness and want of industry’) because ‘the poor woman was extremely industrious and the plaintiff envied her’.⁹⁹ To mitigate against such indolence, John II decided to suspend the granting of long leases during the first decade of his career as head landlord. Only a couple of leases have

⁹⁴ *Northern Whig*, 23 Aug. 1849.

⁹⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 6 May 1848, 6 Oct. 1849, 10 Oct 1850.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 30 Oct. 1847. This tonnage represents the combined tonnage for Swedish and golden globe turnips, and Altrincham and white Belgian carrots.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 19 Sep. 1857.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 24 Sep. 1853; Milford rental, 1842 (APMH).

⁹⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 7 Jul. 1849.

survived from the Famine years, but both hand-written agreements offered only yearly tenancies and contained explicit stipulations about the sort of improvements and diligence expected of an applicant (who was ‘in all respects to be a careful and improving tenant’) by the landlord.¹⁰⁰ In addition, it is clear that John II wanted to populate his estate with a more industrious, solvent and preferably Protestant breed of tenant who might positively influence the long-term leaseholders. To this end, his agent, George Alexander, advertised vacant farms at Milford (describing the estate as ‘THE BEST PART of the county’) in northern newspapers such as Belfast’s *Northern Whig* without inserting similar notices in the *Carlow Sentinel*—‘the object of the Landlord being to introduce the best system of farming amongst his tenantry’.¹⁰¹ John II’s efforts paid impressive dividends in the following decade. In 1853, Joseph Fishbourne, the inspector of drainage for the counties of Carlow and Kilkenny reported Alexander’s agricultural efforts as a successful case study.¹⁰² The achievements of a resident, astute and efficient landlord appear to belie the fact that they occurred during, and in the immediate aftermath of the Great Famine, and while they reflect the region’s immunity from the worst ravages of the crisis, they also suggest that John Alexander’s attentions were chiefly focused on other areas than relief.

iii. Milford and the Great Famine: 1846 – 1851

Shortly before eight o’clock on the calm night of 8 September 1846, a blazing meteor ‘about twice the size of the moon when full, of a circular form and intense brilliancy’ spent ten minutes passing over the neighbourhoods of Milford and Clogrennane before disappearing into the valley near the newly-consecrated church in Bilbo. It was seen by

¹⁰⁰ ‘Memorandum of an agreement between John Alexander Esq. and William Kenny’, 1 Jan. 1848 (APMH).

¹⁰¹ *Northern Whig*, 23 Oct. 1847; 23 Aug. 1849.

¹⁰² ‘Public works Ireland. Twenty-second report of the Board of public works, Ireland’ in *The sessional papers printed by order of the House of Lords, or presented by royal command in the session 1854* (London, 1854), vol. xxxvi, p. 16.

the superstitious members of the population as a bad omen and the *Carlow Sentinel* reported that 'such an appearance would in days of old be set down as one of the portents of the famine with which we are threatened'.¹⁰³ At that time, the likelihood of such a disaster was understood as a real possibility in the county given the failure of two successive potato harvests. An assessment of the nature and quality of John II's performance as both a miller and a landlord is crucial to an exposition of his broader socio-economic policies and beliefs. The prosperous province of Leinster was undoubtedly cushioned from the worst effects of the Famine by its productive land and advanced commercial infrastructures. In 1983, Mokyr gave Carlow's excess death rate per 1,000 population in 1846-51 as under 10, compared to Mayo's figure of over 60.¹⁰⁴ William J. Smyth places Carlow in 'a zone [...] in what was economically, perhaps, the strongest region in Ireland'.¹⁰⁵ In 1847, 52.5 per cent of Carlow's farms were above 15 acres in size, so it no surprise that the greatest distress in the county was experienced by its smallholders and labourers, and landlords were certainly not as badly affected as in other areas.¹⁰⁶ Unlike in many other counties, it was not a massive cause of landlord indebtedness and only 7-9 per cent of the county's townlands were auctioned off by the Encumbered Estates court in 1849-55.¹⁰⁷ What is clear (from the reduced reports of distress in the local press and the absence of any documentation relating to the barony of Idrone West in the Relief Commission papers subsequent to July 1847) is that the worst days of the Famine were over in Carlow by early 1848. However, despite these regional

¹⁰³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 26 Sep. 1846.

¹⁰⁴ Joel Mokyr's figures given in William J. Smyth, "'Born astride a grave": the geography of the dead' in John Crowley, William J. Smyth, Mike Murphy (eds.), *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine, 1845-52* (Cork, 2012), pp 108-117, at p. 108.

¹⁰⁵ William J. Smyth, 'The province of Leinster and the Great Famine' in *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, pp 325-333, at p. 328.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 326.

¹⁰⁷ David J. Butler, 'The landed classes during the Great Famine' in *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, pp 265-76, at p. 270.

variations, the Famine still constituted ‘the severest calamity’ for the county, as Horace Rochfort put it after the event.¹⁰⁸

Without a doubt, the potato disease had an immediate impact on the way land was farmed at Milford. On 31 May 1846, Constable Thomas Phair of Milford barracks supplied details to Dublin Castle about the decline in the acreage of potatoes in Cloydagh and Tullowcreen, the two parishes straddled by Milford estate.

Table 8.1 The acreage of land planted with potatoes in the parishes of Cloydagh and Tullowcreen, 1844-46¹⁰⁹

	CLOYDAGH	TULLOWCREEN	Total
1844	172	160	332
1845	147	187	334
1846	117	125	242

In two years, the acreage thus sown had fallen by 27 per cent, which indicates a significant (although not catastrophic) failure in local crops and the loss of seed potatoes. By contrast, the acreage in the parish of Old Leighlin in the same period fell by 43 per cent.¹¹⁰ While the Milford population were generally prosperous enough not to be totally reliant on the potato crop, the blight of 1845 caused significant distress for smaller tenants and labourers who were forced to ration their stocks and eat seed potatoes.¹¹¹ The robbery of potatoes from the model farm at Craan was reported and in April 1846, Rev. Peter Mooney, treasurer of the Old Leighlin Relief Committee reported that one

¹⁰⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 19 Jan. 1850.

¹⁰⁹ RLFC 4/3/5, 4/3/40 (NAI).

¹¹⁰ RLFC 4/3/39 (NAI).

¹¹¹ For this occurrence in the Burton estate outside Carlow town, see Desmond Norton, ‘Viscount Frankfort, Sir Charles Burton and county Carlow in the 1840s’ in *Carloviana*, no. 47 (1999), pp 2-6, at p. 6.

Alexander tenant, John Brennan of Tomard (living on seven acres while supporting a wife and seven children) had been living on 16 stone of potatoes for a month.¹¹²

Horace Rochfort's proactive measures from February to April 1846 (such as the purchase of over fifty barrels of seed potatoes to be distributed amongst his tenantry) were not mirrored by the Milford landlord—a portion of whose tenantry were worse affected than any of the Clogrennane farmers.¹¹³ On 1 April, it was Rochfort who convened and chaired a special presentment session to discuss possible measures to be taken under the Poor Relief act for the barony of Idrone West.¹¹⁴ Alexander attended and sat on the bench as 'several of the farmers present gave a detailed account of the destitution of the Tomard and other districts extending along the Ridge to Old Leighlin, and that they were unable to support the labourers, the supply of food being beyond their reach'.¹¹⁵ In an attempt to focus discussion on the areas worst affected (outside and to the west of his own estate), Rochfort moved to convene the next meeting—an 'extraordinary sessions for the barony of Idrone West' held on 9 April—in the old roads sessions house at Milford in the Alexander powerbase.¹¹⁶ Interestingly, John II did not attend the subsequent meetings to form a baronial relief committee, and thus took no formal role alongside his brother Lorenzo as treasurer or Rochfort as secretary.¹¹⁷ Such incidents were undoubtedly missed opportunities and created the impression that he was not as sympathetic as a more active public role would have indicated. In March 1847, the *Sentinel* reported that Alexander was acting as the chairman of the 'Tullowcreen Relief Committee' (the neighbouring parish to Cloydagh which formed part of the Milford estate), but there is no other

¹¹² *Carlow Sentinel*, 3 May 1845; Thomas P. O'Neill, 'The Famine in Carlow' in *Carloviana* (1947), pp 16-22, at p. 17; Milford rental, 1842 (APMH).

¹¹³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 14 Feb, 25 Apr. 1846.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 14 Feb., 4 Apr. 1846.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 4 Apr. 1846.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 11 Apr. 1846.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 25 Apr. 1847; RLFC 3/2/3/8, 25 Oct. 1846 (NAI).

reference to this body in the newspapers or the extant records of the Famine Relief Commission.¹¹⁸

Similarly, significant holes can be picked in the narrative of ‘the kindness and attention of Mr Alexander and his family to the poor’ as outlined by the *Sentinel*.¹¹⁹ Surviving evidence of their charity between 1846 and 1850 (£40 in donations by John II and an £8 subscription by ‘Messrs Alexander’ to the Leighlinbridge soup fund in February 1847) does not strengthen an argument for their commitment to relief efforts.¹²⁰ In August 1847, subscriptions to the Idrone West baronial fund had reached £369 2s 6d from 52 donors, the vast majority of whom were members of the gentry or clergy, and about 15 prosperous farmers. After the largest donation of £50 each from Col. Bruen and the Dean of Leighlin, John II was one of four other gentlemen (along with Rochfort, Sir Thomas Butler, and William Steuart) to donate the next largest sum of £20.¹²¹ Such a donation must be considered inadequate given his means and even the *Sentinel* claimed that the entire baronial fund ‘will be, comparatively speaking, of little value towards the relief of the district’.¹²² Alexander’s deficient donation was thrown into sharp relief by one of almost £4 which had recently been collected at local chapel gates, and the fact that in July 1847 over £37 was subscribed by a ‘Milford Fund’ (almost certainly a sum collected from Milford’s labourers, farmers and mill employees) to the Old Leighlin Relief Committee, where distress was intense.¹²³ As a predominantly gentry-led campaign, Alexander was certainly not in the vanguard of relief initiatives and the question must reasonably be asked why the wealthiest miller in the county, an award-winning farmer and much-publicised landlord was not more prominent, active and generous with his time and resources in the campaign, particularly in his home barony which was reportedly one of

¹¹⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 20 Mar. 1847.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 20 Feb. 1847.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 25 Apr., 26 Dec. 1846, 23 Jan. 1847.

¹²¹ RLFC 3/1/5381, 13 Aug. 1846 (NAI).

¹²² *Carlow Sentinel*, 2 May 1846.

¹²³ RLFC 3/2/3/21, 25 Jul. 1847 (NAI).

the few badly-affected areas in the county.¹²⁴ He was perhaps ignorant of the extent of the crisis and clearly regarded it as a short-term problem, and while it was acknowledged that he 'often sympathised with farmers when they would bring their corn to his mill', others less well-off in the county certainly felt that he should have been doing more.¹²⁵

By 1 July 1846, local frustration had reached boiling point in Leighlinbridge where public works schemes proved inadequate in securing employment for all the destitute labourers. A mob of 200 people began to tear up roads that were being laid down, and in a move that was indicative of the increasingly frantic state of affairs, they defied their revered parish priest Fr Kehoe by threatening to carry off some of his cattle, and only disbanded when the military arrived.¹²⁶ Attacks on mills and bakeries were common throughout Leinster in late 1846 and frustration with John Alexander's ostensible indifference to suffering resulted in an episode at Milford mills on 13 May which can be portrayed as a venting of anger by a group of distressed individuals against the man of means who was not sufficiently supportive or proactive in alleviating their plight.¹²⁷ The *Dublin Evening Post* reported that

a vast concourse of people from the hills of Old Leighlin and Clogrennane, composed of men, women and children, assembled [...] at the extensive flour mills of Mr Alexander of Milford. They declared that they were compelled from extreme pressure of hunger to seek for food, and were resolved on entering the mills and taking away the flour, but on being remonstrated with by Mr Alexander on the impropriety of committing any illegal act, and on promising to use his utmost exertions with the gentry of the neighbourhood, and that relief should be given before Sunday, they dispersed quietly and went to their respective homes.¹²⁸

While the *Sentinel* rejected the story as 'idle tales [...] grossly exaggerated', the newspaper conceded that John II had not as yet given his 'utmost exertions' to combat suffering in his neighbourhood. Furthermore, the episode clearly displayed the

¹²⁴ O'Neill, 'Famine in Carlow', p. 17.

¹²⁵ *Carlow Post*, 26 May 1855.

¹²⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Jul. 1847.

¹²⁷ Magee, *Barney: Bernard Hughes of Belfast*, p. 48.

¹²⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 May 1846.

contemporary understanding that in a time of real crisis and want, the Milford powerbase ought to have been an oasis of wealth and sustenance, and the clear expectation of local people that the Alexanders should step forward as the most capable and thus morally, the most natural of benefactors. Given that electoral disturbances had not occurred for five years on the estate, a brief index reference to a registered paper in the chief secretary's office for 1846 (now sadly missing) citing a threat to John II can surely be linked to the crisis of the times and can be taken as further proof of the local community's anger with his relief measures, or lack thereof.¹²⁹ This record appeared to influence the *Carlow Post* a decade later, when it called into question the benevolence of the then MP: 'I ask in what manner has Mr Alexander or any of his family cooperated with the Relief Committee? Did he, from whom *much* was expected, (mark this) subscribe for the relief of the destitute in Carlow; or did he give that which costs nothing— sympathy and regret for those afflicted creatures with whom he stands in such *close social relations*?'¹³⁰

Public employment schemes had opened in Idrone West by the end of November 1846 but less than 5 per cent of the county was thus supported in early 1847; with the second potato failure, the most vulnerable elements of the population endured severe hardship in the early months of 1847.¹³¹ Distress can be seen in the increased instances of theft from Milford's walled garden and from *John Alexander & Co.*¹³² In March 1847, John Bryan, a labourer in Strongstream mill ('he had 9s per week, and his family were otherwise employed and in comfortable circumstances') was detected stealing oatmeal for a second time and was sentenced to four months' imprisonment with hard labour.¹³³

Another factor which worked against Alexander's reputation was the local suspicion that some millers were motivated solely by self-interest or were hoping to benefit from famine

¹²⁹ 'Alexander, Mr. J., Threatened' (NAI, CSORP Index 1846, 3/39).

¹³⁰ *Carlow Post* quoted in *Carlow Sentinel*, 17 Mar. 1855.

¹³¹ O'Neill, 'The Famine in Carlow', p. 18; William J. Smyth, 'The *longue durée*— imperial Britain and colonial Ireland' in *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, pp 46-63, at p. 49.

¹³² On robberies from the garden, see *Carlow Sentinel*, 6 Jan., 24 Mar. 1849.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 3 Apr. 1847.

conditions by actively conniving at price inflation. His record as a miller during the Great Famine can largely be depicted as a defensive and self-protecting reaction against the potential damage to his business by the free trading enabled by the repeal of the Corn Laws in the summer of 1846. From his efforts as a lobbyist in 1840, he viewed repeal as a nemesis on the horizon for his family and their business; in 1843 he ‘expressed some fear of a free trade’ to valuator Martin Coffey.¹³⁴ At an agricultural meeting shortly before blight was first observed in Carlow in September 1845, John II spoke, in a light-hearted way, about his wish to retain protections for his industry:

They had heard that evening a report of the progress of corn growing in Canada which should afford a useful and practical lesson to Irish farmers. It was their duty and interest to keep Brother Jonathan [the personification of New England] and their Canadian friends out of the market, and to prevent them from under-selling them (cheers and laughter).¹³⁵

However, in many ways, John II’s fears for his business did not materialise and Irish milling enjoyed a relative period of boom during the Famine years when the potato failure increased per capita demand for milled cereals.¹³⁶ Along with the importation of vast quantities of Indian corn during the crisis and the rise in net imports of wheat both during and after the Great Famine, the foundering of Milford mills was very unlikely.¹³⁷ Although exports of corn, meal and flour from Ireland to Britain fell dramatically between 1844 and 1849,¹³⁸ this was countered by an increase in domestic consumption of grain products and Bielenberg argues that ‘native demand for flour was ultimately far more important than the export trade’.¹³⁹ When the blight was first observed, Carlow milling was booming and the oat harvests in 1845-7 were bountiful.¹⁴⁰ The effects of

¹³⁴ Valuation office, house book (NAI, OL 5.0010).

¹³⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 27 Sep. 1845.

¹³⁶ Bielenberg, ‘A survey of Irish flour milling’, p. 62.

¹³⁷ Bielenberg, *Ireland and the industrial revolution: the impact of the industrial revolution on Irish industry, 1801-1922* (London, 2009), pp 59-60; P.M.A. Bourke, ‘The Irish grain trade, 1839-48’ in *Irish historical studies*, vol. 20 (1976), pp 156-69, at pp 164-6.

¹³⁸ James S. Donnelly JR, ‘Production, prices and exports, 1846-51’ in *New History of Ireland*, vol. v, pp 286-93, at p. 290.

¹³⁹ Bielenberg, *Ireland and the industrial revolution*, p. 60.

¹⁴⁰ Charles Doyné to Lady Harriet Kavanagh, 3 Nov. 1845 (Kavanagh papers, Borris House, M/47).

inflation were seen at Baltinglass market on 20 October where oats reached the price of 14s a bushel.¹⁴¹ In May of the following year, it was reported that 'there is more oats in stock than there has been known for several years at this season'.¹⁴²

However, in the absence of any extensive secondary investigation into the impact of the repeal of the Corn Laws on Irish milling (at either micro or macro level), and without any account books from *John Alexander & Co.* for this period, only general statements can be made about the company's experiences in the years immediately after the protections were removed.¹⁴³ It certainly faced greater challenges through increased competition but by the fact of its very survival, we can infer that the mills remained profitable, although certainly not to the same degree. Net profits for *John Alexander & Co.* of just £650 in 1858 (the first available figures after the Famine) show the dramatic extent of this fall, the figures inevitably slashed by foreign competition.¹⁴⁴ The ascendancy of Alexander's firm in the flour market ended as the trade was brought down to a level playing field and the price of Milford flour was considered too high by many. By 1849, foreign flour was omnipresent in Dublin and the *Sentinel* expressed disbelief that French flour 'has been purchased by Carlow bakers for the use of the Workhouse, and thus, bread made of *French flour is now consumed by the paupers of the Union*'.¹⁴⁵

However, in the uncertain days of 1846, John II was not assured of the ultimate survival of his firm and he adopted a defensive commercial attitude to protect the business from the potential attacks of free trade. As the foremost miller in the county in 1845, he appeared reluctant to acknowledge the existence of famine which would make repeal and a consequent decline in his commercial power an even greater likelihood. In the same issue of the *Sentinel* which announced the formation of a relief committee for Milford's

¹⁴¹ James P. Shannon, 'Hacketstown and the Great Famine' in *Carloviana* 63 (2015), pp 180-6, at p. 180.

¹⁴² *Carlow Sentinel*, 30 May 1846.

¹⁴³ For the British context, see Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey, *From the Corn Laws to free trade: interests, ideas and institutions in historical perspective* (Massachusetts, 2006).

¹⁴⁴ 'Journal of *John Alexander & Co.*', 1856-68, Aug. 1859 (APMH).

¹⁴⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 2 Jun. 1849.

home barony, Alexander's advocate T.H. Carroll fought against the notion of a crisis by claiming there was 'ample employment at present and no visible want within the barony [of Carlow] to justify apprehension, or to sustain the cry of "famine" which unhappily has been raised to carry out the views of the Free Trade faction'.¹⁴⁶ In Britain, Schonhardt-Bailey has identified a similar feeling among anti-repeal politicians who expressed 'disbelief in the severity of the Irish famine or that repeal would be the appropriate policy tool for addressing the problem'.¹⁴⁷ Allegations were made that some of Carlow's flour millers ignored the crisis at a humanitarian level (placing self-interest above their duties to their social inferiors) or actively sought to benefit from it by taking advantage of an uncertain market in an attempt to protect themselves against the potentially ruinous impact of repeal. An aversion to dealing in Indian meal — 'now very generally consumed' by May 1846— was detected among some of the larger millers (and *John Alexander & Co.* can be ranked among them) who appeared uninterested in dealing extensively in a commodity with little profit potential in a well-supplied market.¹⁴⁸ This cheap foodstuff was ubiquitous in the county by this point, with reports that the people 'in general prefer Indian meal to the potato— and no doubt, finding it wholesome and nutritious, it will be extensively used with a proportionate admixture of oatmeal'.¹⁴⁹ Fr James Maher welcomed the repeal of the Corn Laws and reported his dissatisfaction with the local wealthy millers to his nephew, Dr (later Archbishop) Paul Cullen in August 1846.¹⁵⁰ He celebrated the efforts of his nephews who were preparing

good quantities of it [Indian meal], and by selling very cheaply have kept down the market price. Their violations of the most sacred canons of trade, by lowering instead of rising [sic] prices in time of scarcity have brought upon them the displeasure of the Millocracy, but they have been

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25 Apr. 1846.

¹⁴⁷ Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey, *From the Corn Laws to free trade*, p. 176.

¹⁴⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 May 1846.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 5 Sep. 1846.

¹⁵⁰ Maher to Cullen, 13 Aug. 1846 (Paul Cullen Papers, Irish College Rome, CUL/1227).

abundantly compensated by the consciousness of having acted well and generously.¹⁵¹

Significantly, unlike *Messrs. Clarke & Co.* or *Messrs. Samuel Haughton & Son* of Carlow town who were credited with ensuring 'a sufficient supply of Indian meal for this and the neighbouring counties' and reducing its price by £2 per ton, the firm of *John Alexander & Co.* was not noted in the press for being an importer or substantial miller of Indian meal at the height of the distress in early 1847 and were ostensibly focusing their attentions on the profit-heavy flour market.¹⁵²

Other allegations were made that the larger millers were manipulating market uncertainties to access advantageous wheat prices. Scottish journalist Alexander Somerville visited Carlow in January 1847 and wrote about such practices in his *The whistler at the plough, and free trade*.¹⁵³ As a renowned anti-protectionist and a supporter of anti-Corn Law groups, Somerville's account must be treated cautiously but nevertheless contains unsettling allegations against some of Carlow's milling fraternity. He reported on 'a panic' in Carlow's grain market on 25 January 1847 following a dramatic fall in the price of wheat and oats:

Flour and meal did not fall, because the millers and dealers know the markets better than the farmers. There are many mills about Carlow, all in full work grinding meal and flour. It is supposed that the millers and dealers united to spread an alarm among the farmers to induce them to bring their grain to market, which they were always holding back in hopes of higher prices. It poured in last week, and seldom has such a day of bustle been seen in Carlow as Saturday. Yesterday (Monday) the panic increased. Every farmer offered to sell but the millers would not buy, in hopes of forcing them still further into the panic.¹⁵⁴

Although a charge of such misconduct (in attempting to take advantage of the crisis for financial gain) is not directly levelled against Milford mills, John II did not speak out against the practice unlike Simeon Clarke of Burrin Mills whose 'noble example' was

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² *Carlow Sentinel*, 27 Feb. 1847.

¹⁵³ Alexander Somerville, *The whistler at the plough* (Manchester, 1852), vol. i, pp 440-6.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 442.

praised in the local press for working against such cartels by selling flour and meal at wholesale prices to the poor — ‘although I am aware, the practice, to respectable millers, is inconvenient’.¹⁵⁵ In an attempt to portray himself as a proactive and generous figure during the crisis, John II claimed in 1862 that he ‘opened a retail store during the years of famine and continued to keep it open since for no worldly gain, but for the convenience of the peasantry of the mountain districts, [where] everything was retailed at the lowest possible price, and far below the rates of ordinary retail shops’, but the only two references to this were made retrospectively.¹⁵⁶ While a retail store was undoubtedly in operation in the mill-yard during the Famine, it had been open for years (since at least 1843— see appendix B6) and while prices may indeed have been slashed during the latter years of the crisis, this is not mentioned in contemporary editions of the *Sentinel* where Carroll proved as zealous as ever to promote John Alexander’s reputation.

If John Alexander’s actions as a miller can be faulted during the Famine, his record as a landlord was equally problematic. Interestingly, he received no significant praise for his performance in either role from any unbiased quarter. In his assessment of Carlow’s reaction to the Famine, T.P. O’Neill has argued that ‘the landlords as a body played a noble part in assisting the poor. [...] They deserved better thanks than they received as the government laid the blame for the failure of their own schemes on the shoulders of the landlords’.¹⁵⁷ In that year, Somerville made no mention of John Alexander’s efforts and only singled out Rochfort, Lady Harriet Kavanagh and Col. Bruen for being ‘very attentive to the poor’ and taking ‘their share of the burthen liberally’.¹⁵⁸ Henry Bruen gave orders for 230 of his prized herd of red deer to be slaughtered and given to his labourers between 1847 and 1849.¹⁵⁹ In their bid for a rent abatement in February 1846,

¹⁵⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 6 Feb. 1847.

¹⁵⁶ *Irish Times*, 8 Nov. 1862 and *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 Jan. 1853.

¹⁵⁷ O’Neill, ‘Famine in Carlow’, p. 21.

¹⁵⁸ Somerville, *The whistler at the plough*, p. 443.

¹⁵⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 6 Mar. 1847, 10 Mar. 1849.

the Burton tenants claimed to the estate agents that ‘the landlords in this neighbourhood [just outside Carlow town] generally encouraged their tenantry [promised abatements?] this season’.¹⁶⁰ At Borris in May 1847-9, the agent reported the receipt of rents as only a ‘distant prospect’ but Lady Harriet Kavanagh felt compensated by the knowledge that ‘the people will no longer be in distress & starving’.¹⁶¹ Rochfort defended the responses of his class and lauded the ‘pecuniary sacrifices those in my neighbourhood have felt called upon to make’, and claimed that every landlord in his knowledge had slashed the March 1849 gale by 25 per cent and had not attempted to collect rents in September.¹⁶² Curiously, the Famine years (and their immediate aftermath) mark the only significant gap in the rentals in the surviving Alexander papers. Between 1842 and 1855, there is only one complete rental (1848) and a partial one for the following year while Griffith’s Valuation for the estate in 1852 allows an earlier insight into the effects of the crisis. From these sources, it is clear that John Alexander did not respond in a similar way to many of his fellow landowners in these years.

Firstly, the surviving rental figures do not show any significant abatement. The rent charged dropped only by 7.5 per cent (from £2,384 to £2,205) between 1842 and 1848; over the period between 1842 and 1855, it decreased by only 6.7 per cent. While the 1848 rental was remarkably close to the poor law valuation of the estate in 1851, the figure for 1855 was an astounding 45 per cent above Griffith’s more rigorous valuation of three years previously (see Table 8.2).

¹⁶⁰ Norton, ‘Viscount Frankfort, Sir Charles Burton and county Carlow in the 1840s’, p. 6.

¹⁶¹ C. Doyné to Robert Maddock, 17 May 1849 (Kavanagh papers, Borris House, M/48); Lady Harriet Kavanagh, 7 Aug. 1849 (Kavanagh papers, Borris House, M/52).

¹⁶² *Carlow Sentinel*, 19 Jan. 1850.

Table 8.2 Rentals and valuations of the Milford estate, 1848-52¹⁶³

Source	£	s	d
Milford rental, 1848	£2,205	19s	1d
Poor Law Valuation, 1851	£2,261	15s	
Griffith's Valuation, 1852	£1,539	2s	

Distress on the estate is evident in the huge drop in the rental received during these years. From receipts of 98.8 per cent in 1842, Alexander received only 60.9 per cent of the rental in 1848 (£1,343— an all time low in the history of the estate). Only partial information is available for 1849 on a disorganised document which suggests something of the disruption to normality in the estate office at the time. Still, over £1,444 had been received: 65.5 per cent of the previous year's rental and an increase of over 5 per cent in money received. This document also proves that, unlike Clogrennane, the Michaelmas (September) 1849 rent *was* collected at Milford.

Alexander also differed from other landlords in his leasing policy which appears self-serving in his bid to make the estate more productive— undoubtedly a key priority at this time. While Alexander offered only yearly tenancy agreements at this time, leases of 31 years were standard for new tenants on the Clogrennane estate.¹⁶⁴ In addition, while the Idrone Agricultural Society called off ploughing matches to allow farmers to focus on their farms and the improvement drive was suspended on other estates, Alexander persisted in his programme of reform, ostensibly paying mere lip-service to the existence of relief efforts.¹⁶⁵ It seemed to be business as normal regardless of extenuating circumstances, a fact his friend P.J. Newton acknowledged a decade later.¹⁶⁶ On one occasion in February 1847, John II attempted to pass off self-serving works as Famine

¹⁶³ Milford rental, 1848 (APMH); Census, 1851, pertaining to the Alexander estate, pp 9-10; *General valuation of rateable property in Ireland ...* (Dublin, 1849-64), know as Griffith's Valuation, 1852, available on <http://www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation/>, accessed 23 Jan. 2012.

¹⁶⁴ *Carlow Sentinel*, 20 Jan. 1849.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 20 Feb. 1847; Lady Harriet Kavanagh, 7 Aug. 1849 (Kavanagh papers, Borris House, M/42).

¹⁶⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 20 Oct. 1855.

relief projects. In the only article to appear in praise of 'the benevolent conduct of John Alexander, Esq. towards his tenantry and neighbours' during the Famine years (with information most likely supplied by Alexander himself), Carroll reported in the *Sentinel*:

We can vouch for the fact that he [Alexander] has supplied his tenantry who were unable to purchase it themselves with seed to sow their land at prime cost with (it is unnecessary to say) considerable time to repay the outlay when the harvest is gathered in. Every labourer on his property is employed by him in ditching, draining and sub-soiling the land, and many of them farmers themselves; and they are divided into classes so as to ensure them sufficient wages. Children under nine years old are paid four pence for picking stones; above that to a certain age six pence; and able-bodied men from one shilling to one and six pence per day if they take the work by task [i.e directly linked to productivity].¹⁶⁷

While it cannot be denied that such works provided much-needed employment, and as such, relief for the personnel involved, significant doubts about the philanthropic intention of these measures are generated by the spurious frame in which the report is presented (a report from an anonymous tenant) and by its sycophantic tone. Rather than convince the reader of Alexander's bounty to the needy, it instead paints him as a landlord extracting the optimum amount of labour from distressed farmers and labourers on his improvement works (a good quantity of which were subsidised by government funding, e.g. the drainage act of 1847 as outlined above, or loans from the Commissioners of Public Works) instead of awarding charity, rent abatements or involving himself more actively in relief committees.

Above all, it is clear that John II did not adopt the same helpful and patient approach to his tenantry's distress that his father had demonstrated during the agricultural crises of the early 1820s. In 1848, 37 of 76 tenants were in arrears (49 per cent) ranging from sums of just over £1 (for James Bowes's 13 acre holding) to Andrew Sleaven's arrears of £195.¹⁶⁸ This alarming situation called for assertive and pragmatic action in John II's eyes and he employed the legal infrastructure of ejectment as a corrective tool at a time when this

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 20 Feb. 1847.

¹⁶⁸ Milford rental, 1848 (APMH).

course of action was on a steady and nationally-significant rise in Carlow (See Table 8.3).¹⁶⁹

Table 8.3 Number of actions of ejectments in Co. Carlow, 1847-49¹⁷⁰

Year	# Actions
1847	46
1848	91
1849	112
Total	249
Note: 219 of these cases received judgements in ejectments for the plaintiff (landlords).	

In evicting, Alexander's actions were very much in line with the thinking of the majority of landlords across the county; Carlow had the fourteenth highest eviction rate in the country in 1849-53.¹⁷¹ However, some prominent landlords in Milford's immediate neighbourhood refused to employ this tool and considered it extreme and Alexander stood out as an evictor in his locality. No evictions occurred on the Rochfort estate and Sir Thomas Butler regarded it as poor treatment of tenants, claiming he had only evicted two families in his thirty-five year career as a landlord.¹⁷² Without a doubt, Andrew Sleaven was the greatest tenant casualty of this period. A long-standing, productive and improving farmer of crops and livestock on his 90 acre holding since at least 1800, his lease had last been renewed in 1833.¹⁷³ However, in 1847, newspapers reports claimed his affairs had become 'much embarrassed'.¹⁷⁴ When he failed to pay his annual rent of £195 for his farm at Milford in 1848, John II pursued an action of ejectment and claimed

¹⁶⁹ Tim P. O'Neill, 'Famine evictions' in Carla King (ed.), *Famine, land and culture in Ireland* (Dublin, 2000), pp 29-70, at p. 70.

¹⁷⁰ *Carlow Sentinel*, 3 May 1851.

¹⁷¹ Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants in mid-Victorian Ireland*, p. 235; *Carlow Sentinel*, 6 Oct. 1849.

¹⁷² *Carlow Sentinel*, 6 Oct. 1849.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, 7 Apr. 1849.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*.

total arrears of over £700.¹⁷⁵ The jury at assizes sanctioned the ejectment and awarded Alexander £500; the farm of 90 acres was advertised in the *Northern Whig* the following August.¹⁷⁶ It was felt by the community at large that John II had treated his tenant very harshly and during a political debate ten years later, the then MP was heckled by a voice from the crowd who wondered, ‘Did the ghost of Andy Slevin [sic] ever appear to Mr Alexander (great commotion)?’¹⁷⁷ The second recorded eviction was initiated on 18 June 1849 against the lease-holding widow of Peter Curran, for a 12 acre holding in Tomard with rent arrears of over £20.¹⁷⁸ The fact that Curran had been one of the undaunted voters in the Liberal interest during the elections of the 1830s would have made the eviction even less morally problematic for his landlord. While only two cases can be proven at Milford during the Famine years, the fact that 26 houses disappeared from Milford estate between 1841 and 1851, most notably on the agricultural townlands, indicate that some cabins were probably levelled, which is possible evidence of a greater number of ejectments (see Table 8.4 below). This supposition is strengthened by the disappearance of 18 family names from the estate records between the rental of 1848 and Griffith’s valuation of 1852. The number of tenancies fell from 80 to 58, a reduction of 27.5 per cent (see Table 8.5). However, there were certainly no widespread Famine clearances, or any reports of violent responses on the estate which typically came in the aftermath of evictions on a bigger scale.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, the records show a broad continuity in the tenantry between 1842 and 1852.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 17 Mar. 1849.

¹⁷⁶ *Northern Whig*, 23 Aug. 1849.

¹⁷⁷ *Carlow Post*, 4 Apr. 1857.

¹⁷⁸ Milford rental, 1848 (APMH); ‘Motion of ejectment by civil bill’, John Alexander Esq. against Mary & Matthew Curran, 18 Jun. 1849 (PPP).

¹⁷⁹ O’Neill, ‘Famine evictions’, pp 40-1.

Table 8.4 The decline in the number of houses on Milford estate, 1841-51¹⁸⁰

Townland	# Houses in 1841	#Houses in 1851	Change (+ / -)	% Change
Ballinabranna	42	27	-15	-36%
Ballygowan	28	24	-4	-14%
Clochristic	12	15	+3	+25%
Craanluskey	29	20	-9	-31%
Tomard Lower	36	35	-1	-3%
TOTAL	147	121	-26	-18%
County Carlow	14,562	11,880	-2,682	-19%

Table 8.5 Size of tenancies on the Milford estate, 1841-51¹⁸¹

Size	1842		1852	
	# Tenants	% of tenants	# Tenants	% of Tenants
0-5 acres	18	22.5 %	8	13.8 %
6-10 acres	17	21.25 %	13	22.4 %
11-20 acres	24	30 %	19	32.9 %
21-30 acres	11	13.75 %	10	17.2 %
31-40 acres	5	6.25 %	1	1.7 %
41-50 acres	1	1.25 %	0	0 %
51-60 acres	1	1.25 %	3	5.2 %
61-70 acres	1	1.25 %	1	1.7 %
71-100 acres	1	1.25 %	1	1.7 %
100 acres +	1	1.25 %	2	3.4 %
TOTAL	80 tenants	100 %	58 Tenants	100 %

There was also a small but significant shift towards larger holdings which tends to support Cullen's assertion of the stability in the structure of the farming community pre- and post-Famine.¹⁸² In 1841, only 26 per cent of the holdings on Milford estate were in excess of 20 acres; ten years later, this figure had risen to 31 per cent. The largest single change was in tenancies of five acres or less, which fell from 22.5 per cent to 13.8 per

¹⁸⁰ Census, 1851, pp 1-14.

¹⁸¹ Rental of Milford estate, 1842 (APMH); Griffith's valuation. As the latter is measured in Statute acres, the acreage for each tenancy was divided by 1.6. In accordance with the conversion tables advised by Ordnance Survey Ireland at <http://www.osi.ie/Education/Secondary-Schools/Teacher-Resources/Conversions-%281%29.aspx>, to allow comparisons in Irish plantation acres.

¹⁸² L. M. Cullen, *An economic history of Ireland since 1660*, p. 136.

cent in the intervening decade. A policy of consolidating holdings into larger farms was only acted upon where possible (when the small number of evictees or departing tenants freed up land) rather than actively pursued with a vengeance; small holdings were then generally apportioned to the larger farmers on the estate. In August 1848, 22 acres in Craanluskey and Ballinbranna, in holdings ranging from three to twelve acres 'lately' held by five tenants were redistributed to larger, more capable and more solvent tenants like the Hughes and Bolton families.¹⁸³ By 1852, Mary, the capable widow of Patrick Hughes ('she had a sweet, patient temper, but was very firm in the management of her household') held 220 acres across four of the estate's five townlands.¹⁸⁴

It can be argued, therefore, that Alexander's response to the crisis (in his meagre relief efforts, and his business-as-usual attitude towards rents, arrears and improvements) contributed somewhat to the significant population decline on the Milford estate which incorporated the evictees described above and those who gave up their small holdings (see Table 8.6 below). Census figures prove that Idrone West was the worst affected barony in the county during this period, suffering losses of 29 per cent of its people in the decade after 1841. On Milford estate, the population fell by a substantial 22 per cent in the same period, lower than the percentage decline in the barony, but just above the figure for the entire county. The most dramatic loss was in Ballinabranna, where there were 121 fewer people in 1851, a huge decline of 47 per cent: its population had effectively been halved. Given that only nine of the twenty-six tenants in Ballinabranna in 1842 had holdings in excess of 15 acres, we can safely argue that many of the smaller tenants suffered when the potatoes failed and then gave up their holdings, sought refuge in the workhouse, succumbed to cholera or other illnesses, or emigrated. It can be stated with certainty that none of the 28 recorded deaths by starvation in the county occurred at

¹⁸³ Partial rental for Milford estate, 1849 (APMH).

¹⁸⁴ M.R., 'Father William Hughes, S.J.: a belated obituary', p. 542.

Milford, and unlike other areas in the parish, there is no surviving folklore relating to field burials there.¹⁸⁵

Table 8.6 Population changes on the Milford estate and in Co. Carlow, 1841–51¹⁸⁶

Townland / Region	Population in 1841	Population in 1851	Difference (+ / -)	% Change
Ballinabranna	260	139	- 121	-47%
Ballygowan	170	155	-15	-9%
Clochristic	108	88	-20	-19%
Craanluskey	183	133	-50	-27%
Tomard Lower	240	236	-4	-2%
TOTAL	961	751	-210	-22%
Barony of Idrone West	8,435	5,995	2,400	-29%
County Carlow	86,228	68,075	18,153	-21%

Significantly, the industrial population of Ballygowan (in the immediate vicinity of the mills) fell by a negligible 15 people, which indicates the protection enjoyed by that labour force (through decent cash wages and freedom from total dependence on agriculture for their sustenance) from the worst ravages of the crisis— which is typical of industrial and milling communities of the period.¹⁸⁷ There is no evidence of a system of assisted emigration at Milford, so departing families were left to their own devices. In March 1848, Fr Maher claimed of the county that ‘all who have means have emigrated or are preparing to emigrate. Whole districts are desolated, cabins levelled, the lands lying waste as if a foreign foe had invaded and desolated the country’.¹⁸⁸ Some farmers, labourers and mill workers certainly emigrated from Milford but little evidence of this survives. The parents of Henry Blake (not recorded as agricultural tenants) left Milford and had arrived in New South Wales by late 1847, where they sent for their son under a

¹⁸⁵ O’Neill, ‘The Famine in Carlow’, p. 21; Alan Doran, ‘The black mist’ in *Carloviana* no. 43 (1995/96), pp 35–7, at p. 36.

¹⁸⁶ *Census*, 1851, pp 1–14.

¹⁸⁷ Magee, *Barney: Bernard Hughes of Belfast*, p. 44.

¹⁸⁸ Fr Maher to Cullen, 24 Mar. 1848 (Paul Cullen papers, Irish College Rome, CUL/1572).

sponsored immigration scheme run by the colonial government. They received word that Henry had left from New Ross that spring bound for Quebec and it was feared that he had died at the quarantine station of Grosse Île.¹⁸⁹ A cholera epidemic between July and October 1849 also led to fatalities at Milford.¹⁹⁰

This analysis of John II's record does not seek to imply that he was conniving at suffering or carrying out a vindictive campaign: rather that his interests, priorities, money and sympathies were devoted wholly and distractedly into his improving and railway initiatives, and placed a considered response to famine conditions at the bottom of his priority list. It can also be argued that John II's social and personal life diverted his attentions from the harsh realities of the crisis in the late 1840s. Throughout 1847 and 1848, he was preoccupied with amorous schemes that took him to Co. Meath in his courtship and marriage on 18 October 1848 to Esther Brinkley (1825-1901), the eldest daughter of Matthew Brinkley of Parsonstown House, Lobinstown. Although she brought only a modest marriage portion of £2,000 (approximating a year's rental of the Milford estate) Esther Alexander had impressive intellectual and Protestant credentials. On her mother's side, Esther was the granddaughter of Richard Graves, Dean of Ardagh.¹⁹¹ Of even more repute was her descent from her other grandfather, the Rt. Rev John Brinkley (1766-1835), the first Royal Astronomer of Ireland between 1792 and 1826, the Bishop of Cloyne from 1826 and President of the Royal Irish Academy at the time of his death.¹⁹² Given his social aspirations, it is likely John II spent a considerable amount of time, thought and money in preparing for, and promoting his union with the Brinkleys in 1847-8. The couple's extended honeymoon in Belgium and France took John II away from

¹⁸⁹ E-mail correspondence with Dr Richard Reid regarding his on-line article, "'That famine is pressing most heavily each day upon them': Australia and the Great Irish Famine—some connections", available at http://irishfaminememorial.org/static/events_pdfs/14%202008%20Reid.pdf, accessed 8 Jan. 2010.

¹⁹⁰ *Carlow Sentinel*, 24 Nov. 1849; M.R., 'Fr William Hughes, SJ: a belated obituary', p. 542.

¹⁹¹ Burke's *Landed gentry of Ireland* (1912), p. 71

¹⁹² Memorial plaque in Cathedral Church of St. Colman, Cloyne, Co. Cork; genealogical information and portrait supplied by Mr David Brinkley; Linde Lunney, 'John Brinkley' in James McGuire and James Quinn (eds.), *Dictionary of Irish biography* (Cambridge, 2009), vol. i, pp 840-1.

Milford for approximately nine months.¹⁹³ On their return they pursued an active social life in the capital and stayed regularly at the Shelbourne Hotel.¹⁹⁴ On 9 August 1849 (in the same week that the cholera epidemic was first reported in Leighlinbridge), John II enjoyed the most auspicious social occasion of his life when he was presented to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert at Dublin Castle during their royal visit to Ireland—an honour facilitated by his second cousin, John Hely Hutchinson (1787-1851), 3rd earl of Donoughmore.¹⁹⁵

David J. Butler has recently described the “‘business as usual’ approach to social and commercial life’ of the middle and upper classes during the Famine period, whereby business, landed and social interests were pursued as normal, alongside evidence of great suffering.”¹⁹⁶ It was as if John Alexander was on a sabbatical from his duties as employer, landlord and patron and with his extended absences from the country, it was very much a case of ‘out of sight, out of mind’. In addition, his railway portfolio required a significant investment of time as well as capital, and newspaper accounts of him in early 1847 drinking champagne toasts at the launch of railway works and pouring bottles of wine into the earth to bring success to his ventures sit uncomfortably on the same page alongside articles entitled ‘Death by starvation’.¹⁹⁷ In terms of either ‘callous indifference or congenital inability to be concerned for the poorer classes’, Alexander was probably guilty, to some degree, of the latter.¹⁹⁸ His priorities and concerns did not lie fundamentally with the welfare of his tenantry, workforce or fellow Carlovians at a time of famine, and he failed to construct a reputation for himself as a benefactor which could have made inherited gratitude (through communal memory) a powerful force in the local

¹⁹³ ‘John Alexander. Passeport’, 1848-9 (APMH).

¹⁹⁴ For their stays at the Shelbourne Hotel, see for example, *Freeman’s Journal*, 27 Sep. 1849.

¹⁹⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 11 and 18 Aug. 1849. The earl’s late father and Mrs Christian Alexander were first cousins.

¹⁹⁶ David J. Butler, ‘The landed classes during the Great Irish Famine’ in *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, pp 265-276, at pp 272-3.

¹⁹⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Jan., 17 Apr. 1847.

¹⁹⁸ Butler, ‘The landed classes during the Great Irish Famine’, p. 276; *Carlow Sentinel*, 19 Jan. 1850.

community in subsequent generations. It is hardly surprising therefore that he tampered with his record in later years by embellishing or exaggerating his efforts during the crisis. This was particularly important when he sought a position in the early 1850s which relied on the support of Carlovians in his favour, and which could grant his family the final attribute of the most prestigious members of the Carlow gentry: parliamentary office.

iv. 'The Carlow boy': the career of John Alexander II as MP, 1853-9¹⁹⁹

In the early post-Famine years, although the stability of his non-landed wealth was in question, John Alexander's estate was at a peak of productivity and Milford's identity as a gentry powerbase was assured. He was undoubtedly an influential figure in Carlow society as a businessman, railway promoter and landlord and in 1851, when speaking as chairman at the annual exhibition dinner of the Idrone Agricultural Society, he presented himself as a champion of the local economy and local improvements, 'stating that the great object of his life was to live with them and spend every shilling he was worth amongst them, dispensing so far as his means afforded, the blessings of comfort and contentment among the people'.²⁰⁰ However, his ascent to the role of MP for Carlow borough boosted his political and social profile to an immense degree. Few people (John II included) would have predicted that he was on the verge of a parliamentary career, and he certainly harboured no ambitions whatsoever in this regard—'It was the last wish of my life, and the farthest thing from my expectation, that I should sit in the House of Parliament', he stated in January 1853.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 28 May 1859.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 4 Oct. 1851.

²⁰¹ *Belfast Newsletter*, 24 Jan. 1853.

John II's stumble into national politics was indirectly occasioned by his work on one of the typical petitions against a Liberal victory in Carlow borough in 1852. That December, he travelled to London in a bid to unseat John Sadleir, the Catholic MP for the constituency since 1847.²⁰² Sadleir was among a group of Irish MPs known as the Independent Irish Party who opposed the Ecclesiastical Titles Act (an attempt by the Whigs to prohibit the assumption of papal titles by Catholic bishops, except in Ireland) who effectively held the balance of power in the House of Commons in 1852.²⁰³ However, at the inquiry into the petition against his return before the Examiner of Recognisances, counsel for Sadleir queried John Alexander's designation as Esquire 'on the ground that the security was insufficient, he being only an obscure miller'.²⁰⁴ The insult was significant and Alexander's embarrassment, on such a public stage, must have been intense. After the objection was overruled with costs, Conservative Carlow rallied to defend one of its stalwarts:

Cockneydom supplies a considerable amount of "brass", which may be daily witnessed in Westminster Hall; but it requires a considerable quantity of it to enable a lawyer to stand up in the presence of Mr Alexander and state that he was improperly described as an esquire, and that Milford was not known in the county!²⁰⁵

It was probably in an attempt to avenge these wounds to his reputation that Alexander was approached to present himself as a candidate for the borough election in January 1853.

Sadleir and his colleagues had withdrawn their support for Lord Derby when he rejected the principles of William Sharman Crawford's tenant right bill, and forced the resignation of his minority Tory government on 17 December 1852. The Irish MPs supported the Liberal-Peelite government formed under Lord Aberdeen two days later with the strict

²⁰² Malcomson, *The Carlow parliamentary roll*, pp 87-9.

²⁰³ R.V. Comerford, 'Churchmen, tenants and independent opposition, 1850-56' in *A new history of Ireland*, vol. v, pp 396-414, at pp 405-6.

²⁰⁴ *Carlow Sentinel*, 25 Dec. 1852.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

understanding that they would retain their independence by refusing office in the ministry. However, ambitious Sadleir diverted from this policy and accepted office as a junior Lord of the Treasury— a hugely controversial move which led to passionate accusations of treachery and oath-breaking and intense clerical opposition.²⁰⁶ To accept office, Sadleir required re-election which effectively made Carlow the stage for a battle of national interest in the new year. Accordingly, in an election which Colin Barr has recently described as ‘a referendum on Sadleir’s supposed betrayal of independent opposition’,²⁰⁷ John Alexander II assumed the mantle as the hope or the enemy respectively of Sadleir’s passionate opponents and supporters.

Carlow town had a population of almost 10,500 people, but the small urban constituency of Carlow borough had an electorate of just 208 people in 1853, made up of burgesses and rate-payers.²⁰⁸ As leading businessmen in the town, John I and II both held the status of burgess (freeman) and were registered voters there.²⁰⁹ Although Catholics greatly outnumbered Protestants in the town (to the extent of 8,659 to 1,600 members of the Established Church in 1841), Alexander Somerville commented that the town was ‘a stronghold of the Protestants— the political Protestants’, and there were no Catholic burgesses as late as 1833.²¹⁰ It had returned Conservative representatives in the recent past (most notably Francis Bruen in 1839, brother of Col. Bruen) but had been in Liberal or independent hands since 1841.²¹¹ Beyond this, the borough had a notorious reputation for corruption and was ‘unambiguously up for sale “to the highest bidder”’, according to Hoppen.²¹² Sadleir, later notorious as the ‘prince of swindlers’, had reputedly informed a

²⁰⁶ R.V. Comerford, ‘Churchmen, tenants and independent opposition, 1850-56’, p. 406; Malcomson, *Carlow parliamentary roll*, pp 88-9.

²⁰⁷ Colin Barr, ‘Lord Acton’s Irish elections’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 51, no. 1 (Mar. 2008), pp 87-114, at p. 107.

²⁰⁸ Charles R. Dod, *The parliamentary companion for 1855* (London, 1855), p. 98.

²⁰⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 25 Jan. 1851, 16 Oct. 1852.

²¹⁰ *Thom’s Directory* (Dublin, 1858), p. 830; Somerville, *Whistler at the plough*, p. 441; Duggan, *County Carlow: 1791-1801*, p. 58.

²¹¹ Walker, *Parliamentary election results in Ireland*, p. 255.

²¹² Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society*, p. 77.

local merchant that 'he bought the Borough, and adding with an oath that he would sell it again if it suited his convenience'.²¹³ That the Conservatives were eager to re-gain control of the borough and rescue the county from becoming 'Liberal, Popish Carlow as it is wont to be stigmatised' according to the *Belfast Newsletter*, can be seen in the petition against Sadleir's return at the end of 1852.²¹⁴

At a meeting of the Conservative electors of the borough in late December 1852, it was decided to take advantage of the publicity surrounding the insult to John Alexander in London by asking him to allow his name to be put forward for nomination as their parliamentary representative. In this light, Alexander can be seen as the Conservatives' obvious choice, rather than a last resort as Sadleir's biographer implies.²¹⁵ While hugely flattered by the request and the show of support from a body he had spent years trying to impress, and although he appreciated that he and his family had been presented with a massive opportunity, Alexander confessed in private to the county MP, William McClintock Bunbury, that it was an honour he did not want or feel adequate to fulfil:

Cary and Rawson [...] represented the matter in such a light that no alternative remained. I am very much adverse to come forward, but they declared that they have a much better chance with me than with any other. I urged them to name your brother but they said that none but a Carlow man would go down with the electors. They pay me every high compliment, but one that I would most willingly dispense with. I am quite unfit for the position and nothing could force me into it but the necessity of personal sacrifice, no matter how great, to rid us in the borough and county of present nuisance.²¹⁶

Outside of his railway ambitions, Alexander's field of vision had largely local horizons and he was regarded as a home-bird by his contemporaries; in the opinion of magistrate William Fishbourne of Fonthill, 'he is scarcely ever absent from his home'.²¹⁷ In his heart of hearts, he did not feel up to the task and when faced with the challenge of

²¹³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Oct. 1858.

²¹⁴ *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 Jan. 1853.

²¹⁵ James O'Shea, *Prince of swindlers: John Sadleir MP, 1813-1856* (Dublin, 1999).

²¹⁶ Alexander to McClintock Bunbury, 2 Jan. 1853 (Rathdonnell papers, PRONI, MIC 632/G6/6/100).

²¹⁷ *Carlow Post*, 7 May 1859.

performing on the ultimate political stage, John II was intimidated by the scale of the responsibility and saw his candidacy as ‘a sacrifice of personal feeling’.²¹⁸

Nevertheless, despite its inauspicious beginning, Alexander threw himself into the campaign with characteristic political diligence and was gratified by the generous pen portraits he received in the Conservative press, outlining his status as a landlord and gentleman ‘possessed of the most sterling principles, personal, political and *religious*’.²¹⁹ However, the drive among Liberals to punish Sadleir for his apostasy was probably the biggest factor in his favour. To make the move towards Alexander even more palatable to them, the Conservatives decided to play down Alexander’s Tory credentials and frame his candidacy as an ‘independent’ bid which would attempt to extract maximum benefits for Carlow from a Liberal-Peelite administration. This suited John II perfectly: focusing the policies of his campaign through a comfortable local lens made the position far less daunting to him. Thus he presented himself as a native and resident Carlovian who would work to promote the county’s industry and resources.²²⁰ The *Sentinel* claimed that John II was the individual best qualified to look after Carlow’s interests, and the reputation of John I (‘whose memory is enshrined in the hearts of the people’) was regularly employed in his son’s favour throughout the campaign.²²¹ Alexander clearly wished to make his campaign a unifying economic, rather than a divisive and overtly partly-political one, as seen in a speech he made after his successful return:

My feelings, my interests and my desires have always been connected with the borough and county of Carlow. I have always been anxious for its prosperity, for the promotion of its agriculture and its commerce, and all the benefits which industry is calculated to develop amongst us, and I now occupy a position through which I consider I will be enabled to accomplish those great and glorious objects of my ambition.²²²

²¹⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 8 Jan. 1853.

²¹⁹ *Belfast Newsletter*, 7 Jan. 1853.

²²⁰ *Carlow Sentinel*, 8 Jan. 1853.

²²¹ *Ibid*, 8 Jan. 1853.

²²² *Belfast Newsletter*, 24 Jan. 1853.

While he remained a committed Tory and ultra-Protestant at heart, he presented himself in a well-meaning but ultimately disingenuous way as ‘an independent man, shackled by no pledges, bound to no party [...] unswayed by party intrigue, not actuated by interested motives’, so as to secure the votes of townsmen of both political persuasions (a tall order given the notoriety he had once enjoyed).²²³ As a pragmatic ruse to court Liberal support, his adoption of a mediatory profile appeared to work as it was claimed that many of the town’s Catholic voters were giving him an enthusiastic reception in his canvass.²²⁴ In the week leading up to the election, Alexander’s supporters were ‘in high spirits as to the chances of his success’.²²⁵

Surprisingly, given the broad condemnation of his actions by the Catholic clergy, Sadleir managed to retain the services of his long-term supporter Fr James Maher who accompanied him to the nomination meeting in Carlow courthouse on 17 January 1853. However, Maher clearly had doubts and his support of Sadleir was undeniably lukewarm which surely had some impact on the Catholic electorate, among whom Maher’s influence was still formidable. Maher was almost certainly just as motivated to keep Alexander out as to enable Sadleir to get back in, a notion strengthened by the fact that he was silent during the nomination process apart from a failed attempt to reply to Alexander’s speech.²²⁶ From the outset, Sadleir’s nominators levelled charges of deceit and hypocrisy at John II. Dr O’Meara rejected Alexander’s independent stance and called him ‘an Irish Orangeman who solicited your suffrages under false pretences’, citing his political career to date as evidence. Sadleir had also prepared well for the contest and dug deep into Alexander’s controversial past (clearly enlightened by Fr Maher) in an attempt to disgrace his opponent. The shift in his principles and the independent stance he was now adopting made Alexander an unreliable political chameleon in Sadleir’s estimation:

²²³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 8 Jan. 1853.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ *Belfast Newsletter*, 17 Jan. 1853.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 19 Jan. 1853.

‘He would seem to have no political opinions. He tells us he is of no party; but how would his address be reconciled with the past of his history?’ Finally, Sadleir mentioned ‘a widespread suspicion that at some early period of his life, Mr Alexander had been in official relation with an Orange lodge’.²²⁷ Several posters with this same claim were observed in Carlow town in the days leading up to the contest.²²⁸ The accusation was given some weight by the presence of William Auchinleck Dane among Alexander’s supporters, a deputy Grand Master of the Orange Order in Enniskillen and friend of the late Henry Bruen (who died the previous November).²²⁹ Other placards carried the words of Alexander’s infamous oath to Fr Maher at the election of 1835, and criticised his actions as a landlord and gentleman.²³⁰

Alexander responded by claiming that ‘the electors of Carlow had known him from his childhood; his character, public and private, was before them. [...] He did not shrink from the ordeal of a public examination, his character would bear it’. He had anticipated that his past would be dragged up against him and to combat the inevitable allegations, he presented Sadleir and the audience in the courthouse with a document which worked to convince the electorate and the county in general that all was well at Milford (see appendix I).²³¹ In an address to their landlord, Alexander’s tenantry testified, ‘in terms of the deepest gratitude, for the kindness and benevolence which at all times have been shown them by you and your family’.²³² The provenance of the document is uncertain. The possibility that it originated with the local clergy in an attempt to punish Sadleir for his pledge-breaking is unlikely given the support of Rev Dr Francis Haly (Catholic bishop of Kildare and Leighlin) and Fr Maher for that candidate.²³³ Local parish priest, Fr. Kehoe’s history of confrontation with John II makes this even less likely. The politically-

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ ‘Address to John Alexander Esq’, 1853 (Rathdonnell papers, PRONI, MIC 632 G6/6/143).

²²⁹ O’Shea, *Prince of swindlers*, p. 316; *Belfast Newsletter*, 24 Jan. 1853; *Carlow Sentinel*, 29 Jan. 1853.

²³⁰ *Belfast Newsletter*, 19 Jan. 1835.

²³¹ ‘Address to John Alexander Esq’, 1853 (Rathdonnell papers, PRONI, MIC 632 G6/6/143).

²³² *Carlow Sentinel*, 22 Jan. 1853.

²³³ O’Shea, *Prince of swindlers*, p. 318.

conscious elements within the tenantry may have differed from their priests and prepared the document on their own initiative out of disapproval for Sadleir's conduct, while others on the estate may have genuinely supported Alexander's bid— some of John II's labourers were in Carlow on the day of his election and engaged in tussles with 'a mob' of Sadleir's supporters.²³⁴ The progressive shift towards supporting their landlord in elections, and away from clerical influence in the 1840s has been described above, and it is likely that Alexander enjoyed general support from them by 1853; indeed, by 1857 the *Sentinel* claimed that the voters among the Milford tenantry could be relied on to vote for the Conservative candidates in the county elections.²³⁵ However, while the address emanated from the agricultural tenants, it claimed to represent the views of a generous cross-section of the whole community at Milford including 'numerous families that obtain not only their daily bread, but many of the comforts of life, by employment on your estate, and at the mills'.²³⁶ Some of the 38 signatories were relatively new to the estate (beginning their tenancies c.1838-9), but there were long-standing tenants as well, whose families had been resident on the estate at the time of the original Alexander purchase. They ranged from cottiers with less than an acre of a garden to large farmers of 90 acres. This remarkable document tended to disregard the controversies and tension of fifteen years earlier and painted a picture of an 'attached and faithful tenantry' living in harmony with their landlord ('for many years we have held land under your father and yourself, and have invariably found you honourable, kind and indulgent landlords') to the extent that they appeared willing to facilitate the political ascent of this inveterate Tory.

However, in hitting all the right notes and appearing to emanate from all the right quarters, the hand of Alexander himself and his Conservative colleagues must also be seen in the document, which they employed as the most effective means of rejecting the

²³⁴ *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 Jan. 1853.

²³⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 28 Mar. 1853.

²³⁶ Details of the signatories are taken from Milford rentals, 1830-50 (APMH).

charges (some of them accurate) being made against him. While many of the signatories probably shared a genuine desire to defeat Sadleir, it is likely that Alexander offered incentives or retrospective rewards to some or all of them — possibly in the form of re-negotiated leases, funds to carry out improvements or merchandise from the mills. It should be remembered that none of the signatories had a vote in Carlow borough and thus could not directly impact on the election result, which made the address appear all the more genuine. In any case, the address had an impressive effect, and a new confidence is detectable in Alexander's speech after producing it in the courthouse. To the delight and encouragement of his supporters, he urged Carlow's electors to 'put in the Carlow boy to represent his native town', as opposed to a stranger 'who had established amongst them a political discounting office, and who had jumped into political existence on its counters'.²³⁷ To promote solidarity among the electorate, he used a line from a popular song which became a slogan of sorts for his political career over the next six years: 'a long pull, and a strong pull, and a pull all together'.

At the final announcement of the poll on 20 January, Alexander was declared elected by a majority of 6 votes (97 to 91). In its leading article on 22 January, the *Sentinel* celebrated the 'Return of John Alexander, Esq. MP' and claimed 'we have seldom addressed our readers with more sincere gratification than we do on the present occasion'.²³⁸ His success was greeted by his employees at the Belfast Flour Mills with bonfires, booming cannons and 'a perfect furore of exultation'.²³⁹ To his constituents, John II admitted that it was 'the highest honour you could confer on any man', and he was hugely gratified to hear his family name associated with the county's political heavyweights (the Bruens, Rochforts, Bunburys and 'other great men of the county') in a congratulatory speech by

²³⁷ *Belfast Newsletter*, 19 Jan. 1853.

²³⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 22 Jan. 1853.

²³⁹ *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 Jan. 1853.

William Auchinleck Dane.²⁴⁰ His family had now risen to the very pinnacle of the Carlow gentry with all of the major necessary attributes: assertive Protestantism, a prestigious landed estate, significant wealth and now the highest political office in the county. That March, he was placed 5th on the Grand Jury, the highest position his family had ever, or would ever reach.²⁴¹ A celebratory ‘ball on an extensive scale [...] attended by the rank and fashion of the county’ took place at Milford on 5 July 1853, the only record of such an entertainment ever taking place there.²⁴²

Although he later described it as ‘the happiest and most triumphant day of my life’, the election took a toll and had been a draining and scabrous affair for John II.²⁴³ As he stood to speak in the courthouse on nomination day, a missile was thrown at him from the gallery of Sadleir’s supporters and he was struck on the forehead by a lump of ‘hard mortar’. In the following days, he succumbed to a bout of serious illness which confined him to bed until mid-February and prevented him from travelling to London to take his seat.²⁴⁴ The campaign had also been hugely controversial. As with previous Carlow elections, intimidation, bribery and violence appeared to be the order of the day.

Rumours abounded that Sadleir’s supporters were offering as much as £2 for a vote and it was alleged that they had attempted to physically carry off some of Alexander’s voters on the eve of the election. On the other side, claims were made that Alexander’s supporters had engaged in illegal exertions on his behalf. The *Dublin Evening Post* alleged that as much as ‘a thousand pounds’ was offered by the Conservatives for a vote on Wednesday morning, while other Liberals voters were paid to abstain or to temporarily leave the borough, one going as far as Belfast.²⁴⁵ Alexander’s Catholic voters came in for especial abuse during and after the campaign. As punishment for cheering for John II on the first

²⁴⁰ *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Apr. 1857; *Belfast Newsletter*, 24 Jan. 1853

²⁴¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 12 Mar. 1853.

²⁴² *Ibid*, 9 Jul. 1853.

²⁴³ *Ibid*, 4 Apr. 1857.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 12 Feb. 1853.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 22 Jan. 1853; O’Shea, *Prince of swindlers*, p. 329.

day of the election (allegedly ‘paid with others for doing so’) labourer John Cahill was waylaid by four men on Graigue bridge and wounded with a pen-knife by James Byrne.²⁴⁶ After the election, a handbill was printed and disseminated, headed by an image of a black sheep, which listed ‘nine Roman Catholic traitors’ in the borough who had ‘betrayed their God, religion and country, for the BRIBES of a sworn Orangeman, the exterminator of his Catholic tenants, the Master of an Orange lodge, and one who swears to “wade knee-deep in Papist blood”’.²⁴⁷

Nationally, the election was reported as a major triumph for Conservatism and was significant as the only Tory gain since the 1852 general election.²⁴⁸ The *Spectator* described Sadleir’s loss as ‘an unlooked-for defeat. Even the *Freeman’s Journal* had prophesied that Mr Sadlier would be returned by a majority of four.’²⁴⁹ Indeed, Alexander was the last Conservative to represent the constituency which was merged into Carlow county in 1885. Besides restoring the Conservative credentials of Carlow borough, Alexander had secured his greatest political achievement by defeating Sadleir; the very fact of being elected in his place was to prove John II’s ultimate political legacy. Reports emerged of celebrations in honour of Alexander’s return in Ballinrobe in Mayo, in Cork and other counties and the *Limerick Leader* asked: ‘Why is John Sadleir like Darius, the last of the Persian Emperors? Do you give it up? Because he was defeated by Alexander’.²⁵⁰ Alexander was hugely gratified by the Catholic support he had enjoyed and stood by his pledge to be apolitical and representative of all elements of the community: ‘I feel myself the representative of all parties, of all classes, and all sects in the borough of Carlow. I find among my supporters men of all denominations and all

²⁴⁶ CSORP/1853/736, 27 Jan. 1853 (NAI); *Carlow Sentinel*, 29 Jan. 1853.

²⁴⁷ ‘Borough of Carlow: a list of the nine Roman catholic traitors’ (Rathdonnell papers, PRONI, MIC 632 G6/9/318).

²⁴⁸ *Local collections; or records of remarkable events connected with the borough of Gateshead, 1853* (Gateshead-on-Tyne, 1853), p. 6; O’Shea, *Prince of swindlers*, p. 330. See also, *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 Jan. 1853.

²⁴⁹ *The Spectator*, 22 Jan. 1853.

²⁵⁰ Quoted in *Carlow Sentinel*, 29 Jan. 1853.

religions. [...] Therefore, I am the member for all'.²⁵¹ His voters included craftsmen, professionals, publicans, merchants and handymen.²⁵² He believed that the promotion of Conservative dogma and the representation of Carlow's interests as MP for the largely Catholic borough were two distinct and irreconcilable pursuits, and his mandate had clearly been to pursue the latter. While he would certainly not act against Conservative interests, his efforts would be non-sectarian and non-party political. He defined himself as a Conservative albeit 'not pledged to any line of conduct' in a parliamentary handbook of 1854.²⁵³ Alexander started as he meant to go on, showing the magnanimity of the true politician in court a few weeks after his election where 'he trusted the bench would deal with [Thomas Ellis, who had thrown a stone at him during the nominations] with all the leniency the law allowed, as he felt anxious not to press the matter further'.²⁵⁴

Alexander took the oaths and his seat for Carlow borough in the House of Commons on St Patrick's Day 1853—an auspicious day for any Irishman to undertake a new challenge.²⁵⁵ A resume of his first term in office shows that he fulfilled his election promises to work for the improvement of Carlow. The first major issue in which he was called to defend the interests of Carlow's landholders and occupiers was the debate on the proposed extension of income tax to Ireland. It was a hugely unpopular idea in Carlow among all classes and at a county meeting against the proposal, Horace Rochfort claimed that 'at last, there was a battle ground found upon which all classes could again stand side by side and shoulder to shoulder'.²⁵⁶ John II voted in the minority against the Income Tax bill in May (among the 72 Irish members who voted against the bill, 45 of whom were

²⁵¹ *Belfast Newsletter*, 24 Jan. 1853.

²⁵² 'Borough of Carlow: a list of the nine Roman Catholic traitors' (Rathdonnell papers, PRONI, MIC 632 G6/9/318).

²⁵³ Edward Morton (ed.), *Adam's parliamentary handbook: comprising a pocket peerage and parliamentary companion* (London, 1854), p. 135.

²⁵⁴ *Carlow Sentinel*, 29 Jan. 1853.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 26 Mar. 1853.

²⁵⁶ *Freeman's Journal*, 12 May 1853.

Conservatives) and again in October 1853.²⁵⁷ He also made a significant effort to improve the trade, market facilities, commercial reputation and appearance of the town. In October 1853, it was acknowledged by all parties that the town was in decline, 'so utterly neglected by the supineness and apathy of its own people that it is just like a large cross road on the way to Dublin', according to one prominent merchant.²⁵⁸ It was unfavourably compared with the booming town of Athy with its well-lit and clean streets and whose markets were prospering and taking much of Carlow's trade; that centre was 'improving and rising on our downfall' in Alexander's estimation.²⁵⁹ He chaired the first meeting to discuss the idea of a Town Commission to remedy this situation and was instrumental in unifying the many shades of political opinion in forwarding the establishment and early work of the body during his first term.²⁶⁰ By March 1854, the new Commission was expressing its thanks to Alexander for his efforts in London on their behalf in clarifying details of their entitlements and for his advice.²⁶¹

An analysis of Alexander's other votes during his first term show that he towed the Conservative party line against the Aberdeen government, and voted for measures that benefitted the Irish producer.²⁶² His zealous Protestantism guided his vote against a measure to endow Catholic chaplains in London's Metropolitan Reformatory Prisons, at a mere annual cost of £500.²⁶³ He also supported G.A. Hamilton's motion to extend the scriptural education of children of the Established Church within Ireland's national education framework which was a system he vehemently opposed: 'I cannot support the National (so-called) system of education. It is, I think, based in error; by it the word of God is mutilated', he later declared.²⁶⁴ However, he made some effort to avoid

²⁵⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 7 May 1853.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 29 Oct. 1853.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 29 Oct. 1853; L.D. Bergin, 'How the civic fathers began' in *Carloviana* (1952), pp 16-7.

²⁶¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Mar. 1854.

²⁶² *Ibid*, 18 Jun. 1853

²⁶³ *Ibid*, 4 Apr. 1857.

²⁶⁴ *Belfast Newsletter*, 2 May 1853; John Alexander II to Rev Armstrong, 5 Oct. 1874 (LB2, APMH).

offending the Catholic sector of his constituents by acknowledging the Maynooth grant as 'a prescriptive right and ought not to be disturbed. [...] I take the Latin quotation to express more fully my sentiments— *stare decisis*— "leave matters as they are".'²⁶⁵ His votes in support of the Crimean war effort were largely given from a personal perspective, as his youngest brother Henry Alexander (born 1822, later Major of 1st King's Dragoon Guards) was fighting with the 10th Hussars at the siege of Sebastopol at the time of the vote.²⁶⁶ Other votes were clearly cast from his perspective as a member of the landed class. He defended a magistrate's rights to act as judge in a case which involved his own estate and voted to retain the landlord's power to distrain a tenant's growing crops for rent and arrears, in an amendment to the Landlord and Tenants Bill.²⁶⁷ His vote to deny a tenant the right to retrospectively claim compensation for past improvements led to considerable criticism in the newly-founded Liberal *Carlow Post* newspaper in June of 1855.²⁶⁸ However, Alexander confounded some of his critics when he voted to oppose the summary eviction of agricultural labourers. In its list of supporters (which included many prominent tenant right campaigners including William Shee and Charles Gavan Duffy), the *Freeman's Journal* registered its surprise that 'even Mr Alexander of Carlow [...] voted with the independent party'.²⁶⁹

The move to London constituted a massive lifestyle change for John II that involved a great deal of travel and expense in the running of several households at a time when MPs received no formal salaries: one in Dublin, another in London, membership of both the Kildare Street Club in Dublin and the Carlton Club in London and a house in Boulogne in France, occupied by his wife and young family where he stayed during short

²⁶⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Apr. 1857.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 3 Feb, 2 Jun. 1855, 4 Apr. 1857; obituary of Henry Alexander, *London Standard*, 25 Apr. 1894; *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Aug. 1856.

²⁶⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Jul. 1853, 2 Jun. 1855.

²⁶⁸ *Carlow Post*, 9 Jul. 1855.

²⁶⁹ *Freeman's Journal*, 5 Oct. 1853.

parliamentary breaks.²⁷⁰ His reputation was enhanced by his many charitable donations to local religious and educational funds and his return visits to Carlow were greeted enthusiastically in society and in the press.²⁷¹ For the first two years of his term, Alexander's political actions were deemed so innocuous that he 'passed off very quietly without notice' from the *Carlow Post*, apart from prods towards greater charity.²⁷² However, as rumours of a general election started to circulate in mid-1855, the newspaper began to focus attention on what was undoubtedly the greatest weakness in Alexander's performance: his failure to speak in the House of Commons. That platform was a far cry from the grand jury room in Carlow courthouse, and even in the latter forum, John II had never distinguished himself in speeches. Although he felt confident enough to identify himself as 'a public man' by 1854, he clearly felt out of his depth in the debating chamber in Westminster, and as the months and years progressed the notion of a maiden speech became an increasingly terrifying and unlikely one.²⁷³ In two open letters to John II in the *Carlow Post* in May and June 1855, 'Cornelius Timothy Thrashem' launched a withering attack on Alexander's parliamentary failures, which the author claimed made him inherently unfit for the position he had won.²⁷⁴

Sir, it is a fact that success in life has a tendency in all men to make them enterprising. But when success has favoured them with an ambition for an exalted position, such as you hold at present as a Member of Parliament — when nature has conferred no gift to qualify them for the discharge of the duties of that important trust, they are not useful, nor is their dignity or reputation enhanced in that position, the more particularly, when nature has set great odds against their efforts to obtain distinction, as appears in your case. [...] It is an anomaly to see men returned to parliament, with no other qualification to recommend them than a sufficient stock of prudence to hold their tongues, lest they should make themselves appear ridiculous. [...] You sir, are not as expressive as the Punch of the puppet show, for he vindicates his proceedings when prompted by the chief juggler behind the

²⁷⁰ *Carlow Sentinel*, 27 Aug. 1853; Charles R. Dod, *The parliamentary companion for 1855*, p. 130; interview with John Alexander V, 27 Mar. 2000.

²⁷¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 16 Sep. 1854, 6 Jan. 1855.

²⁷² *Ibid*, 17 Mar. 1855.

²⁷³ *Ibid*, 16 Sep. 1854.

²⁷⁴ *Carlow Post*, 25 May, 2 Jun. 1855.

curtain; whilst you seem afraid to open your lips, lest you should betray yourself.²⁷⁵

The *Sentinel*'s subsequent efforts to defend his parliamentary silence essentially conceded that John II had under-performed in this regard and was probably unsuited to the role:

'During the period of his parliamentary career—if he has not been noisy and loquacious like many of the trading patriots—he has been useful and practical'.²⁷⁶

As a Conservative, Alexander patently saw his role as that of a soldier rather than a leader, and when a general election was called in March 1857, he contemplated calling time on his parliamentary career: 'Were I to consult my own feelings, it would be to retire into private life and live with my family, and reside with you and my friends', he informed the Carlow public.²⁷⁷ His diffidence led him to make such statements as 'to me, it makes very little matter whether I am returned or not'.²⁷⁸ Doubts about his future increased when the Liberal candidate was announced.²⁷⁹ From a family with stellar Whig credentials, Captain Arthur Ponsonby was an English soldier who had fought in the Crimea and was a first cousin of John Ponsonby, 5th earl of Bessborough, who held the third largest estate in Carlow (over 10,500 statute acres) and was the county's greatest absentee.²⁸⁰ A proposal was put to the local Conservatives that if they did not oppose Capt. Ponsonby in the borough, his cousin (Hon. Frederick Ponsonby) would withdraw from the county contest.²⁸¹ At a meeting on 17 March to consider the proposal, John II listened as 'several' Conservatives advised acceptance of the offer which would allow him into the retirement he so patently craved. However, a more sizeable number (approximately 80 electors) were confident of Alexander's return, in whom they placed

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 26 May 1855.

²⁷⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 28 Mar. 1857.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 4 Apr. 1857.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 14 Mar. 1857.

²⁸⁰ Malcomson, *Carlow parliamentary roll*, p. 91; Campbell and Royle, 'The country house and its demesne in county Carlow', p. 740. Capt. Ponsonby's uncle John, 4th earl of Bessborough, was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland at the time of his death in 1847, under Lord John Russell as premier.

²⁸¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 28 Mar. 1857.

‘the most unqualified confidence’, and were unwilling to let the borough back into Liberal hands without a contest. They were determined to extract maximum advantage from the momentum gained by Alexander’s famous defeat of the late Sadleir and, satisfied with his solid if undistinguished performance in the local interest, he was their unanimous choice.²⁸² He again submerged his personal inclinations but his true feelings were unmistakeable in his printed message to his Conservative supporters: ‘I cannot refuse to obey your call, which indeed, carries along with it to me the aspect of command’.²⁸³

Alexander benefitted from the offence taken by many Liberals at Ponsonby’s presumption of local support. One elector, William Collier claimed Ponsonby had been ‘surreptitiously introduced into this borough, [...] pitch-forked upon them by a little clique, without consulting the feelings or wishes of the people’.²⁸⁴ Although the majority of the Liberal camp rejected Alexander on the basis of his historical record, he did enjoy a significant amount of goodwill from some of its members during the 1857 campaign. When Edward Flood (merchant, town commissioner and one of Ponsonby’s supporters) cautioned an especially rancorous meeting of Carlow’s Liberals electors in March 1857 that a split in their party could enable the return of ‘one of the vilest Orangemen in Ireland’, he was met with shouts that ‘Alexander is the man, say what you will’.²⁸⁵ Michael Walshe, another Ponsonby supporter, claimed that he ‘would be sorry to say anything that would in the slightest degree detract from the worth of Mr Alexander’.²⁸⁶ Others displayed palpable respect for the local candidate, ‘the dusty miller, [...] a man of your own’ as one Liberal voter described him.²⁸⁷ Undoubtedly, John II’s cause was aided by the views of James Walshe, the new Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, who was an

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid, 28 Mar., 4 Apr. 1857.

²⁸⁵ Ibid, 28 Mar. 1857.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 4 Apr. 1857.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

opponent of clerical involvement in politics and who wanted to let Alexander stand unopposed.²⁸⁸

At the nominations, which took place on 30 March, Alexander laboured his stance as an independent representative of all sectors of the community:

If you will return me again, I will go as your representative, unfettered and unshackled, as the free servant of free men. I pledge myself now, as I did then, to give my vote according to the dictates of my own conscience. [...] I shall give my vote for you as independent men without fee or reward, to have no affection or leaning to any particular man, and at the same time, that I will aid in passing measures that will be of benefit and advantage to the community at large, or to Carlow in particular, without respect or regard to who is the minister of the day, or what government is in power whether Tory, Radical or Liberal—I care for none of them. [...] I will do so without making the slightest possible distinction as to what may be the shade of politics, or the religious creed from which we may differ. [...] I have done nothing that I am ashamed of (loud cheers). I have done nothing that I am afraid to refer to or mention (loud applause). [...] I have carefully abstained from giving the slightest offence to any person in this community.²⁸⁹

He praised his opponent but believed himself to be the better candidate for Carlow: ‘Be it for yourselves to answer whether you will select a man known to you from his infancy, or will you take a stranger from a high aristocratic family? Can he serve you as I can serve you? [...] Will he spend his fortune among you as I am spending it?’ Although there was the usual ‘great interruption, shouting, cock-crowing, whistling, hooting and yelling’, it was an infinitely more mannerly and restrained affair than four years previously.²⁹⁰ At the close of proceedings Ponsonby urged the audience to be ‘as good friends as Mr Alexander and I are now’ and crossed the floor to shake hands with John II.²⁹¹

On 1 April, a feeling of general goodwill pervaded the streets during the poll, where Alexander secured a decisive victory of 127 votes to Ponsonby’s 79. His return was described by the *Sentinel* as ‘one of the most extraordinary that ever occurred in Carlow

²⁸⁸ Barr, ‘Lord Acton’s Irish elections’, pp 107-8.

²⁸⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Apr. 1857.

²⁹⁰ *Carlow Post*, 4 Apr. 1857.

²⁹¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Apr. 1857.

as no one anticipated so large a majority', which it ascribed to Alexander's popularity and inoffensive conduct in office. It was hardly surprising that Ponsonby had received no Protestant votes, but Alexander's considerable Catholic poll (24 votes, amounting to one fifth of the Catholic electorate) and the sizeable number of Catholic abstainers was crucial in securing his return; Protestant votes alone were not enough, as they constituted only 47 per cent of the electorate (see Table 8.7).

Table 8.7 Breakdown by religious denomination of the electorate of Carlow borough during the election of April 1857²⁹²

	PROTESTANT	CATHOLIC	TOTAL
Votes for Alexander	103	24	127
Votes for Ponsonby	0	79	79
Non-Voters	5	20	25
TOTAL ELECTORATE	108	123	231
% of Total Electorate	47 %	53 %	100 %

High sheriff Arthur Kavanagh of Borris listed Alexander's success in his diary as one of the 'great events' of the year.²⁹³ At the decoration of the poll, many Liberals admitted to voting for John II— an unimaginable turn of events in 1835. Catholic William Collier claimed that his politics were different to Alexander's 'as much as night is from morning' (he had previously called Alexander 'a drivelling cur')²⁹⁴ but explained his vote by celebrating Alexander's record in parliament. He also criticised Ponsonby's Whiggery and Lord John Russell's handling of the Famine, claiming that 'of two evils you should choose the least'. Here, it is clear how Alexander benefitted from the considerable anti-Liberal bias in the borough generated by Sadleir's defection and disgrace, and the ostensibly anti-Catholic measures of recent Whig ministries. In comparison, Alexander was deemed to be so trustworthy and inoffensive that Collier attempted to claim him for the Liberal cause: 'We have Alexander in harness, and we will make him pull his traces'.

²⁹² Table drawn from details supplied in *Carlow Post*, 4 Apr. 1857.

²⁹³ Diary of Arthur Kavanagh, 1857, 'Great events 1857', at rear (Kavanagh papers, Borris House, N/1).

²⁹⁴ *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Apr. 1857.

In an open letter to John II, even Fr James Maher (who had taken huge offence at Alexander's recent chairing of a meeting of evangelical Protestant missionaries) observed 'the forbearance of the town in your regard. They seemed disposed to forget the past —to treat you generously and confidingly. A hope was entertained that your future career would be unsectarian and Liberal'.²⁹⁵

The *Sentinel* claimed that 'not one single act of bribery took place in either side in the borough' and that Alexander's return had been achieved without the expenditure of a single shilling beyond the legal requirements of the contest.²⁹⁶ The returned election expenses show that while Ponsonby spent more on addresses, placards and advertisements (£36 to Alexander's £29), John II wisely spent over ten times as much as Ponsonby (£22 to £2 5s) in conveying electors to the poll.²⁹⁷ It was clearly understood that with such a small electorate, every vote counted. As a former secretary of the Conservative club, John II had long been a manipulator of voting qualification requirements, and he had ensured that three of his brothers claimed the franchise in the borough for houses in the town which, in one case, was never occupied.²⁹⁸ His sister Fanny's husband, Rev Charles Henry Travers, who was ministering in Milton Keynes had also gained a vote by taking a house in the town shortly after John II's first election, but was also struck off when it was proven that he 'never occupied the premises'.²⁹⁹

Immediately after his second success, Alexander set in motion what was to be his greatest initiative at local level and the source of his greatest pride in the whole period of his parliamentary career. His approach to the establishment of his Town Improvement Committee on 29 April 1857 offers an insight into his wishes to create an economic unity from within the conflicting elements of the borough:

²⁹⁵ *Carlow Post*, 9 May 1857.

²⁹⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Apr. 1857.

²⁹⁷ PP, 1857 Session 2 (332), *Election expenses. Abstract of return to an address of the Honourable the House of Commons, dated 29 May 1857...*, p. 224.

²⁹⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 14 Oct. 1854, 21 Oct. 1854, 22 Mar. 1856; *Carlow Post*, 14 Oct. 1854.

²⁹⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 21 Oct. 1854.

The idea of holding this meeting originated with myself. I asked three or four gentlemen whom I met in the town what they thought of it. I said, 'I am determined to call together my friends that we may have an opportunity of talking over the affairs of the town'. They said they fully approved of it, so I went home and took a list of the various people of the town. I weighed them in the balance, to divide them evenly, and sent out about 40 notes. I directed them indiscriminately to all.³⁰⁰

He was hugely fearful of his presumption in attempting to overlook religious and political distinctions and there is a palpable sense of suspicion and unspoken hostility between the various speakers in the accounts of the first meeting.³⁰¹ However, he persisted and chaired the widely-attended weekly meetings of the body over the next two years. A level of genuine enthusiasm and cooperation between individuals and sects soon developed as Alexander spearheaded the tedious and frustrating negotiations with the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to purchase the premises of the ruined Diocesan School in the town to establish as a new market-house.³⁰² He successfully used his influence with the grand jury to direct county funds towards improvement works such as the enlargement of Potato Market at a cost of £800 and assisted the establishment of a new Corn Exchange in the old courthouse.³⁰³ He worked hard to get patents for extra fairs in the county town (aiming to have a horse fair to compete with that of Ballinasloe), to have scales erected in all the town's market-places and announced a pioneering and radical plan to have a 'People's Park' established in the town: 'he looked very much to the recreation of the hard-working, industrious, honest shopkeeper, mechanic, artisan, and labourer of this town'.³⁰⁴ Also, in a centre with a booming trade in prostitution ('there is not a town in Europe so afflicted in this respect')³⁰⁵ Alexander was credited with closing a brothel, 'a nuisance [...] which for years had affected the peace and morality of the town'.³⁰⁶ John II was modest but felt great pride in what he had achieved in uniting all parties on a

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 2 May 1857.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 16 May 1857.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 25 Jul. 1857; 28 May 1859.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 25 Jul. 1857.

³⁰⁵ *Carlow Morning Post*, 4 Nov. 1822.

³⁰⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 28 May 1857.

common purpose: 'He looked back to the 29th of April last with the most heartfelt pleasure' as the date on which he had launched an initiative that made Carlow 'the model town of Leinster'.³⁰⁷

Along with the county representatives, John II exerted himself for several individuals (both Catholic and Protestant) who sought his assistance in securing position or promotion.³⁰⁸ On one occasion, he pressed the case of a nephew of the parish priest of Rathvilly who hoped for advancement in the Inland Revenue.³⁰⁹ Such efforts involved representations to leading figures within the Conservative party during the brief Derby administration of 1858-9, including Sir William Joliffe (Secretary to the Treasury) and party whip in Ireland, Col. T.E. Taylor. In one such representation, Alexander pleaded guilty to Taylor of promising too much and declared 'Now I'm in a fix. I've thrown the die on this case. Can't you, a Lord of the Treasury clear away the difficulty?'³¹⁰ We also gain a valuable insight into his efforts and reputation behind the scenes in the House of Commons in an appeal from Col. Taylor to Jolliffe on Alexander's behalf: 'If you could stretch a point for his [Alexander's] man, it would be very advantageous to him who is a sound and fine sub-leader'.³¹¹ At one point, rumours even reached Carlow that John II had been appointed to the office of Governor of Jamaica as a reward for his efforts at Westminster.³¹²

It was during his second term that John II's social position enjoyed its greatest eminence. His relationship with the kingpins of the Carlow gentry also deepened and, being twenty years older than both the new heads of the Bruen and Kavanagh families, he enjoyed something of the respect gained by seniority which had never formed part of his

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 19 and 26 Sep. 1857.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 28 May 1859.

³⁰⁹ See for example Michael Dalton to McClintock Bunbury, 21 Jun. 1858 (Rathdonnell papers, PRONI, MIC 632/G6/9/700).

³¹⁰ Alexander to Taylor, 25 Sep. 1858 (Political papers of Sir William Joliffe, Somerset Archives, DD/HY/18/12/100).

³¹¹ Taylor to Jolliffe, 28 Sep. 1858 (ibid, DD/HY/18/12/100a).

³¹² *Carlow Sentinel*, 1 May 1858.

relationships with their fathers. Arthur Kavanagh called to dinner in Milford House when he hunted in the vicinity, and John II and members of his family enjoyed extended visits to Borris House in 1857-9.³¹³ In the marriage of Lorenzo Alexander to Harriet, the daughter of Henry Bruen II in June 1857 (whose courtship had been carefully managed by Arthur Kavanagh—the protective uncle of the bride and close friend of the groom), the Alexanders became in-laws of the county's most powerful family coalition.³¹⁴ The event was the cause of significant celebrations at the family mills and was reported as a 'Marriage in High Life' in the national press, who listed the attendance of the landed gentry from across several counties.³¹⁵ In a subsequent speech, Henry Bruen III advertised 'the intimate connection and relationship which exists between my family and that of the [...] member for the borough'.³¹⁶ It was a hugely gratifying link for John II and the name of his new nephew (Henry Bruen Alexander, born in 1860) afforded nominal proof of his family's position at the apex of the Carlow gentry.³¹⁷

With the call of a general election, Alexander showed more confidence than on previous occasions in putting himself forward his name for re-election on 8 April 1859. Never kind to Alexander, the *Freeman's Journal* (labelling him 'a rampant Tory' at one point)³¹⁸ conceded that it could not foresee anyone beating him in Carlow.³¹⁹ However, his failure to speak had not been remedied in his second term and in an article entitled 'Alexander's virtues', the *Post* mocked his inability to produce anything in the House of Commons beyond the pathetic monosyllables 'yea or nay': 'The Alexander of ancient times made, it is true, considerable noise in the world, whilst the modern Alexander has achieved his victories silently, acting on the notable maxim, *non minima para sapientia*

³¹³ Diaries of Arthur Kavanagh, 10 Jan. 1857, 1858, 1859 (Kavanagh papers, Borris House, N/1).

³¹⁴ *Ibid*, 19 Apr. to 25 Jun. 1857.

³¹⁵ *Belfast Newsletter*, 27 Jun. 1857; *Freeman's Journal*, 30 Jun. 1857.

³¹⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 14 May 1859.

³¹⁷ *Freeman's Journal*, 10 Nov. 1860.

³¹⁸ *Ibid*, 2 Mar. 1853.

³¹⁹ *Ibid*, 12 Apr. 1859.

tacere— it betokens no small share of wisdom to hold one's peace'.³²⁰ Effective public speaking was regarded a *sine qua non* for Carlow's highest political office. In 1858, Francis Bruen (a former incumbent of the borough seat) noted the contemporary importance attached to this skill as he gently prodded his nephew on the subject. When congratulating Henry Bruen III (then in his first year as a county representative and yet to speak in the House of Commons) on his efforts in a cricket match at Lords, he added pointedly: 'I am foolish enough to have been better pleased than if you had made a good maiden speech in parliament, but that is between ourselves'.³²¹ Nevertheless, Alexander's supporters argued that the only cause for him to lose his seat was 'a desire for novelty or change (a property inherent in man's nature)'.³²²

Alexander's downfall had its origins in the local Liberal Club's frustration with the Conservative dominance in the county contests and its determination to secure control of a parliamentary seat; to Fr Maher and his supporters, the manipulation of the small borough electorate was a far more manageable proposition than a county contest. By the end of April, they were whispering the name of Sir John Dalberg-Acton as a possible candidate to contest the borough.³²³ The 25 year-old English academic and baronet would later distinguish himself as Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, and although at 'the very centre of the Whig aristocracy', he was an unknown quantity in Carlow.³²⁴ Showing little passion for a parliamentary career, Acton was shepherded into politics by his stepfather, Lord Granville, and as a Catholic, it was felt an Irish constituency would prove his best bet. Interestingly, Granville's enquiries about Carlow borough brought him tales that in the previous contest, the 'Derbyite candidate [Alexander] is a strong Orangeman who bribed something on forty voters, and did not pay

³²⁰ *Carlow Post*, 30 Apr. 1859.

³²¹ Francis Bruen to Henry Bruen, 30 Jul. 1858 (Bruen papers, NLI, Ms 29,775).

³²² *Carlow Sentinel*, 23 Apr. 1859.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 30 Apr. 1859.

³²⁴ James J. Auchmuty, 'Acton's election as an Irish member of parliament' in *English Historical Review*, vol. lxi (1946), pp 394-405, at p. 395.

them'.³²⁵ Carlow borough was the fourth constituency Acton applied to represent in 1859.³²⁶ As a Catholic Whig, Acton was actively supported by Paul Cullen, Archbishop of Dublin since November 1857, who undoubtedly engaged his influential uncle on his preferred candidate's behalf.³²⁷ Fr James Maher's support had also been canvassed by the earl of Bessborough and the Liberal Election Committee,³²⁸ and in adopting Acton's cause Maher hoped to banish the deep embarrassment he felt about his association with Sadleir and his ignominious legacy. Maher was the chief enforcer of his old adversary's political downfall because as a political personality, Acton made no impact on the constituency and played no active part in the campaign— failing to appear in Carlow until 2 June when the contest was over.³²⁹ This fact led Alexander to claim during the canvass that Acton's challenge was as harmless as that of 'the man in the moon'.³³⁰

John II was the only candidate to present himself at the nomination procedure, and had received sufficient promises of support to promote his self-confidence to a new height: 'My prospects of success are as good, if not better than they ever were. [...] If those promises are kept, I have no fears for the result'.³³¹ In his confident speech, he generated equal measures of farce and uproar in the courthouse by pointing out the absurdity of Acton's absence:

Brother electors, I want to ask, where is this candidate (laughter)? I want to look at him (renewed laughter and ironical cheering). I want to ask him what his political opinions are. I want to have him here before me that I may take his measure (tremendous cheers and laughter). Is he a man in buckram? Or is he a phantom? (Here a good deal of amusement was created by some persons flinging a fellow about eighteen stone weight right in top of those in front of him.) Is that (continued the speaker, pointing to the unfortunate individual in question) your candidate (cheers and great uproar)?

³²⁵ Barr, 'Lord Acton's Irish elections', p. 108.

³²⁶ David Mathew, *Lord Acton and his times*, (London, 1968), p. 107; Colin Barr, 'Lord Acton's Irish elections', pp 100-6.

³²⁷ Barr, 'Lord Acton's Irish elections', p. 94.

³²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 106.

³²⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Jun. 1859.

³³⁰ *Ibid*, 7 May 1859.

³³¹ *Ibid*.

However, things became far more serious as Acton's Liberal proposers began to simplify matters in presenting the contest as a purely religious issue, as 'a trial between Protestant ascendancy and Catholic freedom'. In its Catholic support for a Whig candidate, Carlow borough stood out as an unusual constituency. Hoppen argues that the predominant dissatisfaction with the Whigs among Irish Liberals enabled the Tories to lead 'a cheap campaign for the Catholic vote' in 1859.³³² However, the *Carlow Post* pointed out why such an initiative would be resisted in the borough constituency, dogged by the injustices of the Protestant gentry over a Catholic majority: 'Toryism in England is a comparatively mild and compromising conservatism; whilst in Ireland, Toryism is Orange ascendancy'.³³³ In Carlow, Fr Maher's direction was powerful enough to deflect Tory courtship (with vague promises of tenant-right legislation in a bid to improve its minority status in government) by promoting a view of the contest as a religious one.³³⁴ The determination of the borough's Catholics to be represented in parliament by one of their own creed had produced a situation whereby an unfamiliar candidate who had never set foot in the county was favoured over a well-known local gentleman with a proven and lauded track record of ameliorating his county town. At the nominations, Thomas Price (proprietor of the *Carlow Post*) condemned the late Derby administration for its thoroughly anti-Catholic spirit, and John II's ostensible support of it. He contrasted the Catholic majority in the town's population with the absence of a single Catholic postholder in the public institutions of the town, even among the turnkeys of the county gaol. With such statements, the campaign could not but assume a sectarian hue. Price rejected Alexander's inclusive political persona as a sham and claimed 'he belonged to the old Orange ascendancy party'.³³⁵ He also drew attention to Mrs Esther Alexander's attendance at a lecture delivered the previous week by Fr Allesandro Gavazzi, an Italian

³³² Hoppen, 'Tories, Catholics and the general election of 1859' in *Historical Journal*, vol. xiii (1970), pp 48-67, at p. 53.

³³³ *Carlow Post* quoted by Auchmuty, 'Acton's election', p. 401.

³³⁴ Hoppen, 'Tories, Catholics and the general election of 1859', pp 49-50.

³³⁵ *Carlow Post*, 23 Apr. 1859.

priest who had become estranged from Pope Pius IX and had become an infamous critic of the Catholic church; that he was hosted by local Protestants was taken as a gross insult by the Liberal side.³³⁶ As Colin Barr points out, 'Maher and the Liberals were able to channel the Catholic anger that everywhere greeted Gavazzi into opposition to the town's Protestant establishment and the candidate associated with it'.³³⁷ This position was strengthened by a report that John II had refused to let an empty house in Ballinabranna to the local Catholic curate who wanted to be closer to his parishioners at that end of his parish.³³⁸ His record of work in the borough was set at nought and his political reputation reverted to what it had been thirty years previously.

Fr Maher allegedly went from house to house on the evening following the nominations with the motto 'No Catholic should vote for Mr Alexander'. His personal animus against Alexander and his contribution to whipping up the passions of the local population can be seen by the contrasting peace of the following week when two Conservative candidates (Bruen and McClintock Bunbury) were returned unopposed for the county.³³⁹ Carlow's reputation for corruption was in no way dispelled during the borough campaign. The week before the election, one of Lord Granville's agents reported that the borough was 'not to be obtained save by dealing with some 30 of the voters—they are a shocking set'.³⁴⁰ The *Sentinel* alleged that a number of Catholic voters were abducted and 'cooped' until polling day, and bribes were openly given out by the Liberal Club. From the start of polling on Thursday 5 May, the extent of corruption and intimidation, and the significant stock of courage required by the 11 Catholics who voted for John II were apparent. Despite being escorted to the hustings by a Catholic 'mob' of 'slave-drivers', Michael Keating pleaded his wish to vote for Alexander to the election officials to the fury of the

³³⁶ Barr, 'Lord Acton's Irish elections', p. 110.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

³³⁸ *Carlow Post*, 23 Apr. 1859.

³³⁹ Malcomson, *Carlow parliamentary roll*, p. 56.

³⁴⁰ J.D. Fitzgerald to Granville, 26 Apr. 1859, quoted in Barr, 'Lord Acton's Irish elections', p. 108.

crowd; the windows of his grocery shop on Dublin Street were shattered that evening and members of his family were threatened with murder. Twenty three panes of glass were broken at his house; Kennedy successfully applied for £12 in damages from the grand jury at the end of the month.³⁴¹ For similarly defying his captors in voting for Alexander, Thomas Bolger felt the need to flee to Dublin on the midday train. In his absence his butcher's shop and house were ransacked and looted to the extent of £28 in damages.³⁴² Some Catholic voters unwillingly succumbed to intimidation: the premature death of Robert Reddy (a Catholic gunsmith with a weak heart, who had promised Alexander his vote in April) was ascribed to the pressures exerted on him 'by two or three of the prominent Liberals' to switch his vote.³⁴³ Other voters, including some Conservatives, had clearly been bribed. Acton himself was well aware of the unsavoury tactics his agents and supporters had resorted to and expressed dissatisfaction on this account to Cardinal Newman, and he came to believe (as he informed his stepfather) that only 'a profuse use of corruption and of patronage' could win a seat in Carlow.³⁴⁴ He later declared that 'nothing would induce me to stand for Carlow again after certain proceedings which came to my knowledge long after my election', and in Hoppen's estimation, his 'parsimonious high-mindedness debarred him from ever again standing for Carlow after his unexpected return in 1859'.³⁴⁵ Nevertheless, by the close of the poll, Acton had won by 14 votes, polling 117 to Alexander's 103. The night of his declaration saw the worst outburst of political and sectarian violence in the county since the election of 1841. The town (the area around Dublin Street in particular) witnessed riots of

³⁴¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 28 May 1859.

³⁴² *Ibid*, 28 May 1859.

³⁴³ *Ibid*, 11 Jun. 1859.

³⁴⁴ Mathew, *Lord Acton*, pp 27, 109.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 117; Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society*, p. 80.

drunken chaos and violence that were compared to scenes from the French revolution by the *Sentinel*.³⁴⁶

It also seems that the confident local Conservatives spent less on their campaign than was usual, which may have impacted on Alexander's chances of re-election. The Bruen family had been significant investors in the Conservative cause in Carlow; in 1841, John II had complimented Henry Bruen II by saying that 'his heart and his purse have ever been open to support our glorious cause'.³⁴⁷ However, in the lead-up to the borough election of 1859, Francis Bruen advised his nephew, Henry III, to be more careful with his political expenditure: 'I think it is more prudent to get something for your money than to spend it in defending the seats of Messrs Bunbury & Alexander who are quite as well able to pay as you, and better'.³⁴⁸ The Liberal election effort had cost £500.³⁴⁹ However, a large sum of £600 (three times as much as that enjoyed by other constituencies) was sent, along with technical advice, to Carlow borough from the Central Conservative Society to fight the election.³⁵⁰ Hoppen regards Carlow borough as the only constituency where overseer Lord Naas did not get value for his money.³⁵¹ Undoubtedly, Acton's Catholicism was the key factor in his success and was deemed a sufficient qualification for support; as Auchmuty puts it, 'it was the case of a distant prospect pleasing in preference to the local landlord'.³⁵² For the first time since Emancipation, the Liberals were in a minority in the Irish constituencies, but Carlow was one of only three constituencies where they had secured a gain—the new MP was the only English

³⁴⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 7 May 1859.

³⁴⁷ McComb, *The repealer repulsed*, p. 133.

³⁴⁸ Francis Bruen to Henry Bruen, 5 May 1859 (Bruen papers, NLI, Ms 29,775/5).

³⁴⁹ Barr, 'Lord Acton's Irish elections', p. 112.

³⁵⁰ 'Gen. Election, 1859. Money paid' in correspondence to Lord Naas (Mayo papers, NLI, 11,036/1). Barr incorrectly gives a figure of £200 from the same source, 'Lord Acton's Irish elections', p. 112.

³⁵¹ Hoppen, 'The general election of 1859', pp 67-8.

³⁵² Auchmuty, 'Acton's election', p. 401.

Catholic to be elected in Ireland.³⁵³ After Alexander's defeat, the *Post* celebrated the town's freedom from 'the Orange incubus' and crowed that

Carlow has stolen a complete march on the enemy, surprised him and routed the renowned Alexander with all his legions at his back. Never was the Tory camp so taken aback. [...] Mr Alexander will have an opportunity of cultivating his paternal acres, and pursuing the even and noiseless tenor of his way, in a calling more congenial to his tastes and his talents than in the intricate mazes of a parliamentary career, for which nature, as he must himself have too often felt, never intended. Farewell, therefore we say to Alexander, once [and] for all.³⁵⁴

Nowhere was disappointment more apparent than in the columns of its rival and in successive issues over many weeks, the *Sentinel* struggled to accept the result, lamenting Alexander's loss and castigating those who opposed him or let him down. Col. Taylor, the Conservative chief whip found the result 'unexpected quite', and members of the Carlow gentry also expressed their shock: Bruen believed that the electorate had made a huge error: 'You threw overboard the best man you could get'.³⁵⁵ John II may not have lamented the end to his days in Westminster and probably felt some relief in this regard. However, the insult to Conservatism and the success of the Liberals through corrupt practices poured salt into the wound of having lost an important political and social position in the county. In his disappointment, he did not attend the declaration of the poll on the morning of 6 May. Over time, the notion of being defeated by a Catholic rankled him greatly and Acton's name became offensive to him after the election. An occurrence within his powerbase later that year is probable evidence of this ill-feeling: after the new MP presented the 'Acton Cup' as a competition prize for the newly-constituted Carlow Regatta, it 'suddenly disappeared at one of the Milford regattas and was never recovered'.³⁵⁶ Acton's close friendship with William Gladstone, Alexander's future *bête noire*, served only to increase his antipathy.

³⁵³ Ibid, p. 395.

³⁵⁴ *Carlow Post*, 7 May 1859.

³⁵⁵ Quoted by Barr, 'Lord Acton's Irish elections', p. 108; *Carlow Sentinel*, 14 May 1859.

³⁵⁶ [Anon.], 'Oars on the feather' in *Carloviana* (1953), p. 13.

Outside Carlow, future references to his career as an MP typically appeared as footnotes to the demise of the famous John Sadleir.³⁵⁷ Forced to resign as an MP in 1854 over proven claims of illegal electioneering moves in the 1852 election, Sadleir's forgeries and reckless speculations soon caught up with him, and he committed suicide in 1856 leaving a trail of financial chaos in his wake.³⁵⁸ Much reviled in anecdote and literary fiction, his name became infamous in Ireland and a by-word for treachery. Alexander's role in precipitating what was seen as a righteous collapse was sufficient in the eyes of the *Sentinel* as a political legacy, worthy of remembrance if 'he possesses no other claim to the esteem and gratitude of his fellow townsmen, in a moral and political sense'.³⁵⁹ Among his descendants, a view was circulated that John II's parliamentary career was inauspicious and largely forgettable, providing neither distinction nor inspiration. Its absence in the family's stock of anecdotes is also reflected in the surviving archive at Milford where only a print from 1856 of Charles Barry's plan of the Houses of Parliament and a printed list of the members of the Commons in 1855 testify to his days as an MP.

In terms of the Milford powerbase, the role had cemented the family's position in the hierarchy of the county's Protestant gentry. It was the culmination of a long road of social and political aggrandisement that had begun with his father's first commercial success at Ballygowan. It was his awareness of the automatic social elevation that the office conferred that made him leave the scenes of celebration in Carlow town on the night of his first election in 1853 to go to his mother in Milford, 'anxious to convey to her personally the intelligence' of his victory—it was a success that his more eloquent friend, Horace Rochfort would never achieve.³⁶⁰ It is no coincidence that Alexander commissioned his portrait in 1855 (from Stephen Catterson Smith, one of the most in-

³⁵⁷ Colin Barr has argued recently that Alexander's return in 1853 was a direct consequence of 'the baleful legacy of John Sadleir', 'Lord Acton's Irish elections', p. 113.

³⁵⁸ O'Shea, *Prince of swindlers*, pp 268-9.

³⁵⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 28 Mar. 1857.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 22 Jan. 1853.

demand painters of the day)³⁶¹ to preserve his image at the height of his social and political power. Unlike his father, John II was painted without mercantile parchments in his hand, as befitted a member of the quality (see appendix J3).

Almost immediately after his defeat, John II shook off the successful mediatory profile which had necessarily governed most of his political work over the previous six years and which had enabled him to configure the office as a socio-economic rather than an essentially political one. In defeat, his identity as a unifier was at an end and he was free to re-assume the mantle of the zealous Tory, energised by the personal attacks he had endured on his name and work. Letters in the Rathdonnell papers from 1859-60 show him working tirelessly (in Carlow and London) in an almost personal crusade to establish a Protestant-Conservative majority in the borough. His efforts to achieve this measure — which required the liberal distribution of cash and a manipulation of registry regulations to overcome the significant Catholic majority in the population of the constituency — is clear evidence of a scheme of personal retribution. In November 1860, he reported to McClintock Bunbury on the healthy state of subscriptions to the local club and the successful creation of 27 new Conservative voters:

We are now in a positive majority of 6; in any late contest, we went to the fight with a positive minority of 17. [...] I think our subscribers will not say their money is thrown away. [...] We never were in a majority in the borough since the reform bill of 1832. [...] Now let us keep ourselves alive in the borough. Our adversaries are disgusted with the fellow they've put in, are distrustful of each other, weakened and divided. This, instead of making us too confident, ought to have the effect of making us more cautious & more persevering.³⁶²

However, his parliamentary career was well and truly over. Even though brief and devoid of any outstanding successes, it was extremely productive and effective at a local level. He seemed an unlikely person to attempt to paper over the cracks of party politics in a bid

³⁶¹ Strickland, *A dictionary of Irish artists*, vol. ii, pp 363-5; Mary Stratton Ryan, 'A 19th century masterpiece of a master by a master' in *Carloviana* no. 62 (2013), pp 155-162, at pp 156-7.

³⁶² John Alexander II to McClintock Bunbury, 2 and 30 Nov. 1860 (Rathdonnell papers, PRONI, MIC 632/G6/17/887, G6/18/905-6).

to advance the town's trade and prosperity, but this he achieved to a large extent for a couple of years. He hoped to act in an honourable manner by showing due deference to his Roman Catholic constituents and he showed considerable integrity in placing his duty to them above his private principles, in abstaining from any measure that could cause offence to them at a directly local level. A commentary on his political efforts by the *Sentinel* succinctly represents the effect of his parliamentary career for John II at a local level: 'The course he pursued increased the circle of his friends, disarmed many of his opponents and earned for himself, the esteem of the constituency, including many gentlemen who voted against him on former occasions'.³⁶³ His defeat in 1859 should not be seen as a commentary on his parliamentary efforts; it was rather a product of sectarian tensions that had been ongoing for half a century, in which his fiery Tory reputation from previous decades played a contributory role. Despite its bias, the *Sentinel* was accurate in its assessment of John II's defeat: 'The return of Mr Alexander was the advent of peace, union and improvement in Carlow. [...] What then was Mr Alexander's offence? — Simply his Protestantism'.³⁶⁴

The enabling role of *John Alexander & Co.* in his political success was greatly evident during the elections in his opponents' attempts to pull him back down to the mill floor on which he had constructed an elevated platform and presented himself as a political gentleman: "'We won't have Alexander. Who is he?' 'He is a miller' (great cheering). 'We will give him his oats to grind by and by'".³⁶⁵ Consequently, John II's defeat in 1859 was a significant loss and marked the beginning of a decade of irreversible change in the Alexanders' social, political and financial fortunes which contributed greatly to dramatic and inexorable decline of the Milford powerbase.

³⁶³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 23 Apr. 1859.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 28 May 1859.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Chapter 9

A powerbase in decline: Milford, 1850-70

‘The game is over. I am well pleased to be rid of the concern.’

John Alexander II, September 1870¹

i. The demise of *John Alexander & Co.*, 1850-70

When John Alexander II left the parliamentary arena in 1859 and returned to life as a landed gentleman, he would surely not have imagined that ten years later his flour mill would be in ruins, his malthouse would belong to another and he would be in contemplation of leasing his house and selling his estate. Such was the dramatic and rapid decline in the fortunes of the Milford powerbase, through a combination of tragic accidents, economic pressures and unwise investment behaviour. With the loss of political and financial power came the inevitable decline in social status which to John II was the channel in which his failures and weaknesses were most obviously visible. However, it was the loss of his milling income—on a serious decline since the repeal of the Corn Laws—which most crucially effected a downturn in the Alexanders’ stature in Carlow. Therefore, the demise of the Milford milling company needs to be explored in some detail.

The years immediately following the repeal of the Corn Laws were anxious ones for the Alexanders. While Horace Rochfort generalised of Carlow landlords that ‘as a body, with but few exceptions, we look on a return to a high protective duty on corn as impossible and, if possible, not to be desired’, John Alexander was among a minority who

¹ John Alexander II to James Alexander, 30 Jul. 1870 (LB1, APMH).

fundamentally disagreed.² The failure of his first cousin John Handy's mill at Barraghcore in Kilkenny in 1847 (a venture in which John I had heavily invested), had confirmed his alarm about the dangers to his business and he used the label of 'Protectionist' to define himself during his days in Westminster.³ Many of his biggest competitors went out of business in the decade after repeal. It was a significant event in the county when Simeon Clarke's long-established and extensive flour milling business in Carlow town (almost 17,000 square feet across several premises)⁴ went into bankruptcy in October 1851.⁵ Some of the premises remained un-let three years later with advertisements highlighting their 'many inducements to Merchants and Capitalists being in the heart of a superior corn growing district' with excellent transport facilities, but neglecting to mention that foreign imports had almost certainly closed the buildings down.⁶ The Burren mills in the possession of the Brown family had also failed by 1857, despite the high standard of its machinery— 'in perfect working order, not one shilling of an outlay required' as it claimed in a letting advertisement.⁷

Nationally, grain milling flourished, with the number of millers actually increasing between 1841 and 1861 (from 4,309 to 4,417), but by 1855, Milford mills had been eclipsed by other competitors.⁸ Even prior to repeal, according to Anthony Marmion, the mills of the Grubb family in Clonmel were 'the most extensive flour mills in Ireland'.⁹ Steam engines had been installed there between 1834 and 1837 and Cullen describes it as 'the most outstanding' complex, and the town as 'the largest milling centre in Ireland'.¹⁰ While *John Alexander & Co.* survived, the company's profit margins dramatically declined after 1846. The earliest evidence of a substantial fall in profits (or at least an

² *Carlow Sentinel*, 13 Mar. 1852.

³ *Ibid.*, 9 Oct. 1847; Charles R. Dod, *The parliamentary companion for 1855* (London, 1855), p. 98.

⁴ Hogg, *Old mills of Ireland*, vol. i, pp 53-61.

⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 8 Nov. 1851.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16 Dec. 1854.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5 Sep. 1857.

⁸ Cullen, *An economic history of Ireland*, p. 146.

⁹ Marmion quoted by Cullen, 'Eighteenth century flour milling in Ireland', p. 50.

¹⁰ Cullen, *An economic history of Ireland since 1660*, p. 146.

indication of an evidence-based anticipated fall in profitability) was the company's consideration of diversification into other branches of milling in 1850-1. Given Carlow's success with corn and the boom in its milling industry in the first four decades of the century, the impulse to diversify into the potentially profitable flax market was negligible. Col. Rochfort's concerted attempts to establish a local linen industry had failed utterly in 1819-20, and twenty year later, Lewis reported that flax and hemp were only 'occasionally sown' in the county.¹¹ Following the tremors (both real and feared) in the local corn trade in post-repeal Carlow, the notion of a 'flax movement' was re-embraced by the gentry. Tales were told at public meetings in Carlow of northern farmers with only 25 acres being able to pay their rent by growing flax on one fifth of their land.¹² With their Belfast connections, the Alexanders had always been aware of the plant's lucrative potential and their distant cousin, James Du Pre Alexander, 3rd earl of Caledon was a vice-president of the Royal Society for the Promotion and Improvement of the Growth of Flax in Ireland.¹³ Thomas Little, an Alexander contact in the grain trade in Kilkenny suggested flax for Milford at some point after repeal but the idea had been rejected.¹⁴

However, in late 1850, following a county meeting, John II and Lorenzo announced jointly that 'they were about to establish mills for the purpose of preparing flax, and they guaranteed on their own part to open a market for the farmers for the disposal of the raw material'.¹⁵ The move had been given deep consideration and plans were quickly set in motion to convert a portion of the mill site at Milford for the preparation of flax.¹⁶ Clearly, the family had decided upon suspending one of their staple manufacturing pursuits— most probably its malting operation given the downturn in that trade. In

¹¹ See for example, *Carlow Morning Post*, 24 May 1819; Lewis, *Topographical dictionary of Ireland*, vol. i, p. 259.

¹² *Carlow Sentinel*, 9 Nov. 1850.

¹³ *The tenth annual report and transactions of the Royal Society for the promotion and Improvement of the Growth of Flax in Ireland* (Belfast, 1850), p. 5.

¹⁴ *Carlow Sentinel*, 9 Nov. 1850.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 2 Nov. 1850.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 9 Nov. 1850.

November, Lorenzo announced his intention to make Milford the centre of a county-wide flax initiative which would begin at the August harvest in 1851: 'They were prepared at Milford to erect such works as were necessary to steep and prepare the flax for market [...] at our own risk; it is of no consequence what we do with it. [...] They were also prepared to purchase the flax to any amount on the foot at the market price, and all the guarantee they required from the farmer was to pull, stook and deliver it at Milford'.¹⁷

The association of the Alexander name with the project immediately instilled 'the greatest confidence' in many of the farmers and landlords who attended the meeting, and farmers in neighbouring counties also watched with interest when the company announced it might open up its eight out-stores as flax depots in the future. A meeting in Kilkenny chaired by the marquis of Ormond expressed great enthusiasm about the plans for Milford while in Waterford, Robert A. Carleton, who had a similar project in mind, admitted that he had little hope of gaining the Kilkenny flax trade if the Alexander operation went ahead.¹⁸

However, at this point the bottom fell out of the project, probably because of the farmers' unwillingness to experiment with a new crop. The local flax society wound up, although Lorenzo Alexander remained a persistent advocate of the scheme over the next decade, trying to assuage local fears about the lack of a market by saying 'if the flax is grown, the scutch-mill will be found'.¹⁹ Looking back in 1867, his cousin and keen agriculturist, Lorenzo Weld Hartstonge claimed the project had failed 'probably because the society expected the experiment to be made by small farmers who cannot afford to incur even a trifling risk'.²⁰ Indeed, another major consequence of repeal at Milford was the growing dependence of *John Alexander & Co.* on grain imports for its raw materials and the massive reduction in their purchase of local meal. The bid to obtain the cheapest

¹⁷ Ibid, 23 Nov. 1850.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 5 Mar. 1864.

²⁰ Ibid, 9 Mar. 1867.

materials possible was detrimental to local farmers who suffered poor prices and uncertain markets. While their father's fame and popularity was based to a large extent on his provision of a market for local grain, the Alexander sons looked increasingly overseas in the advent of repeal and the local Corn Exchange which John I had been so fundamental in establishing in 1819 had long since been discontinued.²¹ Local farmers appealed to the larger millers (such as Samuel Crosthwaite) to increase their prices and Carlow's shopkeepers reported a serious slump in business — 'their trade "is going" rapidly', according to the *Sentinel*.²² Horace Rochfort was perhaps the most vocal critic of milling economics in Carlow and was outraged that many local millers were offering significantly lower prices to farmers for corn than in neighbouring counties. He had clearly received unsatisfactory treatment at Milford in his attempt to sell a stock of 'old wheat' in the summer of 1851:

I was offered by Mr Ebenezer Shackleton of Moone Mills [in Kildare, over 20 miles from Milford] 2s a barrel more than I could get from any other miller in this neighbourhood. The other day I sold him 30 barrels of wheat at 20s per barrel and I could only obtain 19s for the same sample at one mill in this vicinity, and was refused a price altogether at another. [...] These remarks, I know, are of little value but I give them such as they are, in a friendly spirit to my neighbours of all classes.²³

In 1853, he pointed out 'the simple fact that for the last five or six years the prices of corn have been at a far lower figure than they have been upon any former occasion previous to the time of Free Trade'.²⁴ He believed it was the millers' responsibility to give an inducement to Irish farmers to farm their lands more productively and act patriotically by supporting their fellow countrymen. As a regular and significant customer at Alexander's mills, Rochfort's comments make clear that John I's policy of paying the best prices in the vicinity had been abandoned in the shift towards importation which had the inevitable

²¹ See *Carlow Morning Post*, 9 Nov. 1818.

²² *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Oct. 1851.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7 May 1853.

effect of forcing local farmers to accept lower prices.²⁵ In November 1854, the *Sentinel* reported on the poor prices being offered at Milford for home-grown wheat, barley and oats — ‘the demand was dull and lower prices were taken’.²⁶

The absence of a centralised corn exchange in Carlow worked against healthy competition by denying the farmer the facility of conveniently and quickly comparing prices for his produce. Rochfort claimed that in the absence of a proper market-place, ‘the farmers have not confidence to being in their corn’ and accepted unfair prices.²⁷ An attempt to remedy this situation was made in the inauguration of a new Corn Exchange in the old courthouse in September 1857 under the auspices of the Town Commission, and with the approval of John II’s Town Improvement Committee.²⁸ He acted as chairman at its opening ceremony and Lorenzo served on its board of management. Many millers in attendance expressed their satisfaction with the development and probably shared Benjamin Haughton’s hope that it would dispel the common perception of extortionate mill-owners offering mercenary prices. However, many others were wary of the facility and stayed away. It was noted that only five purchasers (including Edward Byrne, the agent for *John Alexander & Co.*) had attended the exchange on a market day in October 1857 ‘owing to the panic in the corn markets’.²⁹ It seems that many millers were still hoping to benefit from the uncertainty of the times— which the Corn Exchange tended to work against. The widespread speculative nature of the domestic trade can be gauged from the fact that by December, the Milford agent was one of just two buyers who regularly attended the exchange, which John II’s position as an MP, at the mercy of public opinion, goes some way to explaining.³⁰ Nevertheless, corn growing remained a major agricultural activity in Carlow in the mid-1850s and a central part of the local

²⁵ ‘*Journal of John Alexander & Co.*’ 1856-68, details of Rochfort’s regular dealings at Milford mills (APMH).

²⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 25 Nov. 1854.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2 May 1857.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19 Sep. 1857.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17 Oct. 1857.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 12 Dec. 1857.

economy— ‘there is corn coming in every hour of the day’ Samuel Haughton remarked about local producers in 1857.³¹ Although buying cheaply, the Alexanders were eager to take advantage of local produce and remain competitive, and took the unprecedented step of advertising their prices. In occasional notices during this period, the company announced that Milford was offering (slightly) better prices than elsewhere, e.g. in 1854, a barrel of white wheat was purchased for 40s at Milford as opposed to 39s in the Carlow markets.³²

In the mid-1850s, the evidence shows that Milford mills were still working to capacity. When asked by a select committee on postal arrangements in Leinster in 1855 to estimate the annual sum of money in circulation in his district, Lorenzo Alexander claimed, ‘throughout our whole district, extending from Carlow to Kilkenny, I should say over a million [pounds] of money’.³³ He also emphasised his company’s reliance on foreign trade in the details of its ‘extensive correspondence with the outports’.³⁴ The company’s shift towards imported grain is evident in Bernard Hughes’s advertisement in Belfast in January 1852 for ‘*John Alexander & Co.*’s silk-dressed flour, made from three of the best selected wheats known, viz. French, American and Dantzic [sic: Danzig, then in Prussia]’.³⁵ By 1855, Indian meal had become a major part of its business with the firm arranging its imports principally through the ports of Waterford and New Ross.³⁶ The extent of their foreign transactions can also be gauged from one of John II’s election promises in 1853 that his company would undertake to spend £4,000 a week on the purchase of corn in the town of Carlow, indicating that this was not the case at the time.³⁷ This had not come to pass by the time of his re-election four years later and was a

³¹ Ibid, 2 May 1857.

³² Ibid, 9 Dec. 1854.

³³ PP, 1854-55 (445), *Report from the select committee on postal arrangements (Waterford &c)*..., p. 114.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 113.

³⁵ *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 Jan. 1852.

³⁶ PP, 1854-55 (445), *Report from the select committee on postal arrangements (Waterford &c)*, pp 113-5.

³⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 4 Apr. 1857.

significant bone of contention with his political opponents who held it up a sign of his duplicity.³⁸

The fact that net Irish wheat imports exceeded native wheat production by the early 1860s is clearly evident from the accounts of *John Alexander & Co.* from this period (1856-68).³⁹ As well as offering some fascinating insights into the everyday running of the company at this time (e.g. the reference to 'Xmas boxes' for flour customers in December 1857 or the expenditure of 19s on new bedding for the maltsters in the winter of 1863)⁴⁰ the sole-surviving journal of the company immediately reveals the extent of the dealings with foreign companies and markets. *John Alexander & Co.* had many contacts in the cities of Waterford, Limerick and Dublin (including the firm of *Clibborn & Shaw*, one of whose owners was George Carr Shaw, father of the playwright George Bernard Shaw) and in Britain, the company regularly dealt with grain merchants in Glasgow and London. However, the vast majority of its business was conducted through Liverpool and numerous corn factors, merchants and shipping firms from that city appear in the accounts.⁴¹ Through that port, Milford products were exported regularly to Ancona in Italy and a great deal of Greek corn was purchased. After the bankruptcy of its contact in Greece in 1857, the Alexanders used the London office of the Greek commissioning agents *Rodoconachi Sons & Co.* and the *Zizania Brothers* shipping line to secure grain from that country. Further afield, the company dealt with millers in Chicago and Baltimore in the United States, Nantes in France and conducted regular business through the Baltic ports of Danzig (now Gdansk) in Prussia, as well as Hamburg, Mecklenburg and Altona (in modern-day Germany). Undoubtedly, its largest dealings were with eastern European contacts through Black Sea ports in Ukraine (Odessa and

³⁸ *Ibid*, 4 Apr. 1857.

³⁹ Bielenberg, 'A survey of Irish flour milling, 1801-1922', p. 67.

⁴⁰ 'Journal of *John Alexander & Co.*' 1856-68, pp 88, 440 (APMH).

⁴¹ For example grain merchants such as *Wakefield, Nash & Co.*, flour merchants like *Richardson, Spence & Co.* and shipping firms such as *Ridyard, Daly & Co.* and *Kenneth Dowie & Co.*

'Marianopolis', now Mariupol, then a significant centre of the European grain trade) and Galatz in Romania. Large exports were also dispatched from Milford to the Russian port of Taganrog. For example, in January 1868, £4,600 worth of flour was sent there on board the 'Pepi' (through one of their most regular shipping agents, *Begbie, Young & Begbie's* of London) at a cost of over £900; the advance to the captain and insurance generated further expenses of £300.⁴² Although its profit margins were far from remarkable in 1858-70 (see Fig 9.1 below), the number of foreign contacts employed on a regular basis by this inland milling firm certainly was. During the agricultural depression of 1859-64, domestic grain crop yields declined dramatically, which consolidated Milford's dependence on imported raw materials.⁴³

The company certainly traded on its past triumphs and the quality of its products maintained their high renown. As well as custom from the local gentry, the Milford mills were patronised by the earl of Clonmel and Thomas St. Lawrence, 3rd earl of Howth in the late 1850s.⁴⁴ The oatmeal from Strongstream mill retained a prestigious reputation which even extended to the royal family. From December 1856, 'H.R.H. Prince Albert' or alternatively 'The Prince Consort' (prioritised as customer number 7 in the firm's list of 150 regular accounts) appears as the most illustrious patron in the sole-surviving journal of *John Alexander & Co.*⁴⁵ It is hardly coincidental that John II made a point of specifically toasting the Prince at the launch of the new Corn Exchange the following year.⁴⁶ Between 1856 and 1862 (when the Prince of Wales made the final purchase), almost 60 tonnes of Milford oatmeal was purchased for the royal household, at a cost of £884.⁴⁷

⁴² 'Journal of *John Alexander & Co.*', 1856-68, p. 95 (APMH).

⁴³ James S. Donnelly jr, 'The Irish agricultural depression of 1859-64' in *Irish economic and social history*, vol. iii (1976), pp 33-54, at p. 37.

⁴⁴ 'Journal of *John Alexander & Co.*' 1856-68, p. 5, 123 (APMH).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 19 Sep. 1857.

⁴⁷ 'Journal of *John Alexander & Co.*' 1856-68 (APMH).

The company also benefited greatly from the smooth and competent leadership provided by its knowledgeable, talented and loyal manager from 1854 onwards. The need for a competent leader was brought home to the Alexanders that year when a man named Brownrigg, in the course of his employment in collecting debts for *John Alexander & Co.*, had embezzled £50 of its money.⁴⁸ It is no coincidence that the Alexanders sought a new overseer at Milford at the same time, and they were extremely fortunate in securing the services of Alexander Rutherford Moncrieff for the firm. A Scotsman, Moncrieff had migrated to Dublin and was operating as a corn factor in Dublin in 1852.⁴⁹ Two years later, he secured the most senior position at the famous Milford mills— its highly remunerative annual salary of £300 giving some indication of its onerous demands but also of the company directors' wishes to attract the best quality candidates.⁵⁰ From his experiences as a poor law guardian, Lorenzo Alexander firmly believed that you got what you paid for with employees and used the maxim: 'Appoint good officers and pay them well'.⁵¹ From 1854, Moncrieff oversaw the entire operations of the three buildings, and lived with his wife and young family in a house adjacent to the site.⁵² To encourage even greater diligence, the Alexanders signed an agreement with Moncrieff for a 5 per cent annual bonus of the company's net profits. This was a very lucrative perk which brought in substantial money, ranging from £34 in 1859 to £125 in 1865.⁵³ Moncrieff was a key contributor to the survival of the company and was highly regarded by Lorenzo and James Alexander. In 1879, John II wrote of his wish to retain his services: 'We know him to be man of high integrity & worth. [...] We have known him so long & he is so well up

⁴⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 5 May 1854.

⁴⁹ *Northern Whig*, 13 May 1852.

⁵⁰ Moncrieff's annual salary payments between 1856 and 1868 are listed in 'Journal of *John Alexander & Co.*', 1856-68 (APMH). His presence at Milford is first mentioned in *Carlow Sentinel*, 25 Nov. 1854.

⁵¹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 1 Dec. 1849. Lorenzo served as a poor law guardian in Carlow from 1849 until his death in 1867.

⁵² His wife, Anne Cowan Bain Moncrieff died at Milford in 1860 and is buried in Clody graveyard, adjacent to the Alexander plot; *Carlow Sentinel*, 7 Nov. 1862.

⁵³ 'Journal of *John Alexander & Co.*', 1856-68 (APMH).

to all details of the business.⁵⁴ Moncrieff enjoyed an elevated position in local society. He was prominent in the Protestant community as a church warden of Cloydagh parish and his children enjoyed the patronage and guidance of John II in their early careers.⁵⁵ Bielenberg has written of the 'social respect accorded to [professional managers]. Owners knew well that their best interests depended on them and if they wanted to know what was going on in their business, they needed these men. Such knowledge constituted a form of wealth and this was socially recognised'.⁵⁶

As major grain importers and exporters, the Alexanders and Moncrieff faced serious challenges in the late 1850s, most of which were posed by the mills' inland location, so fundamental to their early prosperity but which now posed a serious and perpetual challenge to their owners. They were isolated in communication terms, and given the company's reliance on the import and export trade, freight costs to and from the ports were a massive expense which did not apply to the new maritime mills. Other similarly-located mills faced the same challenges and many mills had closed down in Clonmel by the end of the 1870s.⁵⁷ Competition between the railways and the waterways companies was intense in Carlow, particularly between the Barrow Navigation Company and the Great Southern and Western Railway. In 1854, the *Sentinel* reported that 'an internecine war wages as fiercely as the deadly struggles that took place between the border chieftains of olden times'.⁵⁸ Both companies were accused of pursuing unfair and selfish policies. In 1855, the Barrow Navigation Company generated considerable outrage in its bid to increase profitability by reducing the competition it faced on the waterways. It offered generous prices to buy the privately-owned boats of many millers and private hauliers (including some belonging to the Alexander and Crosthwaite mills) only to raise

⁵⁴ John Alexander II to James Alexander, 27 Nov. and 11 Dec. 1879 (LB3, APMH).

⁵⁵ John Alexander II to William Haughton, 9 Mar. 1869 (LB1, APMH).

⁵⁶ Bielenberg, 'The industrial elite in Ireland', p. 156.

⁵⁷ Bielenberg, 'A survey of Irish flour milling, 1801-1922', p. 67.

⁵⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 2 Sep. 1854.

the tolls to a level of 3s per tonne above what their previous owners had charged.⁵⁹ Given his railway connections, John II's relationship with the Barrow Navigation Company became increasingly belligerent in the 1850s— even though *John Alexander & Co.* owned 20 shares in the company with an estimated value of £1,000.⁶⁰ He balked at what he believed were exorbitant charges and because of the amount of business his firm had sent its way in previous decades, he clearly expected to be accommodated in his wish for cheaper and more reliable services: 'I am the best friend of the Barrow Navigation Company', he pointed out in a critical letter in 1869.⁶¹ While an MP, he remarked to a Carlow merchant that he was 'obliged to carry [his] corn from Athy to Milford, in consequence of the fares which the [Barrow Navigation] Company demanded, as it was much cheaper to cart it along the road'.⁶² Samuel Crosthwaite went even further and informed a public meeting that the company 'would drive the milling trade out of the district altogether'.⁶³ Alexander also grew impatient with the slow pace of water transportation and began to believe the railways were a safer channel for his produce than the rivers and canals. For example, in November 1857 his company hired a Bagenalstown transporter to ship a consignment of Milford malt to the capital. When it sank only three miles into its journey, 100 barrels were lost— a massive loss at a challenging economic moment.⁶⁴ In an effort to influence things from within, Lorenzo Alexander managed to be elected as a director of the company in 1865, but had little time to affect proceedings before his death two years later.⁶⁵ The debilitating nature of transport costs for the Milford business can clearly be gauged from the Alexanders' payment of £3,104 to the Barrow Navigation Company in freight charges for the month of

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 19 Aug. 1854.

⁶⁰ 'Dissolution of dissolution of partnership. Lorenzo W. Alexander Esq. and James Alexander Esq.', 1 Oct. 1863 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

⁶¹ John Alexander II, 10 May 1869 (LB1, APMH).

⁶² *Carlow Sentinel*, 19 Aug. 1854.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 2 Sep. 1854.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 21 Nov. 1857.

⁶⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 18 Mar. 1865.

January 1868 — a year in which their net profits fell below £800.⁶⁶ Since the opening of Milford railway station in 1848, the company tried to use water transport for its Dublin-bound merchandise only.⁶⁷ At the same time, however, the prices charged by railway companies were almost as demanding and the subject of considerable public controversy. The Alexanders' extensive use of the nightly 9 o'clock goods train from Milford would have constituted a significant overhead: trains were priced in the region of 2s a mile, giving *John Alexander & Co.* a bill of £5 for a journey from Milford to Waterford.⁶⁸

Apart from expensive and frustrating freight requirements, the disadvantage of Milford's inland location was also felt through the slow postal service, where delayed letters meant the loss of time and money. Lorenzo felt sufficiently strongly about this to travel to London in July 1855 to testify to a select committee on postal arrangements.⁶⁹ He estimated that somewhere in the region of 500 letters were sent between Milford and Waterford every month, of which 160 concerned *John Alexander & Co.*⁷⁰ He highlighted the unsatisfactory situation whereby a letter posted in Waterford announcing the arrival of a vessel went to Dublin that night by train (passing through Milford), and back by rail to the post office in Carlow the following morning, where it lay until delivery to the sub-post office in Milford the next day. To expedite this, the Alexanders were obliged to employ a 'special messenger [...] who is a source of some expense' to drive into Carlow to retrieve their mail.⁷¹ Lorenzo felt badly neglected by the postal service which 'frequently prevents our doing the amount of business we should otherwise do with Waterford, and we are occasionally very much injured at New Ross by the delay in reporting cargoes upon their arrival'.⁷² He suggested moving Milford post office to

⁶⁶ 'Journal of *John Alexander & Co.*' 1856-1868 (APMH).

⁶⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 19 Aug. 1854.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 2 Sep. 1854; PP, 1854-55 (445), *Report from the select committee on postal arrangements (Waterford &c)*, p. 119.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, evidence of Lorenzo Alexander, 16 Jul. 1855, pp 113-122.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 119.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 117.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 115.

Milford railway station, and allowing the station-master to serve also as post-master. This would allow for the direct delivery of mail to Milford on one or more of the three up and three down daily trains between Waterford and Dublin. When the members of the committee expressed doubts about the greater costs involved, Alexander pressed his hand and emphasised Milford's contribution to the local economy as a bargaining tool: 'We are a very important district. [...] We pay a great deal towards the country, and I think we are entitled to accommodation'.⁷³ However, Lorenzo's appeal was formidably rejected three days later (on the grounds of unjustifiable expense) by a post office surveyor who displayed detailed knowledge of postal arrangements at Milford: future novelist Anthony Trollope, who had been working in the Irish postal service since 1841.⁷⁴

From 1850 onwards, the company endured a perpetual struggle to remain profitable at all. As outlined above, the Alexanders had clearly enjoyed handsome margins on their flour in pre-repeal days. In the region of 50,000 barrels were ground annually in the early 1840s. Almost 20 years later, in the year up to August 1862 (just three months before the fire) the mill had ground 39,938 barrels of flour with a retail value of £64,760. However, the company's net profit of just £1,420 that year (across all premises and product lines) is proof of the dramatic decline in the income generated by milling at Milford and conclusive evidence of the fall in the profit potential of flour (see Fig. 9.1 below).⁷⁵ The fight to remain competitive and increase productivity in the early 1860s saw the introduction of a night shift in the flour mill— which now operated 24 hours a day.⁷⁶ The fact that the new shift required only 5 men (the night miller and four labourers) in 1862 is also indicative of a reduced workforce at Milford.⁷⁷

⁷³ Ibid, p. 120.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 180.

⁷⁵ 'Journal of John Alexander & Co.', 1856-68, p. 383 (APMH).

⁷⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 8 Nov. 1862.

⁷⁷ *Carlow Post*, 8 Nov. 1862.

Another major factor which affected Milford's competitiveness was its total reliance on hydropower in an era when the most powerful mills in the country were employing steam energy. Although over 90 per cent of mills in Ireland remained totally water-powered up to 1891, the most powerful mills in the country were undoubtedly those which were powered by steam.⁷⁸ In the period 1830-50, the installation of steam engines as energy supplements to many of the larger Irish mills was a major development in the industry—one which John Alexander I shied away from, as did his heirs.⁷⁹ In 1822, James Conolly's mill on the Grand Canal dock in Dublin was steam-driven, but John I chose not to invest in similar technology at Milford.⁸⁰ By the 1850s, new steam mills were developing at coastal locations or near navigable rivers where coal could be conveniently obtained. To compete effectively with these mills meant investment in steam technology. It is clear from the information they supplied to the Halls in 1840 that the Alexanders were a little anxious about their reliance on hydropower and were eager to dismiss the arguments for steam. Obviously deferring to their informants' opinions in their report on Milford, the authors noted how few of Ireland's mills were then run by steam: 'The entire works at Milford are driven by water power, Nature having bountifully supplied a force far greater than that which can be derived from steam, and at a cost infinitely less'.⁸¹ The costs referred to here were the initial ones of capital investment, which *John Alexander & Co.* was reluctant to make having only recently installed Fairbairn's improvements and with uncertain economic winds blowing around them. The common reluctance to reinvest or even contemplate improvements among many of Carlow's millers at this time was noted in an article of 1835 entitled 'On the agriculture of the county of Carlow'.⁸² While praising the huge improvements in milling machinery that had taken place in Carlow, the anonymous author noted how 'the profits of the trade and the improvements

⁷⁸ Rynne, 'Development of milling technology in Ireland, c. 600-1875', pp 37-8.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁸⁰ James Conolly to Thomas P. Luscombe, 17 Jul. 1822 (NAI, CSO/RP/1822/92).

⁸¹ Hall's *Ireland*, vol. i, pp 406-7.

⁸² [Anonymous], 'On the agriculture of the county of Carlow' in *Quarterly journal of agriculture*, p. 189.

have not advanced *puri passu*, but on the contrary, bear an inverse ratio to each other'. Even after installing steam engines in the late 1840s and early 1850s, some local mills had failed— another indication of the uncertainty in the trade at this time. Simeon Clarke's company had failed despite having given it the best chance of success in replacing its waterwheels with more reliable steam engines —a move which required considerable investment but which was undertaken by at least four Carlow millers by the 1850s.⁸³ In 1862, Mr Brophy had decided on 'giving up the milling business' at Hanover Mills (a premises insured for £2,000) despite recently purchasing three new silk-dressing machines and the recent repair of his 25 feet long, 36 horse power steam engine (26 feet long and 6 feet in diameter) by a Belfast firm.⁸⁴

There was no significant capital re-investment in stream engines or other machinery at Milford in 1850-70, apart from the importation of new malt kilns from the Journeaux firm.⁸⁵ In 1851, Lorenzo admitted that Milford's machinery had not changed since his father's final improvements, 'except some slight alterations and repairs which is an everyday occurrence'.⁸⁶ This was undoubtedly a consequence of the downturn in prices, a lack of capital finds and commercial vision on the part of its owners, but also John II's unwillingness to risk his position in society on an expensive scheme of mechanical improvements— thereby denying the centrality of the mills to his portfolio of power. Milford's place in the vanguard of technological and engineering excellence had deteriorated significantly, and the impression is that its managers chose to tread water in the profit pool rather than risk a significant amount of funds in renovating the enterprise. Even in the Belfast Flour Mills, the firm's investment in steam technology was limited. Only one steam engine had been installed there by 1860 but it was run in conjunction

⁸³ Apart from Clarke, there were steam engines in a mill on John Street, in Margaret Kelly's Steam Mill at the Quay and in Brophy's Hanover Mills. *Carlow Sentinel*, 7 Feb. 1857, 23 Jul. 1859, 8 Feb. 1862.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 1 Feb. 1862.

⁸⁵ *Cork Examiner* 14 Jan. 1857.

⁸⁶ 'Information of Lorenzo Alexander', 2 Dec. 1850 (Valuation office house books, NAI, OL 5.0010).

with the old waterwheel, making it the only mill in the town (where there was an estimated total steam power of 3,500 horses) to still employ hydro-power.⁸⁷ In noting the reducing cost of steam technology and the reliability and strength of that power source, even Sir William Fairbairn was heralding the end of the hydro era in milling and conceding the redundancy of the waterwheels which had made him famous: 'Until recently, steam has been auxiliary to water; it is now the principal source of power, and waterfalls are of comparatively small value'.⁸⁸ The engineer who had made Milford technologically superlative in the 1830s was effectively describing its works as redundant in 1864. The company would probably have succumbed to these pressures at some point after 1860 or been given up because of its meagre profits. However, the first of the two massive blows to *John Alexander & Co.* which occurred in 1862 and which ultimately proved fatal, could not be laid at the door of geographical, economic or technological challenges. In a devastating fire at the flour mill, a core constituent of the company and a key foundation of the Milford powerbase fell victim to an occupational hazard suffered by every mill-owner.

With his public profile at a height as an MP and with incessant demands on his time and attention, it is not surprising that John II took a further step away from direct involvement in Milford mills in 1855. The capital of *John Alexander & Co.* was then estimated at £53,360 (including its buildings, machinery, stock, insurance policies etc.) with debts amounting to just over £10,000.⁸⁹ On 9 July, the partnership of John, Lorenzo and James was formally dissolved by deed, at which point John II received a payment of £8,000 from his partners as his share of the assets of their company.⁹⁰ The two younger brothers then took out a lease from him on the Milford and Belfast premises at a total annual rent

⁸⁷ *Belfast Newsletter*, 27 Oct. 1860.

⁸⁸ Fairbairn, *Treatise on mills and millwork*, vol. i, p. 67.

⁸⁹ 'Assignment, John Alexander Esq. to Lorenzo William Alexander Esq. and James Alexander Esq.', 9 Jul. 1855 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

of £923.⁹¹ One of the covenants of the lease stated that they were ‘to keep the premises in repair and insure them from fire’.⁹² Given the aridity of its raw materials, fires were a recurrent feature of Carlow’s milling history. Simeon Clarke’s mills were thus destroyed in 1848 and just three months before the Milford blaze, the De Renzy mill in Clonegal was burned at a loss of £2,500.⁹³ The Alexanders had previous experiences of fires at their premises in Belfast. On 10 June 1809, a ‘dreadful fire’ took hold of the Belfast Flour Mill which required the efforts of the officers and privates of the garrison of the town, the firemen of the Belfast Insurance Co. and ‘other numerous friends’ to extinguish the flames.⁹⁴ Over £1,000 worth of stock in corn and flour was lost. In another fire in March 1845, one of their storehouses burned down.⁹⁵ The premises at Milford were luckier and no accidents appear to have occurred prior to 1862. While the buildings were insured in no less than five separate companies (the Patriotic, National Assurance, Mercantile, Lancashire and Royal insurance offices)⁹⁶ inadequate provisions were in place to deal with an outbreak. Pleas for a fire engine had first been made to Carlow Town Commission from its business community in 1860 but by the time of the Milford catastrophe, there was only one horse-drawn fire engine in the town (over four miles away) which belonged to the military barracks.⁹⁷ Surprisingly, given the scale of its industrial operations, the Alexanders had not invested in a dedicated engine for Milford; both Borris House and Duckett’s Grove had their own fire engines at this time.⁹⁸

The flour mill was ‘in full working order’ on Tuesday 4 November 1862 and after dark, the night miller and his team of four workers set to work for the night shift where twelve

⁹¹ Referred to in ‘Indenture between Lorenzo, James and John Alexander’ dated 1 Oct 1863 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

⁹² *Belfast Newsletter*, 20 Apr. 1866.

⁹³ *Carlow Sentinel*, 26 Aug. 1848, 16 Aug. 1862.

⁹⁴ *Belfast Newsletter*, 20 Jun. 1809.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22 Apr. 1845.

⁹⁶ ‘*Journal of John Alexander & Co*’, 1856–68, p. 399 (APMH).

⁹⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 17 Nov. 1860; *Belfast Newsletter*, 7 Nov. 1862.

⁹⁸ *Carlow Sentinel*, 2 May 1863, 6 Aug. 1870.

of the fifteen pairs of grinding stones were in operation.⁹⁹ At half-past eleven, one of the workers discovered a fire in the 'stone loft' at the eastern end of the building which was probably started by a spark from one of the millstones (caused by friction in the absence of grain). The night miller immediately stopped the machinery and all five men attempted to extinguish the flames but to little avail. Within half an hour, the fire had spread to the upper storeys. Shortly after midnight, Constable O'Sullivan was leading a police patrol from Milford barracks in nearby Powerstown (about a mile and a half from the mill) when they also noticed flames coming from the windows of the building's upper lofts. They rushed back to the site and called at the manager's house; the alarm bell was soon sounded. Within a short space of time, 'large numbers had congregated at the scene' and Moncrieff arrived just as a group began to remove sacks of flour from the ground floor of the premises as the fire raged overhead. A mounted policeman had been sent to Carlow to alert Sub-Inspector Edward Medlicott who, along with Head Constable Johnston, assembled a team and set out for Milford with the military fire engine.¹⁰⁰

However, an hour after the fire was first observed, it raged in every part of the building; the flames were seen by police patrols in Nurney, Leighlinbridge, Bagenalstown and for a circuit of many miles. When the fire engine eventually arrived, it was put into continuous operation by the police (detachments arrived from several locations), drawing water from the canal. The strength of the inferno can be deduced from the speed with which it spread and also the destruction it caused to everything its path, including Fairbairn's engines and gears, as noted by the *Carlow Post*:

The power, howsoever effectual and well-directed of that solitary engine proved utterly ineffectual to allay the ravenous element that was devouring with rapacious rapidity not only consumable corn, but even hard metal and steel machinery, that we should be almost disposed to consider fire-proof.

⁹⁹ Unless otherwise stated, the details of the fire are taken from *Carlow Sentinel*, *Carlow Post* and *Irish Times*, all 8 Nov. 1862, and *Belfast Newsletter*, 7 Nov. 1862.

¹⁰⁰ On Medlicott, see Herlihy, *Royal Irish Constabulary Officers*, p. 219.

Yes, huge iron pillars and gross engines, in common with wheat and flour, melted away like tallow before the all-devouring element.¹⁰¹

Shortly after 3 o'clock, the terceira roof of the mill collapsed with 'a fearful crash' on to the top floor which could not sustain the weight. In a ripple effect, each of the six wooden floors collapsed onto the one beneath in quick succession until a great mass of wheat and wood (20 feet deep) lay burning on the ground floor. The flames now spread along the castellated walls and soon threatened the adjacent malthouse. With the flour mill beyond hope, the hoses of the fire engine were now directed there and with the help of the excited crowd, these flames were extinguished; it was thought that the calmness of the night had greatly contributed to the saving of that building. At some later point in the night, a loud crack and a gleam of light in one of the gables gave a warning of the collapse of one of the mill's walls, which eventually fell at noon the following day. By morning, the fire still raged inside the building, feeding on the debris and it continued for another three days. Remarkably, nobody had been hurt even though a reporter for the *Irish Times* was told that 'some of Mr Alexander's workmen remained in the mills saving property till their coats were burnt off their shoulders'.¹⁰²

The story was widely reported across the country and was carried in many of the English newspapers.¹⁰³ Reporters arrived throughout the week and were eager to establish the cause of the fire and report the total aggregate damages. The reporter for the *Carlow Post* was told on Friday 7 November that 'the calculations had not been completed'.¹⁰⁴

Although it was reported that when the alarm bell rang, clerks ran to the offices and rescued all the account books, money and papers of the firm, it is clear that this was not

¹⁰¹ *Carlow Post*, 8 Nov. 1862.

¹⁰² *Irish Times*, 8 Nov. 1862.

¹⁰³ An online search of the British Newspaper Archive website (<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>) and the Irish Newspaper Archives (<https://www.irishnewsarchive.com>) indicates the large coverage of the story in the first week, accessed 8 Jan. 2015.

¹⁰⁴ *Carlow Post*, 8 Nov. 1862.

entirely true.¹⁰⁵ The company's records office formed part of the mill complex and was also destroyed in the fire. Although there were iron safes on site, the fact that only one ledger of *John Alexander & Co.* has survived is probably indicative of the destruction of the majority of the firm's archive. That valuable source records the minutiae of the fire's financial toll: from the melting of £4 in 'coppers' in the office to the 18s charged by the police for their car transport to Milford that night.¹⁰⁶ The loss in stock was variously estimated by different newspapers (£8,000 in the *Sentinel*, £4,000 in *Saunders's Newsletter*).¹⁰⁷ Some stock was salvaged: almost all the flour in the mill amounting to a few thousand bags (with a value of £11) and Fairbairn's waterwheel valued at £1,000 'was saved by great exertions'.¹⁰⁸ However, the company experienced monumental losses with the destruction of approximately 8,000 bags of wheat (recorded to the value of £814), the huge building itself and an estimated £20,000 worth of machinery.¹⁰⁹ The loss of employment was one of the direst consequences in the eyes of the press, as the fire 'throws a considerable number of persons out of employment and will, no doubt, be calculated to inflict serious injury on the immediate neighbourhood and surrounding locality'.¹¹⁰ The *Carlow Weekly News* reported that 'Mr Alexander is one of the best employers in the county' and the *Irish Times* believed that 'the whole working population of the district are ruined by this great calamity'.¹¹¹ The *Sentinel* hinted that the event would break up Milford's harmonious and productive community:

We fear this deplorable consequence will necessarily be the means of breaking up many of the happy and comfortable homes— which all Mr Alexander's employees enjoy— by throwing numbers out of employment, as the re-erection of the mill would occupy a considerable period.¹¹²

¹⁰⁵ See for example *Irish Times*, 8 Nov. 1862; *Carlow Post*, 8 Nov. 1862.

¹⁰⁶ 'Journal of John Alexander & Co.' 1856-68, pp 400, 410 (APMH).

¹⁰⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 8 Nov. 1862; *Belfast Newsletter*, 7 Nov. 1862.

¹⁰⁸ 'Journal of John Alexander & Co.' 1856-68, p. 432 (APMH); *Carlow Post*, 8 Nov. 1862.

¹⁰⁹ 'Journal of John Alexander & Co.' 1856-68, p. 550 (APMH).

¹¹⁰ *Carlow Post*, 8 Nov. 1862.

¹¹¹ *Carlow Weekly News*, 8 Nov. 1862; *Irish Times*, 8 Nov. 1862.

¹¹² *Carlow Sentinel*, 8 Nov. 1862.

Although it is likely that some of the flour mill staff were subsequently deployed into the malthouse or oatmeal mill, many others undoubtedly lost their positions and were forced to leave Milford and the county. A notice from a Milford stone-dresser in the *Freeman's Journal* the following May, seeking a position in another mill — mentioning the fire and the reference he possessed from his old employers— is just one example of how the tragedy affected the local population.¹¹³ In September 1864, Patrick Kelly, the foreman maltster at Milford, advertised his services in the local press.¹¹⁴ The fire was a huge event in the county and the sense that an era was ending is evident in the response of the community at large. 'Great manifestations of sympathy were shown by the people of Carlow', according to the *Irish Times* and people of all classes called to the offices of the *Carlow Weekly News* expressing 'their deep regret that any accident should have occurred, and their anxious wishes that the insurance may be sufficient to cover Mr Alexander's loss, in which wish we heartily share'.¹¹⁵

The most significant lacuna in the press coverage of the fire is that relating to the Alexanders themselves. None of the press reports puts them at the scene and it becomes clear that they were not in Milford House on the night in question. At that time, Lorenzo Alexander (who was credited as the proprietor of the mill in most reports) was living at Strawhall, a house on the Bruen estate just outside Carlow town, and since the end of his parliamentary career, John II was spending an increasing amount of time in Boulogne and had spent the Christmas period there in previous years; his family may have already departed for France at the time of the accident.¹¹⁶ Reporters noted the peculiar and marked reluctance among officials and employees at Milford 'to make any statement whatever in allusion to the occurrence'— clearly waiting for direction from their

¹¹³ *Freeman's Journal*, 11 May 1863.

¹¹⁴ *Carlow Post*, 3 Sep. 1864.

¹¹⁵ *Irish Times*, 8 Nov. 1862, *Carlow Weekly News*, 8 Nov. 1862.

¹¹⁶ *Carlow Sentinel*, 17 Dec. 1859, 12 May 1860.

employers.¹¹⁷ In the two weeks after the fire, no comment from the family appeared in the press and the *Carlow Post* verged on criticism of their silence in listing a number of people who exerted themselves during the fire, 'to whose united efforts the insurance companies at least, if not the owners of the property are much indebted'.¹¹⁸ It was left to A.R. Moncrieff to attach his name to a notice on behalf of the company on 22 November 'to offer our best thanks to all our friends, who with untiring zeal and earnestness, gave their valuable assistance in the night of the 4th inst. in trying to extinguish the fire at our mills'.¹¹⁹

Although the *Sentinel* tried to protect the Alexanders' reputation by stating that the insurance would adequately cover the losses incurred, fears were expressed in many other publications that the pay-out would not be sufficient to enable the rebuilding of the mill.¹²⁰ The size of the Alexander claim caused some distress for their various insurers; at the half-yearly meeting of the National Assurance Company in July 1863, the Milford fire was mentioned as one of their 'very great losses on fire policies'.¹²¹ As it turned out, it appears the mill was hugely under-insured and the pay-outs were so low that the rebuilding of the mill was never a serious option: this would have required significant investment in expensive steam technology which could not be afforded. Of the £13,000 which *John Alexander & Co.* received in December 1862, only £6,037 was granted for the building and a paltry £975 for the loss of its machinery. The Alexanders had clearly made an exaggerated claim for the loss of wheat and flour stock as they received £5,987 on that account.¹²² A look at their profit and loss accounts (see Fig. 9.1) makes clear the impact of the fire on the company's already modest profits. With the loss of the mill,

¹¹⁷ *Carlow Post*, 15 Nov. 1862.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

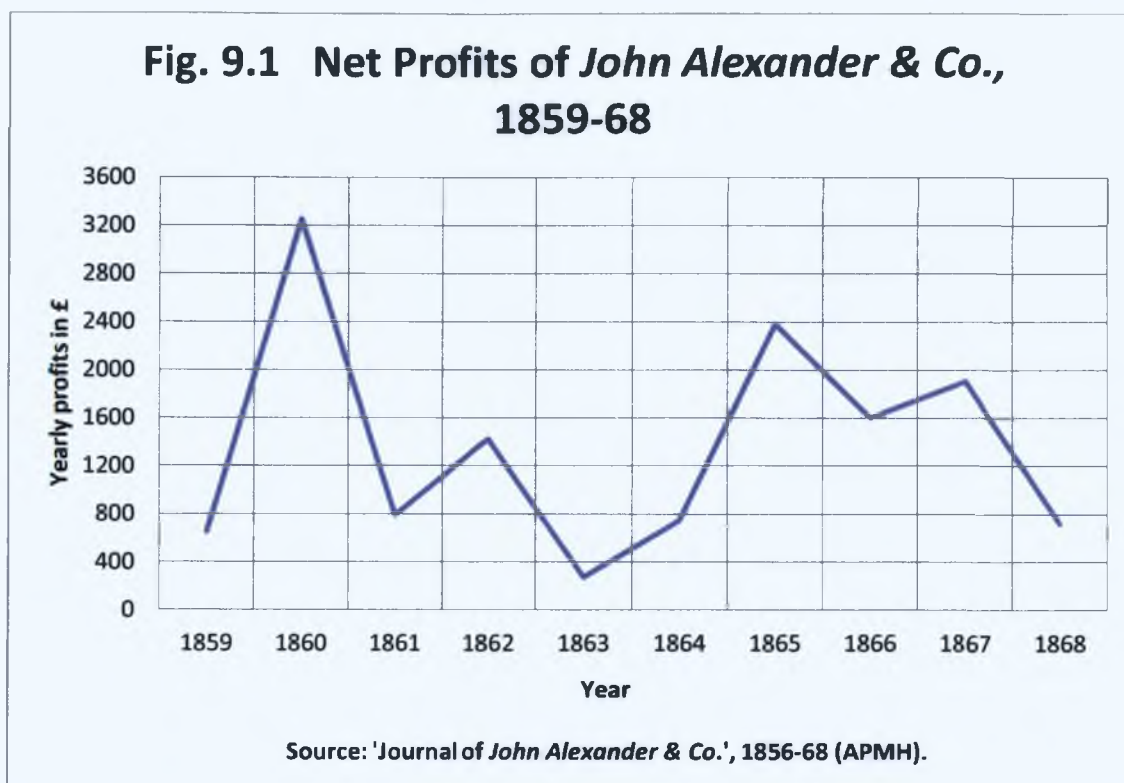
¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22 Nov. 1862.

¹²⁰ *Belfast Newsletter*, 7 Nov. 1862.

¹²¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 17 Jul. 1863.

¹²² 'Journal of John Alexander & Co.', 1856-68, p. 399 (APMH).

these figures plummeted even further, collapsing from £1,420 in August 1862 to just £273 a year later — a fall of 80 per cent.



The fire also affected contractual arrangements. In January 1863, Lorenzo and James handed over the insurance money and surrendered their lease on the Milford premises to their elder brother. Two new contracts were subsequently drawn up which saw Lorenzo becoming the sole lessee of the Milford concerns from John II for £250 per annum, while James focused his attentions exclusively on the premises in Belfast, where he paid an annual rent of £600.¹²³ Morale within the business was hugely shaken by the loss of its most famous product and its flagship building. Milford was now mainly a malt producer and although the firm enjoyed a steady (but still modest) rise in profits on its dealings in malt, oatmeal and Indian meal from 1864 onwards, one gets the sense that the Alexanders were clinging on for dear life rather than asserting themselves as leaders in the industry between 1863 and 1870.

¹²³ 'Dissolution of dissolution of partnership. Lorenzo W. Alexander Esq. and James Alexander Esq.', 1 Oct. 1863 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

The fire was a huge blow to John II, both financially and psychologically. Dealing with the repercussions of what he termed 'the great fire' caused many headaches and he appeared happy to be out of Carlow. After his political defeat in 1859, he sought regular refuge in France and Milford House was occupied for lengthy periods by Mrs Harriet Farrer (younger sister of Esther Alexander) in 1863-5.¹²⁴ His name disappears from the columns of the *Sentinel* for weeks, and often months at a time; the twice-annual selection of the grand jury were the only occasions he attended without fail. He also suffered a series of personal losses with the deaths of his eldest sister Anne in 1862, his mother in 1864 and his right hand man Lorenzo in 1867.

The second blow to his company occurred just two years after the fire and was just as unforeseen and catastrophic for its owners. When the three-way partnership between John II, Lorenzo and James Alexander was dissolved in 1855, a concerted effort was made to reduce expenditure. Among the many payments that ceased to be made at this point was an annuity to Mrs Elizabeth Conolly, the daughter of Sir Hugh Nugent of Ballinlough Castle in Westmeath, who had married William, a younger son of James Conolly, in 1816. By their marriage settlement of May 1816 (in which both Conolly and John Alexander I were named parties), she was guaranteed an annual jointure of £1,000 in the event that she survived her husband, secured against 'an undivided moiety' of some of the property John I had purchased with the funds of *Alexander & Conolly*— namely 237 acres in Ballygowan (including the flour mill site), Tomard and Craanlusk.¹²⁵ As described above, the Conollys sold out to John I between 1825-7, but with the strict proviso that the obligation to the annuity would still stand. After William Conolly's death in 1851 his widow enjoyed the annual payment until the dissolution of the partnership between the three Alexander brothers in 1855.¹²⁶ In April 1866, Mrs Conolly sought

¹²⁴ See for example, *Carlow Sentinel*, 18 Jul. and 14 Nov. 1863.

¹²⁵ Details of this settlement in 'Abstract of title', pp 23-5 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

¹²⁶ *Belfast Newsletter*, 20 Apr. 1866.

satisfaction through a petition filed against the Alexanders in the court of chancery on the grounds that she was entitled to be paid based on their obligation to repair in the lease of 1855. She sought the retrospective payment of her annuity through the rebuilding of the mill from the £13,000 insurance fund, and claimed that 'at least £8,000 of that sum was properly applicable to restore the mills to their original condition; that the [Alexanders] undertook to do so, but in fact had neglected to repair them and had allowed them to fall into a state of decay, having transferred their trade to other concerns in the same neighbourhood'.¹²⁷ Lorenzo and James argued that in surrendering their 1855 lease on Milford flour mill back to their eldest brother after the fire, they had been released from the obligation to repair and consequently, their obligation to pay the annuity.¹²⁸

The Lord Chancellor initially concurred with this argument and dismissed Mrs Conolly's petition. However, the following month, she secured an order for the lands in question to be partitioned between both families — a decision that was to have massive consequences for the Alexanders and effectively placed the ownership of Milford mills into the hands of the courts.¹²⁹ A partition map prepared in October 1867 assigned 273 acres (mostly in Clochristic) in the vicinity of the mills, as well as the main mill site to the Conollys (comprising the ruined flour mill and malthouse), leaving the Alexanders with the rest of the Milford landed estate and Strongstream mill (see Fig. 9.2 below).¹³⁰ After a number of legal battles over the next five years, the case was finalised by Judge Stephen Woulfe Flanagan in the Landed Estates Court on 26 November 1869.¹³¹ Devastatingly for the Alexanders, they had lost ownership of two of their father's three industrial leviathans. To make matters worse, Mrs Conolly's legal costs were assigned to John Alexander

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ 'Landed Estates Court Ireland dated 26th November 1869 in the matter of the estate of John Alexander. Partition Order' (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

¹³⁰ Map entitled 'The property of John Alexander Esq., surveyed in October 1867 by William Browne', also labelled 'Partition map, 1867' (APMH).

¹³¹ 'Landed Estates Court Ireland dated 26th November 1869 in the matter of the estate of John Alexander. Partition Order', (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

adding almost £400 to his bills.¹³² It was a devastating blow which effectively made the Alexanders tenants in their own premises.

Fig. 9.2 The Landed Estates Court 'Partition map' for Milford, 1869¹³³



The sad history of Milford mills subsequent to this ruling is detailed in the letter books of John Alexander II from the late 1860s until his death in 1885. He was hugely frustrated that the premises had passed out of family hands and that he had not the capital to remove

¹³² 'Account of John Alexander Esq. ending 25 March 1870' by George Alexander (APMH).

¹³³ Map entitled 'The property of John Alexander Esq., surveyed in October 1867 by William Browne', also labelled 'Partition map, 1867' (APMH). Showing the division of the Milford mills site between the Alexanders and Conollys in the case finalised on 26 November 1869 in the Landed Estates Court, Ireland. The lands above the red line (including Strongstream mill) were assigned to John Alexander II; the lands below (including the ruins of Milford flour mill and Milford malthouse) to the heirs of Mrs Elizabeth Conolly.

the Conollys' claims. When his solicitor recommended in March 1870 that he buy them out, John II balked at the price they sought— well in excess of the £8,500 he valued the site at in 1863.¹³⁴ His rejection of the idea gives a flavour of the souring that took place in his mind with regard to the mills and the potential embarrassment their loss would inflict on his asset portfolio, his income, his reputation and his ego: 'I would not repurchase the worst part of my property, subject to heavy head rent, and the mouldering ruins of the late mill at anything that could be called a fancy price'.¹³⁵ By order of the courts, the Alexanders were to formally hand over the site of the flour mill and malthouse to the Conollys on 1 November 1870.¹³⁶ In anticipation of this, the new owner, Captain Conolly (probably a younger son of Mrs Elizabeth Conolly) advertised the site for letting in the *Irish Times* in May.¹³⁷ Alexander was incensed when Conolly made representations to him intimating his willingness to lease the site back to him, albeit at the right price. John II's letters of discussion with his brothers James and George on this topic are seething with outrage, disbelief and intense embarrassment. Supplied with advice and documentation by A.R. Moncrieff, John II decided to make an offer to lease the premises in perpetuity for an annual rent of £650.¹³⁸ Conolly countered with an offer for a shorter lease at £400 per annum, which James Alexander appeared willing to accept, eager to retain the premises in the family name. However, John II's categorical rejection of this idea in his letter to James on 15 September shows him picking holes in the premises and is indicative of his attempts to make a very bitter pill easier to swallow:

The moment I received it [James's letter], I ran off before breakfast & sent you a telegram, 'NO'. 'Tis an extravagant figure, £400 per annum for the concerns and the lock-field. I would rather let it go to the dogs. I know the state of the malhouses better than anyone else. They are not worth the money. We are better without them. It will soon be found that new roofs will be required, and the floors of Nos. 1 & 2 are in a very unsafe

¹³⁴ John Alexander II, 10 Mar. 1870 (LB1, APMH).

¹³⁵ John Alexander II to L.W. Hartstonge, 10 Mar. 1870 (LB1, APMH).

¹³⁶ John Alexander II, 11 Jul. 1870 (LB2, APMH).

¹³⁷ *Irish Times*, 20 May 1870.

¹³⁸ John Alexander II to James Alexander, 30 Jul. 1870 (LB1, APMH).

condition. [...] I'll have none of it. You have had your own trouble & have done your best. The game is over. I am well pleased to be rid of the concern & to have gained what I originally sought, viz. the moiety discharged from the annuity. Someone will be ruined and someone will yet have a bargain of them, tho' you and I may not live to see it.¹³⁹

Much more than his elder brother, James was prepared to pay above the odds to restore family pride and fight for their father's legacy. He was commended by John II for his 'disinterested exertions about the concerns and your wish and intention to take the whole burden on yourself for the benefit of the family and the keeping up of the old place'.¹⁴⁰ In another letter to James in mid-September, just a matter of weeks before the handover, John II showed that he had completely resigned himself to letting the mills go, mainly in a bid to free himself from the insult of having terms dictated to him by Conolly, an individual whose family history, religion and recent legal success were abhorrent to John II, and who had become a demon on Milford's horizon:

I trust the whole matter is over & off, as they would not agree to any but unreasonable demands & extortion. I would not be tenant to such. I would have all or none—and I would never agree to take any lease on such fabulous terms. It would be little short of madness in my mind and I don't care who comes there from Wexford or any other place. The place has no happy prestige for me & I'm glad to be clear of it. You have no idea of the expense it would entail on whoever becomes tenant [...]. [James Conolly] attempted the ruin of our father in 1826 and now this fellow wants to ruin us; he shan't do it. I cannot write stronger. Don't touch th' accursed thing. Get out of it, have nothing further whatever to say to him or to it. I don't want nor won't have a part. None of my children care for the place and I'm tired of it—so ought you be, dear fellow.¹⁴¹

The cutting of their mercantile links was also imagined as a social and psychological release for the family, as he expressed to James: 'We would only have been keeping up the persecution against ourselves & those to come after us, perpetuating serfdom upon us. I am well pleased that we are not to be thus placed. [...] We are independent of the place.'¹⁴² The malthouse was let to wealthy maltster P.R. Norton in November 1870

¹³⁹ John Alexander II to James Alexander, 15 Sep. 1870 (LB2, APMH).

¹⁴⁰ John Alexander II to James Alexander, 19 Sep. 1870 (LB2, APMH).

¹⁴¹ John Alexander II to James Alexander, 18 Sep. 1870, in *ibid.*

¹⁴² John Alexander II to James Alexander, 19 Sep. 1870, in *ibid.*

(later of *Minch Norton Ltd.*) but James was determined to retain the ruined flour mill and he took out a lease on the building from Conolly. He then engaged in what his brother considered to be a 'miserable scheme' of renovating and refurbishing it as a five-storey malthouse, at considerable expense.¹⁴³ It was in full operation by February of 1872 and James Alexander continued as tenant (sub-letting to a local maltster) for the next eight years. However, this pet project inspired by family pride, was not a cheap or successful one and James fell into heavy debt on its account, reputedly to the extent of £12,000.¹⁴⁴ Matters got even worse when Captain Conolly's heir put the entire site up for sale through the chancery division of the High Court in June 1880.¹⁴⁵ John II was mortified to see the premises advertised in the *Carlow Sentinel*, believing 'it was a dodge, a direct poke at us'.¹⁴⁶ Although he was eager to purchase the site, he was unable to mortgage his property to buy the site. In a crucial letter to his eldest son in July 1880, John II expressed his views on recent government legislation and his reluctance to re-enter the industry which had generated his family's fortune and enabled its social elevation:

The withdrew [sic] of the duty on malt and the protecting duty on malt imported from foreign parts would seriously affect the trade in Ireland and therefore lessen the value of the concerns here if not ruin them altogether by opening the trade to the world, which has been confined to these islands for very many years. [...] No-one can as yet contemplate the effect in the trade of this frantic move. To me, it seems destined to change the trade *in toto*, to hand it over to other countries and induce farmers and others in this country to meddle in business that once, protected from foreign imports, was money-making. [...] I would fear to lay out money on a concern, the greatest part of which is nearly 90 years old, which to my knowledge has been for the last 60 years kept together by constant attention & annual repair, renewal of beams, joist, flooring &c &c, which before long will demand a new roof and other thorough repair at a cost of 5 or 6 thousand pounds. The rent of £425 to which it is at present liable never could be made out of it, and I cannot see what profitable purpose it could be turned in these days of free trade, with all the world competing with us. I could say a great deal more but I should be sorry to send down these old

¹⁴³ John Alexander II to Fanny Travers, 14 Apr. 1882 (LB3, APMH).

¹⁴⁴ John Alexander II, 10 May 1882 (LB3, APMH).

¹⁴⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 2 Jun. 1880.

¹⁴⁶ John Alexander II to James Alexander, 8 Jun. 1880 (LB3, APMH).

concerns now to those who are to come after me, unless at a much reduced amount of purchase money.¹⁴⁷

Norton (whom he regarded as 'a dangerous man to have any dealings with')¹⁴⁸ had already announced his intention to bid for the site: 'Let the fellow make what hash he please of it. [...] I am content to let it go and take a chance on some future day, whether or not it may ever become [sic] again into our hands'.¹⁴⁹ Following James's death in 1882, Norton took on the operations of all the buildings on site and John II reported that they had 'now gone forever from our hands'.¹⁵⁰

Since the partition order of 1869, the Strongstream building was the only one of the original three mills to remain in Alexander ownership, leased by Lorenzo from John II and subsequently taken on by James until 1880 when it was grinding 15,000 bags of Indian meal and 10,000 bags of oats on an annual basis.¹⁵¹ With James's retreat to Belfast after the Norton purchase, Strongstream was advertised for letting in the local and national press.¹⁵² It was taken on by George Alexander, the youngest son of John II, much against the advice of his father who feared that it would lead him to abandon his legal studies.¹⁵³ An advance of £2,000 from his inheritance was allowed to him for the project but he quickly tired of it and the building was leased to Norton in 1883. By 1890, Strongstream mill had been abandoned and awaited reinvention. In Belfast, James Alexander oversaw the family mill and made it one of the first in the country to install the modern and revolutionary Simon roller machinery in 1880.¹⁵⁴ Following James's death in 1882, John II could see no alternative but to sell the concern. It was let to the Andrews brother of the Comber mills in June 1882 and they became the owners of the site within a

¹⁴⁷ John Alexander II to William Alexander, 19 Jul. 1880 (LB3, APMH).

¹⁴⁸ John Alexander II, 18 Jan. 1883, in *ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ John Alexander II to James Alexander, 8 Jun. 1880, in *ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ John Alexander II to George Alexander, 10 Feb. 1883, in *ibid.*

¹⁵¹ John Alexander II, 24 Jul. 1880, in *ibid.*

¹⁵² *Carlow Sentinel*, 12 Jun. 1880.

¹⁵³ John Alexander II, 25 Jul. 1880 (LB3, APMH).

¹⁵⁴ Glyn Jones, 'The introduction and establishment of roller milling in Ireland, 1875-1925', in Bielenberg (ed.), *Irish flour milling: a history, 600-2000* (Dublin, 2003), pp 106-32, at p. 116.

year.¹⁵⁵ By 1890, the Alexander milling story was at an end. From that date onwards, the name 'Milford' became a historical rather than a descriptive label for the area. His actions in his later years show that John II was disturbed—to a surprising extent—about the loss of his family's milling identity and the passing of its physical monuments into other hands. Some of his thoughts on the Belfast sale offer key insights into his views on his family's historic relationship with the trade:

We have done our best, made every fair attempt and failed. The family cannot reproach us for throwing up the business. [...] Believe me, 'tis for the better that we should have nothing to do with milling, 'tis too precarious, my long experience shows me the dangers attendant. [...] The object now is to retire as quietly as we can and save as much as possible of what remains to us.¹⁵⁶

However, as the 1860s progressed, it seemed that less and less of the Alexander fortune remained and as the milling industry changed and as his income declined, John II's status among Carlow's gentry was significantly undermined and sent the Milford powerbase into precipitous decline.

ii. A powerbase in decline: the financial woes of John Alexander II, 1860-70

In 1860, the year after his electoral defeat, John II was enabled to devote his full energies to tackling his financial issues which was to prove a perpetual, merciless and losing battle until his death. A number of observations can be made from an assessment of his financial activities and difficulties in the decade from 1860 to 1870. Firstly, it shows a man, in increasingly restrained circumstances, spending far beyond his means, seemingly unable to reduce the expenditure his family had been accustomed to in the days before the repeal of the Corn Laws. Secondly, in the face of declining solvency, it exposes John II's

¹⁵⁵ Sydney Andrews, *Nine generations: a history of the Andrews family, millers of Comber*, edited by John Burls ([Belfast?], 1958), pp 159-60.

¹⁵⁶ John Alexander II to William Alexander, 6 Jun. 1880 (LB3, APMH).

unwise, apparently random and speculative commercial ventures which threatened to overwhelm him. Thirdly, it proves that when the Alexander possession of the mills came to an end, Milford's identity as a powerbase went into inexorable decline. He pursued a standard and style of living which had been supported by milling profits up to the mid 1840s, but which after repeal were unsustainable. Without substantial milling profits, he was less commercially and socially powerful, and the family's modest and broadly static rental income was insufficient to guarantee them a place in the echelons of the landed hierarchy. The necessary culling of many of the traditional habits and markers of gentility inflicted significant psychological and emotional turmoil on John II as the head of a powerbase in obvious decline.

Beyond occasioning grief, John I's death in 1843 had other consequences for affairs at Milford as outlined in the will he had written (comprising less than 150 words) thirteen years earlier in Belfast. Besides retaining Milford House for his wife for the rest of her life, he left the remainder of his property to his 'dearly beloved eldest son [...] to enable him to pay all my just debts and to carry on with effect the business at Milford &c. and to make such provision for his brothers and sisters as the successful issue of the business may permit'.¹⁵⁷ Ironically, while the mills were enjoying their greatest publicity and turnover in the early 1840s, the private family archive shows that the Alexanders' financial prosperity was not taken for granted by their founder who perceived the increasing precariousness of his financial supremacy, in the wake of unfavourable government legislation. Such fears had been at the back of John I's mind in the years immediately before his death and his advice to his heir ('Be economical and prudently live within your income. All our misfortunes have arisen from those who I have been connected with living in a degree of wanton and mad expenditure that exceeds belief')¹⁵⁸ is evidence of both his prediction of a dramatic future fall in their milling income and a

¹⁵⁷ 'Copy of the will of John Alexander I, 25 Jan. 1830' (APMH).

¹⁵⁸ John Alexander I to John Alexander II, 19 Jan. 1830 (APMH).

suspicion that his son might find it difficult to adapt to a less extravagant style of living. There is evidence of only two instances of John I borrowing a significant sum of money in his life (one loan for £5,000 and another for £10,000) which makes it clear that his milling income largely freed him from what was a necessity for many other landlords.¹⁵⁹ However, from November 1836 to September 1842, John I made a series of four statements ('by certain memoranda entered into and signed by the testator [John I] in his books')¹⁶⁰ which successively and significantly reduced the generous portions for his children that were envisaged (but not explicitly stipulated) in his marriage settlement of 1801 and his will of 1830. The extent of this may be gauged from a transaction which was perhaps John I's last significant financial agreement. In November 1842, 'having occasion to borrow the sum of ten thousand pounds', he mortgaged Milford estate to the Rt. Hon. Louis Perrin (a justice of the Court of Queen's Bench, a former liberal MP and Attorney General, and associate of O'Connell who dubbed him 'honest Louis Perrin') at an annual interest rate of six per cent.¹⁶¹ This very steep charge (Curtis notes how 'heavily incumbered [land]owners might have to pay as much as 5 to 5.5 per cent interest in the 1870s to compensate to the greater risk of the creditors')¹⁶² suggests that even before John I's death, the Alexanders' profits were already in decline. From this point onwards, a significant portion of the Alexander income would have been used in servicing the interest on these loans.

Once John II became master, his greatest expense was in paying the annuities due to his mother and his eight surviving siblings (their sizeable number greatly increasing the burden of such payments). In the years immediately after his father's death, the extent of these payments appears to have put considerable pressure on John II: in 1845, he took out

¹⁵⁹ L.P. Curtis Jr, 'Incumbered wealth: landed indebtedness in post-Famine Ireland' in *American history review*, vol. 85 no. 2 (Apr. 1980), pp 332-67, at p. 336.

¹⁶⁰ Indenture of 24 Aug. 1846, referred to in 'Abstract of title', pp 36-8 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

¹⁶¹ Indenture between John Alexander I and the Rt. Hon. Louis Perrin, 29 Nov. 1842 (APMH); on Perrin, see <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/member/perrin-louis-1782-1864>, accessed 23 Apr. 2014.

¹⁶² Curtis, 'Incumbered wealth', p. 339.

a further mortgage on Milford estate with some English lenders for the sum of £8,000, which was not fully redeemed until 1865.¹⁶³ The following year, he expressed his fears for the estate and to prevent a case in the court of equity and in the hope of ‘avoiding disputes and differences’, he arranged a meeting with his siblings to establish new and more sustainable payments. He explained that ‘from the nature of the circumstances of the various properties, it was found impractical to give effect’ to their father’s original wishes and alternative arrangements were necessary to keep the estate intact and stabilise his financial position.¹⁶⁴ With Lorenzo and James waiving their claims for the duration of their partnership with John II in *John Alexander & Co.* (an agreement signed on the same day), their six other surviving siblings willingly deferred to their elder brother and signed an indenture on 24 August 1846 which limited their calls on the estate to a more modest annuity of £200 each per annum (or a once off payment of £5,000).¹⁶⁵ Along with their mother’s jointure of £300, Milford estate was now formally burdened with annual charges of £1,500—incumbrances which amounted to 63 per cent of the rental for 1842.¹⁶⁶ After the dissolution of the three-way partnership of *John Alexander & Co.* in 1855, annuities were also paid to Lorenzo and James. By 1864, family settlements amounted to £1,876, or 87 per cent of the rental received at Milford that year.¹⁶⁷

Along with headrents (£205 for Ballinabranna and Clochrisc in 1857)¹⁶⁸, tithe rent-charges, poor rates and salaries (agent, bailiff, etc.), the charges on the estate’s income reduced John II’s profit rental to well below the 30 per cent considered by Curtis to be the minimum a landlord required to be considered solvent: ‘any amount less than this would have made it difficult for a gentleman dependent on rental income to keep himself and his

¹⁶³ ‘Abstract of title’, pp 34-36 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 36-44.

¹⁶⁶ Milford rental, 1842 (APMH).

¹⁶⁷ Milford rental, 1864; ‘Account of John Alexander Esq. ending 25th March 1865’ (APMH).

¹⁶⁸ ‘Account of the estates of John Alexander Esq. in the city of Dublin and county of Carlow’, 1857 (APMH).

family in the manner appropriate to his social standing'.¹⁶⁹ The slight reduction in the rental between 1842 and 1855 only exacerbated this problem. Therefore, it is clear that from the time he inherited, John II was heavily reliant on his precarious milling profits to enable solvency and expenditure on a level which professed social superiority. As the profits of *John Alexander & Co.* deteriorated between 1845 and 1870, his financial position became increasingly restrained. Table 9.1 attempts to estimate his gross income in 1864.

Table 9.1 Estimated Gross Income of John Alexander II, 1864¹⁷⁰

Source of Income	£
Milford rental	2,168
Belfast rental	3,117
Dublin rental	431
Milford mills rental (Lorenzo)	250
Belfast Mills rental (James)	600
Total	6,566

Much of this was liable to extensive charges and interest repayments on loans. From his estimated gross income of over £6,500, he had estate charges at Milford of £3,266 (inclusive of headrents, tithe charges, annuities, taxes and miscellaneous costs).¹⁷¹ His Belfast rent roll may have been substantial, in the region of £4,000 in 1881 but his profit rent in that year amounted to only £1,271.¹⁷² Similarly, his Dublin rental of £585 in 1857 incurred charges of £335, leaving a profit rent of just £250.¹⁷³ By a comparison of the surviving accounts of Milford estate from the period 1858-70 (prepared by agent George

¹⁶⁹ Curtis, 'Incumbered wealth', pp 334-5.

¹⁷⁰ Milford rental, 1864 (APMH); John Alexander II, 6 Dec. 1869 (LB1, APMH); Milford account, 1864 (APMH).

¹⁷¹ 'Account of John Alexander Esq., ending 1st May 1864' (APMH).

¹⁷² John II estimated the Belfast rental at £4,000 in 1853, *Carlow Sentinel*, 22 Jan. 1853. The rental was £3,117 in 1864 and £4,224 in 1881— a rise due to significant improvements. John Alexander II, 6 Dec. 1869, 9 Nov. 1881 (LB1 and 3, APMH).

¹⁷³ 'Account of the estates of John Alexander Esq. in the city of Dublin and county of Carlow, 1857' (APMH).

Alexander) with the rental received in those years, it becomes clear that John Alexander's income from this source was insufficient to cover the charges of the estate, let alone contribute to his expenses elsewhere (see Table 9.2). By 1870, the charges constituted a worrying 152 per cent of monies received from tenants. John II's credit rating did not improve in his borrowings in the years ahead. In 1870, he protested at the 'extravagant [interest] rate of 5%' he was incurring, but six years later he accepted that 'I cannot get money under 4½% because my property is so heavily charged'.¹⁷⁴

Table 9.2 Comparison of estate charges to rental received on Milford estate, 1858-70¹⁷⁵

Year	Rents received	Estate Charges	Charges as % of rental received
1858	£2,201	£2,639	119
1861	£2,148	£2,966	138
1862	£2,226	£2,728	123
1863	£2,275	£2,561	113
1864	£2,168	£3,266	151
1865	£2,257	£2,982	132
1867	£2,370	£3,121	132
1868	£2,386	£3,204	134
1869	£2,386	£3,449	145
1870	£2,054	£3,131	152

On top of these charges he also had to run Milford House, pay his wife's pin money, educate his children, contribute to his Protestant charities, maintain his subscriptions and club payments and a myriad of other expenses associated with his lifestyle. His other sources of income were of negligible value. His railway investments brought only small dividends: for example, in September 1863, the Chester and Holyhead railway brought him £42 and in March 1866, he received a dividend of £34 on his Great Southern and Western Railway shares.¹⁷⁶ While Alexander might just have managed to remain solvent

¹⁷⁴ John Alexander II, 17 Feb. 1870, 2 Dec. 1876 (LB1 and 3, APMH).

¹⁷⁵ Surviving accounts of John Alexander Esq. for his Carlow estate, 1858-70; rentals of Milford estate 1858-70 (APMH).

¹⁷⁶ 'Journal of John Alexander & Co.' 1856-68, p. 435, 530 (APMH).

by carefully managing and reducing his expenditure, he greatly endangered his position with some reckless and risky investments.

During his time as an MP and in the years immediately following his electoral defeat, he invested heavily in a number of obscure and risky ventures in the vain hope of gaining handsome dividends. In the early 1850s John II was eager to enhance his landed portfolio and get some bargains in the Encumbered Estates Court. As a new MP in 1853, he spent £9,501 in a purchase of urban property from the embarrassed Lord Donegall (including the Belfast mill site); this was the substantial financial commitment which increased John II's reluctance to stand for Carlow borough: 'I have no money to throw away on such matters, having lately entered into a heavy pecuniary engagement which I must meet ere long.'¹⁷⁷ The desire to enhance his landed portfolio increased after the fire of 1862.

New land was desirable not only for its potential extra rental income but for its compensation value to his social profile once he had lost the flour mill. In 1864, he made an investment which surely would have bankrupted him had he not realised his error and sold out. In that year, land in Co. Wexford was put up for sale by John II's colleague and co-director of the Irish South Eastern Railway, James Edward Redmond (of The Deeps, co. Wexford, and great uncle of John Redmond of the Irish Parliamentary Party).

Alexander secured a mortgage on Milford from the Scottish Amicable Life Assurance Society for an astonishing £44,000 in January 1864—the high interest rate of 5 per cent indicative of that company's assessment of Alexander's poor credit rating.¹⁷⁸ The small estate had an annual rental of £437, but when legal disputes from Redmond's relatives surfaced after that gentleman's death in 1865, Alexander wisely wanted out of the deal. The lands were sold through the Landed Estates Court (although not finally settled until 1877) and he had repaid his mortgage by 1871. However, he had incurred serious losses

¹⁷⁷ John Alexander II to McClintock Bunbury, 2 Jan. 1853 (Rathdonnell papers, PRONI, MIC632/G6/6/ 100).

¹⁷⁸ 'Abstract of title', pp 67-9 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917). Of similar lenders, Curtis notes that 'heavily incumbered lenders' had to pay as much as 5 to 5.5 per cent interest in the 1870s. Curtis, 'Incumbered wealth', p. 339.

in the form of legal expenses and interest payments to the amount of £12,000 in the six years up to 1870.¹⁷⁹ In 1876 he commented: 'I have certainly been very unfortunate, and in the case of Redmond, culpable for trusting him & being led by him into such heavy loss.'¹⁸⁰ With Gladstone's land act of 1870, John II begrudgingly accepted that any further land purchases would be foolish: 'I feel great disinclination to increase my stake in this country under present circumstances and until this vexed land question is brought to some satisfactory conclusion, which does not seem a probable contingency'.¹⁸¹

In other avenues, his indulgence in dangerous speculative investments appears to have been heavily influenced by his Monkstown neighbour, Sir James Dombrain, who had been Inspector-General of the Irish coastguard during the Famine. Clearly advised by Dombrain, John II became a director of the *West of Ireland Mining Company Ltd.* in 1857 on lands in Mayo leased to Dombrain by the marquis of Sligo.¹⁸² Despite the risk involved in its bid for £50,000 in capital, the presence of William Dargan as a co-director alleviated the fears of many investors. However, other projects were of a more dubious nature, such as John II's directorship in 1860 and 1861 (with Dombrain and others) of two new slate companies in Wales, with a combined capital of £55,000.¹⁸³ The *Belfast Newsletter* commented on the prospectus of one of these companies that John II's name 'will be sufficient guarantee in this neighbourhood for the *bona-fides* of the concern' — a comment expressive of the dubious prospects of the venture in an obscure location.¹⁸⁴ None of these companies appear to have been successful and certainly did not bring any significant money into John II's hands and a comment made about Dombrain in 1870 is probable evidence that these projects incurred significant losses: 'I have no feeling

¹⁷⁹ John Alexander II to Farrer, 21 Dec. 1871 (LB2, APMH).

¹⁸⁰ John Alexander II to James Alexander, 29 Dec. 1876 (LB3, APMH).

¹⁸¹ John Alexander II, 8 Mar. 1870 (LB1, APMH).

¹⁸² *Freeman's Journal*, 5 May 1857.

¹⁸³ The 'Lower Taldrws and Clodd Fa Coed Slate Company Ltd' and the 'Cricceth Slate Company Ltd'. *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 Sep. 1860, *Irish Times*, 16 Mar. 1861.

¹⁸⁴ *Belfast Newsletter*, 12 Sep. 1860.

whatever for him as he brought me much trouble and great loss, and I shall not do anything for him by which I could lose a shilling'.¹⁸⁵

As the chairman of the Waterford and Tramore railway, Dombrain shared John II's railway mania and by this, both men suffered heavy losses.¹⁸⁶ Alexander invested large sums in several Irish and English lines in 1860-70 and was a regular customer at Dudgeon and Chaytor's railway stocks office on Grafton Street in Dublin. In the 1850s he invested in several railway lines and was a committee member on many of them (for example, the Downpatrick, Belfast and Dublin Railway Company, the Belfast and West of Ireland junction Railway Company in 1853,¹⁸⁷ and was a director of the Bagenalstown and Wexford line, which went bankrupt in 1864.¹⁸⁸ His current day descendants have inherited anecdotes about reckless and disastrous speculations in this field and there is some documentary evidence to bear this out. In 1866, he ended up in the court of bankruptcy and insolvency in Dublin after the failure of the Bagenalstown and Wexford Railway. As the proprietor of 200 shares at £10 each, John II suffered a heavy loss, despite his claim that he had previously transferred 150 of these shares to 'a pauper' named Hynes. In court, this development was dismissed as a ruse and it was argued that Hynes had never consented to become transferee. Astonishingly, Alexander's counsel argued that his client had a 'set-off against the company for £40,000' but he was still held liable for his 200 shares by the judge.¹⁸⁹ The failure of this line was a perpetual source of frustration for John II (what he called 'this railway torment')¹⁹⁰ and he was convinced that he had been hugely unfortunate: 'The railway was declared bankrupt & what cost the company upwards of £200,000 was sold to Mr Mott for £20.'¹⁹¹ However, such failures did not curb his temptations and he appeared unable to resist indulging in speculations. In

¹⁸⁵ John Alexander II, 28 Jan. 1870 (LB1, APMH).

¹⁸⁶ *Bradshaw's railway manual, shareholders' guide and official directory for 1866* (London, 1866), p. 326.

¹⁸⁷ *Belfast Newsletter*, 10 Jan, 7 Oct. 1853.

¹⁸⁸ *Bradshaw's railway manual, shareholder's guide and official directory for 1864* (London, 1864), pp 8-9.

¹⁸⁹ *Freeman's Journal*, 5 May 1866.

¹⁹⁰ John Alexander II, 28 Oct. 1868 (LB1, APMH).

¹⁹¹ John Alexander II, 21 Dec. 1871 (LB2, APMH).

the autumn of 1868, with the Milford partition case in court, John II bought £1,700 worth of shares in the Great Southern and Western Railway— 70 per cent of the Milford rental for that year— and a further £800 in railway bonds the following April.¹⁹² By 1870, he was forced to pay some of his debts in railways bonds.¹⁹³

While not all of his expenditure was unwise or speculative, other passions were just as demanding on his bank balance. He continued to pursue his objective of farming excellence on the Milford estate, investing heavily in improvements, which was a major preoccupation. In February 1869, he informed P.J. Newton that he found it 'difficult to leave this place with so many matters as I have on hand, building, planting and improving'.¹⁹⁴ Indeed, Alexander would appear to be that rare landlord who was convinced of his commitment to fundamental improvements on his Irish estate and to spending the money that this required.¹⁹⁵ His letterbooks from 1868 to 1884 show that he pursued several improvement projects in his walled garden and demesne, but that he also had a broad vision for the wider estate. As well as substantial improvement schemes for his stable block, his barn and vinery at Milford, he imported thousands of Osage orange trees from Iowa to be used as fencing, and developed his passion in this area by purchasing several thousand trees from Scotland for his demesne (over 10,000 in 1869 alone).¹⁹⁶ He took out several loans from the Board of Works (at 3½ per cent, repayable in 22 years)¹⁹⁷ and executed many improvement projects on the estate: continuing the switch from thatch to slate, continued drainage works and building new houses and out-offices for his tenants and labourers. He supervised most of the works personally, was on-hand with advice and instructions to builders and was a regular reader of the *Irish*

¹⁹² John Alexander II to Dudgeon and Chaytor, 18 Sep., 6 Oct. 1868, 28 Apr. 1869 (LB1, APMH).

¹⁹³ John Alexander II, 8 Jan. 1870, in *ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ John Alexander II to Newton, 24 Feb. 1869, in *ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ On the lack of investment in improvements by landlords, see Cormac Ó Gráda, 'The investment behaviour of Irish landlords, 1850-75: some preliminary findings' in *The Agricultural history review*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1975), pp 385-92, at pp 141-6.

¹⁹⁶ John Alexander II, 1 Oct. 1868, 15 Feb. and 24 Nov. 1869 (LB1, APMH).

¹⁹⁷ Ó Gráda, 'Investment behaviour', p. 146.

Builder. He was constantly eager to improve the built environment and trial new materials such as roof tiles in 1870: 'thus they would be fully introduced into this improving county where no covering is known but slate and thatch'.¹⁹⁸ He regarded Carlow as a leader in contemporary improvements and was clearly proud of his own efforts in contributing to this reputation; 'there is such an amount of work going on in this county and particularly in this part of it'.¹⁹⁹ In 1880, as many landlords were being criticised for their lack of investment in their properties, John II wrote to Walter Gyles, the honorary treasurer of the Irish Land Committee (a body which aimed to promote the landlords' efforts)²⁰⁰ to state his own record:

I have gone over my accounts kept by myself for the past 45 years and I find that I have during that period expended in building tenants' houses (2 storey slated), workmen's houses (slated), barns, stables, cattle-houses, police barrack (slated), drainage, fencing, levelling old fences, making roads, hay-houses, planting & reclaiming bogland, & other matters on this property containing 2,200 statute acres, the full sum of £12,500.²⁰¹

In the same vein, he wrote to Lord Cairns, the leading Conservative politician and former Lord Chancellor

in the hope that the few facts relating to the management of this property may help to refute the lying assertions that no improvements have been made by the Irish landlords on their estates, but that all such have been the work of the tenant. This is one of the many falsehoods which have been put forward in parliament and elsewhere [...]. I borrowed a large sum of money from the Board of Works for the purposes of drainage, building, fencing &c. The only charges made to tenants on this head were in three instances of small amount. Thus have I carried on a life of exertion and industry in the hope of benefitting the community, while at [the] same time, I would be handing down to my son an improved property in a peaceable, prosperous country, 'tho the rental would not be increased one per cent on my outlay.²⁰²

In this latter regard, Alexander was correct. Excluding the Clochrisc property (which was in Conolly hands by 1870), the Milford rental charged by Alexander for

¹⁹⁸ John Alexander II, 26 Dec. 1870 (LB2, APMH).

¹⁹⁹ John Alexander II, 14 Oct. 1871, in *ibid*.

²⁰⁰ Ó Gráda, 'Investment behaviour', p. 151.

²⁰¹ John Alexander II to Walter Gyles, 17 Dec. 1880 (LB3, APMH).

²⁰² John Alexander II to Lord Cairns, 1 Jul. 1881 (LB3, APMH).

Ballinabranna, Ballygowan, Craanluskey and Tomard fell from £2,105 in 1840 to £1,896 in 1871—a drop of almost 10 per cent.²⁰³ Between 1855 and 1870, Milford estate continued to be a very productive agricultural unit and the rents received never fell below 95 per cent; 107 per cent of the rental was received in 1870. While these improvements were of great benefit to the community, they undoubtedly constituted a massive part of Alexander's expenditure, and were probably considered as essential in their visible, anecdotal and physical contribution to his reputation as a landed gentleman of repute. Overspending in this line (in the context of his falling income) was a constant danger and had already overwhelmed his brother-in-law, who brought a significant extra amount of financial trouble and worry to John Alexander's door.

Richard Graves Brinkley (1823-1890) was the younger brother of Esther Alexander and became owner of the Ardagh estate in Co. Sligo on his marriage to Hester Lloyd in 1845.²⁰⁴ In 1854, he sold the paternal property at Parsonstown in Co. Meath and purchased the Fortland estate in Sligo in the Encumbered Estates Court, bringing his total acreage in that county to over 6,000.²⁰⁵ However, he over stretched himself considerably in improving the lands and took out too many loans as John II explained to Brinkley's son in later years:

Your father says in one of his letters it will never be known till he is dead and gone how much money he has sunk in those estates. The hard years, bad crops and money at 10 per cent in 57 & 58 were his ruin. He could not pay the heavy outlay for drainage, educate and maintain his children with the debt about his neck.²⁰⁶

In 1867, Brinkley was on the verge of bankruptcy, which warranted the intervention of his sisters in the name of family pride: Harriet (wife of Captain Richard Farrer, agent to the Kingston estate of Mitchelstown), Anna (Countess of Kingston of Mitchelstown

²⁰³ Milford rentals, 1840 and 1871 (APMH).

²⁰⁴ *Burke's landed gentry of Ireland* (1912), p. 72.

²⁰⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 22 Dec. 1874; see also the record for the Brinkley estate in Sligo on the NUI Galway landed estates database at <http://landedestates.nuigalway.ie/LandedEstates/jsp/estate-show.jsp?id=196>, accessed 12 Feb. 2015.

²⁰⁶ John Alexander II to J.L. Brinkley, 4 Dec. 1876 (LB3, APMH).

Castle, wife of James, 5th earl of Kingston) and Esther Alexander. The three women requested their husbands to combine in a security to prevent their brother's bankruptcy.

As John II later explained to his solicitor:

In March 1867, I did put my name to a document which had already been signed by Lord Kingston and Mr Farrer to raise a sum of money for my brother-in-law, Mr Richard Graves Brinkley. I signed the parchment at the request of Mrs Alexander without reading it or knowing at all what it contained, being impressed with a conviction that the signatures already placed to it were sufficient warrant for me.²⁰⁷

This document obliged him to pay the interest on one-third of £4,100— an inconvenient but hardly crippling liability. However, matters became far more serious when Brinkley was incarcerated in Marshalsea debtor's prison in 1868 and required John Alexander to forward £1,257 to secure his release.²⁰⁸ Declared bankrupt, Brinkley absconded to France and left his three brothers-in-law to work through his complicated financial mess. In May 1869, Lord Kingston's name appeared 'on the black list' in a publication on account of this affair which caused huge embarrassment and deep tension in the wider family network. John II took huge pride in his prestigious connection with the Kingstons given that family's social and historical renown and he was eager to retain good relations with James and Anna (the latter of whom he was extremely protective towards, and one of only two people in the entirety of his surviving correspondence between 1868 and 1884 to whom he signed his letters with only his Christian name). To this extent, he implicated himself more than was legally binding in the Brinkley debt; as he expressed to Farrer in May 1869, 'I must now pay one third of it or break with J.K.'²⁰⁹ With tensions running high in the family, John II wrote to the countess of Kingston on 28 June 1869 explaining his restrained finances and his growing resentment towards Richard Graves Brinkley:

My dear Anna, you are altogether under a serious mistake as to my annual income and I feel quite certain from your knowledge of me that you will accept what I say as true. The balance of income from my properties in

²⁰⁷ John Alexander II to Samuel F. Adair, 27 May 1869 (LB1, APMH).

²⁰⁸ John Alexander II to Richard Farrer, 5 Nov. 1868, in *ibid*.

²⁰⁹ John Alexander to Farrer, 27 May 1869, in *ibid*.

Dublin, Carlow and Belfast is £1,200 per annum, and were it not for our strict economy, I could never make the two ends meet. You are not probably aware that I have to pay £2,200 per annum interest for the large sum of money out of which I have been swindled. Had I the property that you had been given to understand, I would not hesitate to take on myself the entire sum which has occasioned so much unpleasantness and misrepresentation. Certainly no people have your interest and James's more earnestly at heart than Essie and myself.²¹⁰

With Lord Kingston's death that September, Farrer was appointed receiver for Brinkley's estate with John II acting as security for many of his transactions. Before Brinkley's Sligo estates were purchased by his son in 1875 and as the tenants began to withhold their rents, Farrer and Alexander were obliged to pay all the estate charges at Ardagh and Fortland.²¹¹ By 1878, John II estimated to his daughter that his involvement in this affair has cost him £15,000 and his personal account book shows that his obligations in the Brinkley debt remained a considerable expense right up until his death.²¹²

John II also invested a lot of money in his children's education. Without the cushion of the milling income he had enjoyed in his youth, educational fees became a priority as a social elevator for John II as he explained to his sons in 1869: 'My object is to have you fully educated and to push you into the best position in life that I can. [...] The most I can offer my children is good education which I hold to be of primary importance'.²¹³ With a view to imitating the practices of many of the upper gentry and aristocracy, and as an elevation from his own Irish education, John II sent his five sons to English preparatory schools such as Uppingham and Stubbington. Two attended English universities: John III at Cambridge ('I had set my heart on my eldest son having a Cambridge degree')²¹⁴ for a term before joining the 1st King's Dragoon Guards in 1871, and William studied law at Oxford. Lorenzo joined the Royal Navy in 1868 and Charles entered the Royal Military

²¹⁰ John Alexander II to Anna, countess of Kingston, 28 Jun. 1869, in *ibid*.

²¹¹ John Alexander to Farrer, 27 Feb. 1869, in *ibid*.

²¹² 'Richard Graves Brinkley in account with John Alexander' in personal account book of John Alexander II 1846-84 (APMH).

²¹³ John Alexander to William Alexander, 12 May 1869; same to John Alexander III, 4 Jun. 1869 (LB1, APMH).

²¹⁴ John Alexander II, 18 Jan. 1872 (LB2, APMH).

Academy at Woolwich in 1876. His youngest son, George, studied at Trinity College Dublin and was called to the bar in 1881. The demands of these expenses can be gauged from John III's account of £143 for 1869 alone or William's expenses at Oxford in 1871 which totalled £356.²¹⁵ John II wrote many letters in this period querying or seeking to reduce these costs, claiming 'I am pressed to the utmost of my funds to meet necessary demands of five expensive sons'.²¹⁶

All of these expenses had huge social ramifications for John II. His straitened finances made him fear for his social position and maintain his power sources. His non-landed wealth was collapsing and he had failed to expand his landed portfolio. The loss of the mills had the remarkable effect of making him reconsider his career in politics. In April 1865, as a general election approached, John II was active in 'a personal canvass', seeking nomination as a candidate for the borough.²¹⁷ According to the *Daily Express*—delighted by his announcement—Alexander presented himself 'on modest Conservative principles'.²¹⁸ From his boldly assertive address to the electors (referring to his prospective return as 'the legitimate object of my ambition' and indicating a new yearning for the position), it is clear that John II now grasped at political office as a social float, to boost his sinking profile and financial decline.²¹⁹ However, his bid came to an end the following week in highly embarrassing circumstances when Horace Rochfort also sought the nomination. John II simply could not compete with the political pedigree, eloquence or talent of his near neighbour and was convinced to retire at a Conservative meeting on 6 July. The *Sentinel's* explanation—that John II had resigned in favour of Rochfort on health grounds—was an awkward artifice which surely only intensified Alexander's

²¹⁵ Account of John Alexander III, 1869 and William Alexander, 1871 in private account books of John Alexander II, 1846-84 (APMH).

²¹⁶ John Alexander II to Farrer, 24 Feb. 1874 (LB2, APMH).

²¹⁷ *Carlow Sentinel*, 1 Apr. 1865.

²¹⁸ Quoted in *ibid*, 10 Jun. 1865.

²¹⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 1 Jul. 1865.

humiliation.²²⁰ Taunts thrown at Rochfort during the election that he had been nominated 'in Alexander's slippers' were flattering to neither candidate.²²¹

The visible maintenance of a gentry lifestyle at Milford House made heavy demands on his mind and his finances. His letterbooks show how he continued to invest in furniture, fittings, decorations and repairs throughout the 1860s and 1870s with notable instances of excess. Hampers were ordered from London and a box of 50 oysters from Dublin was delivered to Milford railway station for Christmas in 1868.²²² On the insistence of his wife and daughter who were eager to maintain social displays ('Essie and Harriette forced me to buy')²²³ a new landau carriage, painted with the Alexander crest, was commissioned from a London company in 1873 at a cost of £130.²²⁴ Comments like 'I have more champagne than I shall consume in a long time' made in December 1872 are also proof of the substantial, indeed excessive, investment in merchandise and material culture at Milford during this period.²²⁵ However, the frustrations to John II's ambitions and desires in this field were numerous and he grudgingly accepted the necessity of economising in his household. Certainly, his biggest disappointment was his inability to substantially modify Milford House in the 1870s. He commissioned plans for embellishment from renowned architect, John McCurdy in 1872, seeking the elimination of the wing, and additional accommodation including a campanile, a museum, a billiard room and a new stable block adjacent to the house.²²⁶ Keenly aware of the prestige enjoyed by his architect (who had designed the museum building in Trinity College), John II first unveiled McCurdy's plans for Milford before a group of friends in December

²²⁰ Ibid, 8 Jul. 1865.

²²¹ *Carlow Post*, 15 Jul. 1865.

²²² John Alexander II, 19 and 26 Dec. 1868 (LB1, APMH).

²²³ John Alexander II to Farrer, 25 Jul. 1874 (LB2, APMH).

²²⁴ John Alexander II to Farrer, 2 Jul. 1873, in *ibid*.

²²⁵ John Alexander II, 23 Dec. 1872, in *ibid*.

²²⁶ John Alexander II to John McCurdy, 12 Aug. 1872, in *ibid*.

1873 (see appendix C2).²²⁷ While he was disappointed with McCurdy's retention of the wing, John II mainly rejected the proposal on the grounds of the £5,000 expense required; he had only budgeted for £1,500.²²⁸ The lack of new material (from 1840-80) in the house's library is clear evidence of economic restraint; W.E.H. Lecky would later observe 'that libraries in country houses in Ireland stop dead at the year 1830, no additions are subsequently made'.²²⁹ After all his efforts and pretensions regarding his family pedigree, it was ironic in the extreme that John II admitted to being unable to afford Joseph Foster's *The baronetage and knighthage of the British Empire* in 1881 when that author wrote seeking a subscription.²³⁰

From 1865 onwards, John II admitted to being depressed about his finances and his extra worries and labours certainly took a toll on his health. To his son John, he commented in June 1869: 'My circumstances are worse than when I last wrote to you. I have been hit in a large sum and am harassed, nearly to death, with law, loss and vexation'.²³¹ The following week, he wrote to Farrer that 'a few months more of the torture I have lately had will put me under the sod, happily free from all earthly cares'.²³² He found the cautious treatment he received from professional agencies mortifying in the extreme. With 'stinging' letters from 'bank nabobs' informing him 'you are our debtor', and warning him not to sign any more bills, he became obsessive about the privacy of his letters and was incensed when correspondents used postcards or neglected to wet the gum on envelopes.²³³ His greatest worry was that his financial pressures would damage the social position and reputation of his family which had been so laboriously constructed. He lamented that his money worries weakened his enjoyment of a gentry lifestyle: 'All

²²⁷ See entry on McCurdy on the Dictionary of Irish architects website at <http://www.dia.ie/architects/view/3507/MCCURDY,+JOHN>, accessed 30 May 2015.

²²⁸ John Alexander II to McCurdy, 5 Dec. 1873 (LB2, APMH).

²²⁹ Quoted by Terence Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland: a study of Irish landed families, 1860-1960* (Dublin, 2001), p. 110.

²³⁰ John Alexander II to Foster, 4 May 1881 (LB3, APMH).

²³¹ John Alexander II to John Alexander III, 4 Jun. 1869 (LB1, APMH).

²³² John Alexander II to Farrer, 15 Jun. 1869, in *ibid.*

²³³ John Alexander II to L.W. Hartstonge, 17 Dec. 1868, in *ibid.*

these things make me over anxious and give me many a sleepless hour, tie me to the writing desk like a common clerk and I will not embarrass myself more', he complained to Farrer.²³⁴ Through lack of resources and poor spirits, his social calendar also diminished and he turned down several invitations, but he also feared the rumour mill at such events and declared his hopes that gossip would at least paint him as the abused party: 'Anyone who will consider for one moment must feel for us, but I am not aware of estrangement. There is in some quarters a feeling of compassion and sympathy for those who have been made the undeserved victims of fraud and avarice'.²³⁵

Horried by the aspersions cast on his honour by other parties caught up in the Brinkley affair, John II was highly defensive about any slights on his character. On 7 June 1870, less than three months after Milford House was advertised for letting in a national newspaper, Alexander was in a despondent frame of mind when he had a physical altercation with another passenger on a train journey. John II took a seat in a first class carriage and then went to speak with a relative in another. In Alexander's version, a John Teeling informed him that all the seats therein were already occupied and became increasingly irritated when he mistakenly assumed that Alexander was attempting to take one. As Alexander explained:

I replied that I have my seat in another carriage when he again said the places were engaged. Again I disclaimed any intention of taking them when he, being much agitated, said in an insulting tone 'You're no gentleman' and repeated the words a second time, whereupon I touched him slightly with the back of my hand, or the gloves which I held loosely in it, saying that I was not accustomed to such language.²³⁶

The following week, John II received a letter from a Dublin solicitor accusing him of 'an unprovoked assault' and argued that Teeling had never used the disputed remark in the first place. There must have been grounds that John II had misheard him because Alexander replied stating his regret that 'in the excitement of the moment I should have

²³⁴ John Alexander II to Farrer, 14 Dec. 1868, in *ibid.*

²³⁵ John Alexander II to James Alexander, 29 Dec. 1876 (LB3, APMH).

²³⁶ John Alexander II to Arthur O'Hagan esq., 16 Jun. 1870 (LB1, APMH).

so far forgotten myself'.²³⁷ In his apology to Teeling, he used plainer language and explained that 'under the impression that you had used an offensive expression towards me, I became so much excited as to strike you. I now apologise to you for that act, which I admit I cannot justify'.²³⁸ The matter went no further but is hugely important as an insight into the psychological and emotional stress experienced by John II as his powerbase was threatened.

In the 1860s and 1870s, Milford went into visible decline. With the substantial loss of employment at the flour mill after the fire, there was much less footfall in the area. Milford's bi-annual fairs had been in decline since the repeal of the Corn Laws and were no longer prominent dates in the county calendar or seminal events in the local one. The extent of the decline can be seen in John Alexander's offer, during his days as an MP in 1857, to transfer his patent for Milford fair to Carlow town.²³⁹ The dates were last listed in *Thom's directory* in 1874 and were discontinued the following year.²⁴⁰ The necessity for a police barracks on Milford bridge was also questioned by Col. Hillier in headquarters at Dublin Castle in 1868 and the men were removed for a time in 1871. By that stage the barracks (then owned by the Conollys) was in poor repair, the population had greatly decreased and crime of any nature was not prevalent at Milford. Essentially, the closure of the barracks was a comment at government level of Milford's demise but was labelled 'a dangerous experiment' and 'an unlucky hour for the peace of this neighbourhood' by John II.²⁴¹ He was determined to have the police 're-established in so important a locality' and urged the local magistrates to present a petition to this effect. He also liaised with Dublin Castle in his renovations of the Tower House in Ballinabranna as a substitute barracks. The small rent he charged of £7 per annum and

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Interestingly, this letter was not listed in the index to the letterbook in which it was contained. John Alexander to John Teeling, 25 Jun. 1870 (LB1, APMH).

²³⁹ *Carlow Sentinel*, 2 May 1857.

²⁴⁰ *Thom's directory* (Dublin, 1874), p. 25.

²⁴¹ John Alexander II, 14 and 16 Aug. 1871 (LB2, APMH).

his arguments for a police presence at Milford convinced the authorities to re-open a station on the incline to Ballinabranna on 1 March 1872, known as the Barrack Hill from then on.²⁴² Milford House and demesne were also quieter places by 1870 and it appears that some staff were let go in John II's economising drive. A letting notice for Milford House in London's *Bazaar* magazine in 1873, stating that '2 servants could be left', is probable evidence of a much-reduced household by that time. Another anecdote from this period neatly encapsulates the decline in activity and pomp in the big house's service yard. In late 1872, a coachman en route to the stable block found the avenue and demesne so deserted (the site of immense activity in the 1830s) that he whipped his horses into a brisk pace. Clearly not expecting to meet anybody in the coach-house yard, he turned the corner at a dangerous speed and almost collided with a solitary, elderly man in the act of painting an iron gate, who held up his arm in alarm; the seventy year-old man was none other than John Alexander himself.²⁴³

The definitive sign of a landlord in distress was his removal from his seat through the letting or sale of his property. The extent of the danger posed by these financial pressures to the Milford powerbase is best encapsulated in John Alexander's serious consideration of a plan to retire to the continent and let Milford House and demesne. In 1869, he advertised them for £250 per annum in English newspapers and journals (such as the *General Advertiser* and *Daily Express*), but by March of 1870 his pressing circumstances forced him to reduce his asking price to £240 and insert the notice in the *Irish Times*.²⁴⁴ By July 1872, his anxiety to secure a tenant can be seen in his decision to advertise in the *Carlow Sentinel*.²⁴⁵ The act of advertising was a huge social embarrassment which he hoped to limit by securing a professional lessee; his comment that he was 'very particular' about applicants and that 'there is a class that I would not admit on any terms'

²⁴² File of letters labelled 'Police barracks', 1868-72 (APMH).

²⁴³ John Alexander II, 24 Mar. 1873 (LB2, APMH).

²⁴⁴ John Alexander II to P.J. Newton, 24 Feb. 1869 (LB1, APMH); *Irish Times*, 14 Mar. 1870.

²⁴⁵ *Carlow Sentinel*, 27 Jul. 1872.

make it clear that even the worst financial crisis would never override his anti-Catholic prejudices.²⁴⁶ In October 1874, he confessed his fears of losing Milford altogether to his son William: 'I often wish I could lead all my sons to feel how uncertain our tenure of all here is and how wise it is not to look beyond it'.²⁴⁷ Although the house was never let, it was repeatedly advertised in 1870-80 and became an increasingly imperative scheme. In 1878, despite efforts to economise, John II admitted to his daughter:

We are living above our means and ought to change our hands before it be too late. I give you the advice that I am now about to follow myself. I desire to let this house and demesne for a term, give up all possible expenses, improvements &c &c and retire where I can recoup myself to some extent from the innumerable losses that have been driven upon me.²⁴⁸

Three years later, the Land War had reached Milford and many tenants refused to pay their rents. With Parnell and the Land League reputedly 'rampant' on his estate, further reducing his income, John II seriously considered selling the estate to the tenantry, as he wrote to his brother James;

A crash is coming upon me which I can see no hope of avoiding, and must endeavour before too late to be prepared for. [...] I want your advice. The case is an extreme one. I must succumb. Shall I at once commence negotiations to sell the property *in toto*, and let the fellows borrow the money from government?²⁴⁹

In effect, the decline and loss of Milford mills had limited John II to the income from a landed estate which was insufficient to fund the lifestyle his father's milling income had led him to desire and expect. On top of this, his unwise speculations and property deals led to serious losses and undermined rather than enriched the Milford powerbase which was so important to his social position in the county and beyond. In this way, Milford's weakened status now posed a threat to the Alexanders' social reputation. It was the obvious decline in this powerbase — culminating in the perceived necessity of

²⁴⁶ John Alexander II, 22 Apr. 1873 (LB2, APMH).

²⁴⁷ John Alexander II to William Alexander, 20 Oct. 1874 (LB2, APMH).

²⁴⁸ John Alexander to Harriette Alexander, 12 Mar. 1878 (LB3, APMH).

²⁴⁹ John Alexander II to James Alexander, 9 Nov. 1881, in *ibid*.

abandoning it for the continent— which was the sorest consequence of his economic troubles for John II. However, he realised that there was a worse possibility, the irredeemable social and financial loss of having to sell up completely, as he wrote in a frank letter to his daughter in 1878: ‘For my own part, I must say that the bitterest day of my existence will be that on which I quit my house & property, but of two evils I prefer the least’.²⁵⁰

John II’s views and reactions to Milford’s decline are perfectly encapsulated in a letter to Richard Farrer written some years previously. It neatly summarises his humiliation at the loss of his social and financial eminence; explains his hopes that his previous attempts at social modesty would allow his powerbase to crumble in private and with dignity; shows that he was in denial about his own culpability in contributing to his losses; and contains a most important acknowledgement, that in the absence of Milford mills, his small landed estate would find it difficult to perpetuate his elevated position among Carlow’s landed gentry:

Instead of being wealthy and able to help others as I have done in days gone past, I am barely able to hold my position and cope with the daily expenses of the time. This is for your own eyes alone. I neither trumpet success, nor wish to relate my losses to others. I placed too much confidence in certain people and sorely I paid for it. I thank my God for great mercies in sparing me, and saving what property I have left.²⁵¹

In essence, when the mills stopped grinding, this modest but remarkable landed estate— fundamentally linked to industry— could no longer maintain or fund a prime position in the upper echelons of Carlow’s gentry powerbases.

²⁵⁰ John Alexander II to Harriette Alexander, 12 Mar. 1878, in *ibid*.

²⁵¹ John Alexander II to Farrer, 21 Dec. 1871 (LB2, APMH).

Conclusion

In October of 1879, a correspondent of the *Irish Times* visited Milford in the course of researching an article on the impact of that year's serious agricultural depression. Written 95 years after John Alexander I signed his first contract in the county, the journalist's description of 'the decay of the town of Milford' paints a picture just as bleak as John I's initial impression of Ballygowan in the previous century.¹ At its core, the article lamented the demise of the milling establishments which had brought so much improvement, productivity and wealth in their wake:

The decline in the production of grain is made painfully apparent as one approaches the picturesque little town of Milford, once the scene of busy labour and whose magnificent mills, which were formerly employed in the manufacture of native flour, are now reduced to a ruinous condition [...], which thus was made the centre of a thriving industry, of which today scarcely a vestige remains. [...] The plush of the mill-wheel is no longer heard; the busy workers are long since dispersed or have emigrated; the costly milling establishments are now heaps of crumbling ruins; and the magnificent water power of the Barrow glides idly by neglected and unavailed [sic – of] by the people, whose fathers were indebted to it for much of their former prosperity.²

It amounted to a public declaration that the Alexander powerbase had evaporated and that from that point onwards, they would have to look to their landed estate to retain their position in society. It was the end of an era.

What conclusions can be drawn from this study about the Alexander history at Milford and the trajectory of their milling fortunes? Firstly, it establishes Carlow as the milling centre of Leinster between 1790 and 1850 and shows the vital importance of the grain trade to local prosperity. This work has offered a detailed case study of the leading milling enterprise in the country in the 1840s and illustrated its fundamental reconstitution from a business based around domestic grain before 1846, to an import-

¹ See above, p. 37.

² *Irish Times*, quoted in *Carlow Sentinel*, 11 Oct. 1879.

and export-dependent venture after the repeal of the Corn Laws. Protective legislation guaranteed Milford an ascendancy it could not maintain— despite technological, managerial and infrastructural excellence — in a free market. Were it not for a series of unfortunate accidents and legal disputes in the 1860s, Milford mills may well have foundered by 1870 in any case.

Secondly, it is clear that although land was an essential component of social status in contemporary Carlow, the Alexanders' impressive elevation in the Carlow gentry had more to do with their bank balance (generated by their mercantile success) and political zeal in the second generation than with their assets in acres. For John Alexander I, this elevation was a consequence of his ingenuity rather than an overriding objective and Milford estate remained for him an economic rather than a social investment. However, his prosperity enabled a standard of living (in material terms) and a social elevation for his children which made them ambitious for further privileges, as seen in John II's expectations of political deference from his tenantry in the 1830s. Through a powerful combination of wealth and a growing (and ultimately infamous) political profile, this mercantile family compensated for their lack of genealogical depth in Carlow, and enjoyed an elevation to the upper ranks of the provincial gentry— a feat that was unique within the county and remarkable on a national level.

Finally, this thesis has proven the inextricable link between the Alexander's social status and the success of *John Alexander & Co.* In his perpetual attempts to play down his milling credentials in his public roles, John II failed to grasp their centrality to his position. When the milling profits dried up, he found it difficult to economise or make the psychological shift which a move towards membership of the lesser gentry necessitated. This led to unwise investments and irresponsible behaviour which further imperilled his assets. By 1870, it was his heavily-burdened landed estate (what had been his father's *final* addition to his property portfolio) that John II clung to as his family's

primary financial buoy. However, the powerbase which Milford mills had enabled had declined to the extent that selling out became a serious option and threatened to deprive the Alexanders of their entitlement (as owners in fee simple) to even nominal membership of the landed gentry.

It was the pragmatic and sensible handling of the estate as a farm by the next generation which ensured Milford's survival. Like his grandfather, John Alexander III (1850-1944) was reserved and methodical and lived prudently within his means. His family's finances were in a sorry mess on his inheritance. Mortgages from the Bank of Ireland on Milford totalled £20,000 in 1870-4; he was also responsible for a crippling loan of £47,000 from the Representative Church Body on the family's Belfast properties.³ Such arrangements spoke of a rapidly approaching insolvency, and annuity payments to his aunts and uncles had been 'postponed' for years before he inherited. John III was initially disinclined to take over the estate, a sentiment encouraged by the fame he garnered in 1879 as a Captain of the Kings's 1st Dragoon Guards, when he was personally involved in the capture of King Cetewayo at the end of the Anglo-Zulu war.⁴ However, having reluctantly assumed the mantle of landlord on his father's death in 1885, he successfully re-constituted the estate, and the family as gentleman farmers and the owners of a renowned Aberdeen Angus herd. The Strongstream building still formed an essential part of Alexander operations but only as accommodation for other projects: with the personal assistance of Horace Plunkett, John III established the 'Milford Co-operative Dairying Society Ltd' creamery in the mill in 1891, and in the same year another part of the premises was used to house a hydropower turbine, which made Carlow the first inland town in Ireland or Great Britain to have electric street lighting.⁵

³ 'Abstract of title', pp 70-7 (Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917).

⁴ This author, 'The Alexanders: Milford, Co. Carlow in the nineteenth century' in *Carloviana* (2009), pp 70-93, at pp 88-9.

⁵ R.A. Anderson, *With Horace Plunkett in Ireland* (London, 1835), p. 279; *Carlow Sentinel*, 9 May 1891; William Ellis, 'Electricity comes to Carlow' in *Carloviana* (1991), pp 24-7.

Over 700 acres of the estate were sold to tenants through the Land Commission in 1914-15, but John III's home farm was exempted from acquisition by the same body in 1940 on the grounds that 'this Estate may very properly be described as a very valuable National asset'.⁶ Major John Alexander IV established a successful stud farm in Milford demesne in the following decade which the current head of the family, John Alexander V, closed in the 1980s in order to focus on his investments in hydro-electricity. Indeed, a further examination of the estate's activities from 1890 to 1950 would make for an illuminating study of the changing condition, outlook and fortunes of the Anglo-Irish gentry pre- and post-independence in 1922.

However, for our present purposes, it is hoped that this study establishes Milford's importance to local, county, and provincial narratives and may contribute to future studies on the Irish grain trade, the upwardly-mobile merchant community, the political authority of Irish landlords and the development of landed estates, during our timeline. On a boating trip along the Barrow in 1983, Irish diplomat T.F. O'Sullivan wrote that 'Milford as we found it is a sad, overgrown little place today, with little to recall its prosperous past but its name'.⁷ With regard to the historical record, it is hoped that the present work will go some way to redressing this deficiency.

⁶ Alexander papers, ILCRB, EC 4917; report of valuer D.A. Telford of the Irish Land commission on 'The Estate of Major John Alexander, County Carlow. Record no. S8563', 26 Jun. 1940 (APMH).

⁷ T.F. O'Sullivan, *Goodly Barrow* (Dublin, 1983), p. 117.

Appendix A

Description of the Malting Process.¹

An understanding of the malting process is conducive to an appreciation of the architecture, capacity, power and extent of the Alexander malthouse in Milford from 1796.

Malt is a product of barley grains, which is one of the main ingredients in beer and whiskey. However, the barley is transformed by a series of processes before it reaches the brewery or distillery as malt. It involves the partial germination of barley grains to encourage enzymes in the grain to convert some of their starch into sugar. The degree to which the germination was allowed to proceed was carefully controlled and was arrested at a very critical stage in order to conserve the amount of saccharine in the sprouting grain. This sugar was then chemically transformed into alcohol at the brewery or distillery.

The above process involves four main stages.

1. Kiln-Drying: The barley grains are first dried for a period of 12-24 hours at a heat of 100° F.
2. Steeping: The grains were immersed in a stone (later cast-iron) cistern called a *steep*, where they were thoroughly soaked for a period between 54 and 60 hours, and where they would swell by an average of 25 per cent. The grains sank to the bottom of the steep, while seeds, dirt and other extraneous material floated to the top and was carefully skimmed off. Not only could this material affect the quality

¹ PP 1835 (17-19), *Fifteenth report of the commissioners of inquiry into the excise establishment, and into the management and collection of the excise revenue throughout the United Kingdom: Malt*, pp 3-17; Colin Rynne, *Industrial Ireland, 1750-1930: an archaeology* (Cork, 2006), pp 236-240.

of the germination process, but excise duty on malt was based on volume so maltsters took great care in removing floating debris.

3. Couching: The swollen barley was then heaped or *couched* in a wooden-framed receptacle called a *couch* or *couch-frame* where they absorbed heat to encourage germination. They remained in the *couch* for at least 26 hours and were then removed to one of the malting floors to grow, spread in layers of about 2 grains in thickness. The grains become moist and emit a sweet smell. This process was largely weather-dependent as a temperature of 50-58°F was required. The maltster had to skilfully adjust the amount of air allowed in from the windows, and regularly and carefully turned the sprouting grains (now termed *green malt*) with a large wooden shovel in order to regulate the temperature and to prevent shoots getting entangled.
4. Kiln Drying: The green malt was then subjected to a strong heat for a period of up to 3 days which reduced the moisture content to a level compatible with safe storage and which prevented further germination. The malt was stored in an air-sealed bin where it was allowed to mature for a number of weeks.

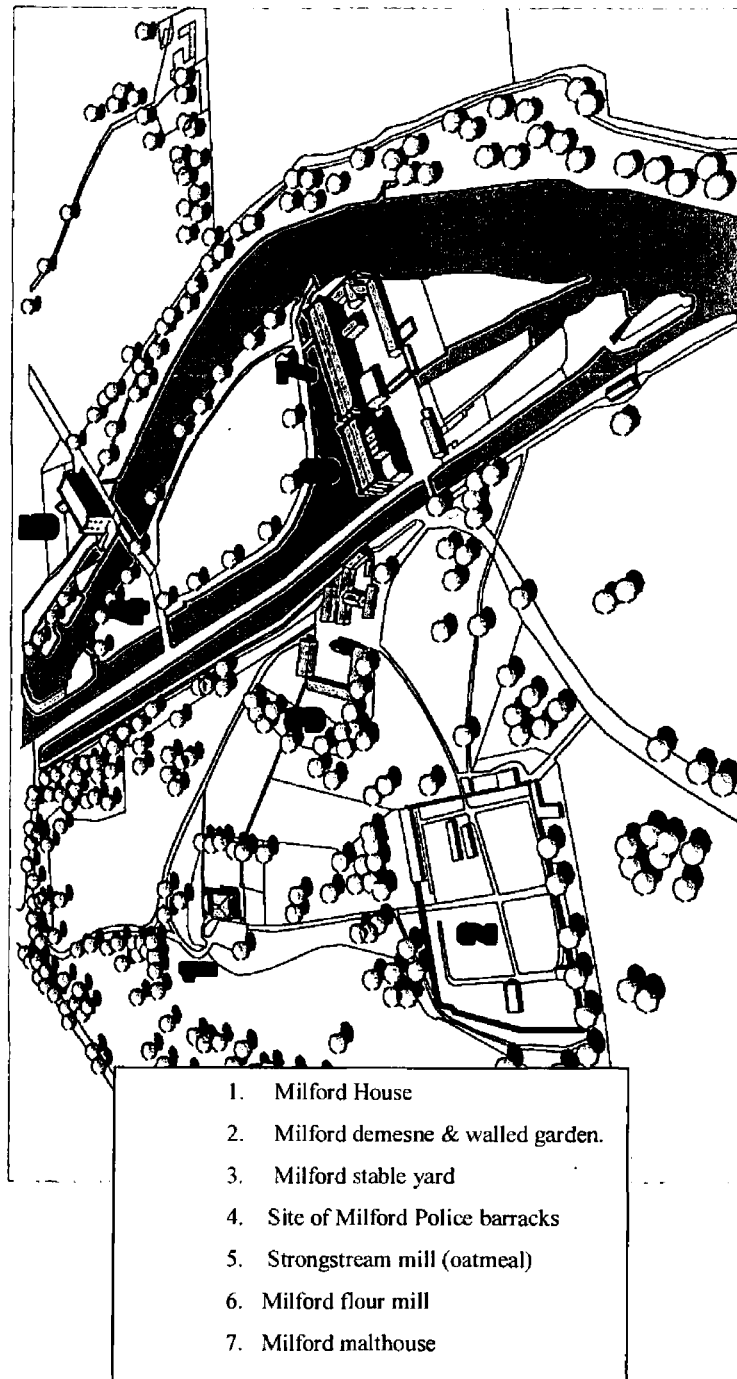
Malting was a highly regulated trade as it was subject to a government duty from 1785 onwards. By 1835, it was 2s 7d per bushel of barley. This meant that an excise officer was involved in all stages of production, from the steeping of the grains onwards. The cistern and the couch-frame had to be constructed in a particular manner, to permit the excise officer to gauge the grain. The maltster had to give notice before wetting any grain; 24 hours in the city or market-town, 48 hours elsewhere. The grain had to be kept covered with water for 48 hours, excepting one hour for changing the water. Grain could only be put in the cistern between 8am and 2pm, and taken out between 7am and 4pm. It had to

remain in the couch frame for at least 26 hours. Once thrown out of the cistern, it could not be sprinkled for 12 days. A survey book or ledger had to be kept to record the process and the gauging of the grain in the cistern, the couch, and on the floor. The volume of the grain was carefully measured, based upon the mean width, length and height, and calculated by mental arithmetic, pen and paper, or slide rule. The duty to be charged was based upon the largest gauge of the cistern, couch or floor after a multiplying factor of 1.6 was applied to the larger of the cistern or couch gauges.

Appendix B

Illustrations, photographs and plans of Milford mills, Co. Carlow.

B1. Computer-generated overhead image (looking to the north-west)
of Milford mills, c. 1840.¹



¹ Commissioned by the author from Paul Osborne, architect, Co. Carlow. Based on contemporary maps (APMH) and measurements contained in Valuation of Milford mills by Martin Coffey, 4 May 1843 (Valuation Office Collection, NAI, house Book OL 50010).

B2. South-eastern view of Milford demesne and Milford mills, *c.* 1840.²



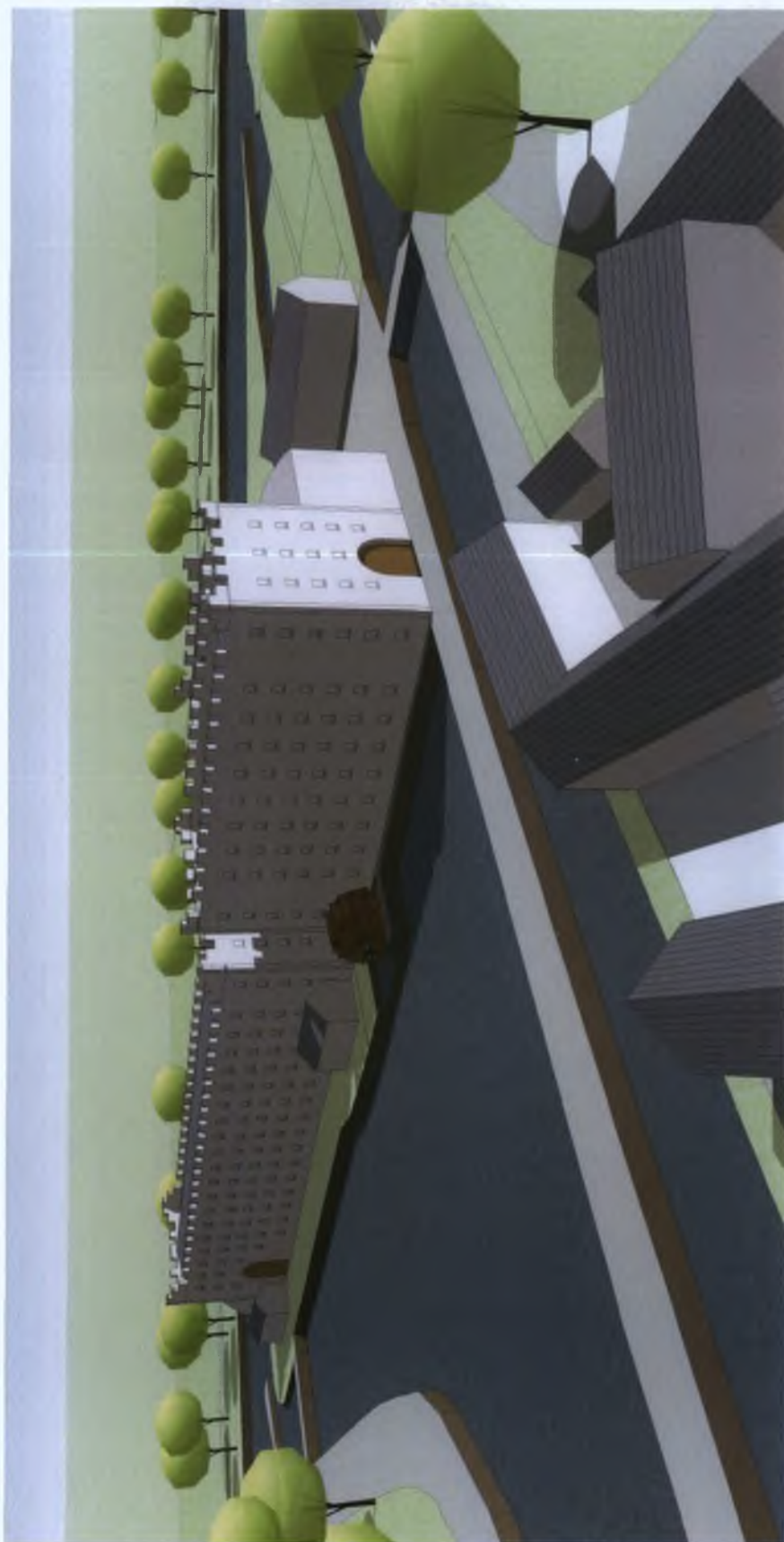
² Ibid.

B3. North-western view of Milford mills, c. 1840.³



³ Ibid.

B4. View of Milford malthouse and Milford flour mill (l-r), c. 1840.⁴



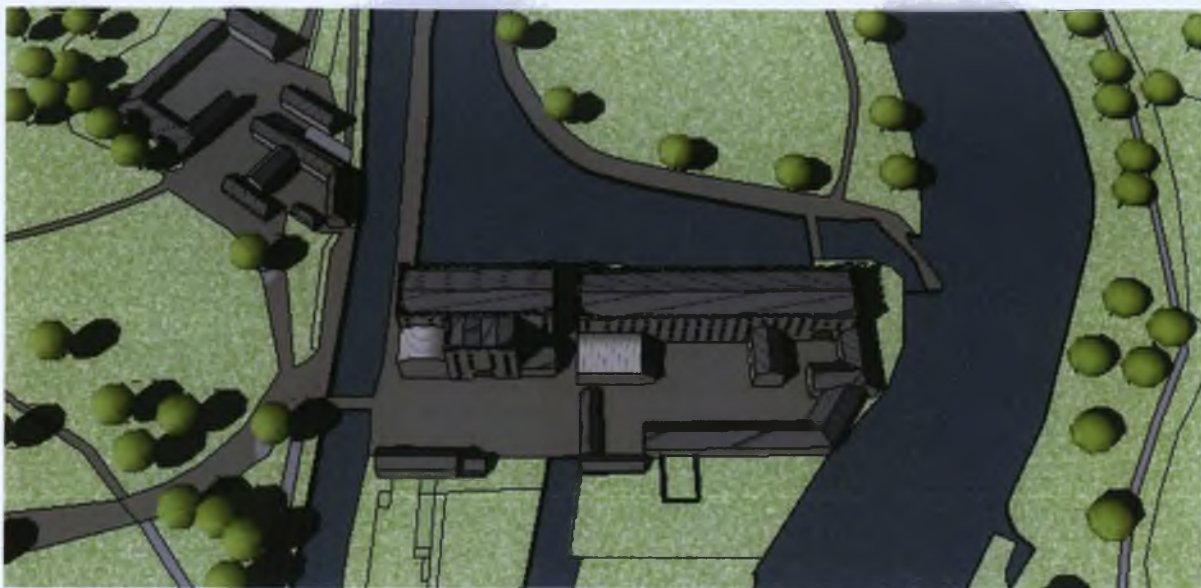
⁴ Ibid.

B5. Western view of Milford mills, c. 1840.⁵



⁵ Ibid.

B6. Overhead plan of Milford flour mill and Milford malthouse of *John Alexander & Co.* in 1843.⁶

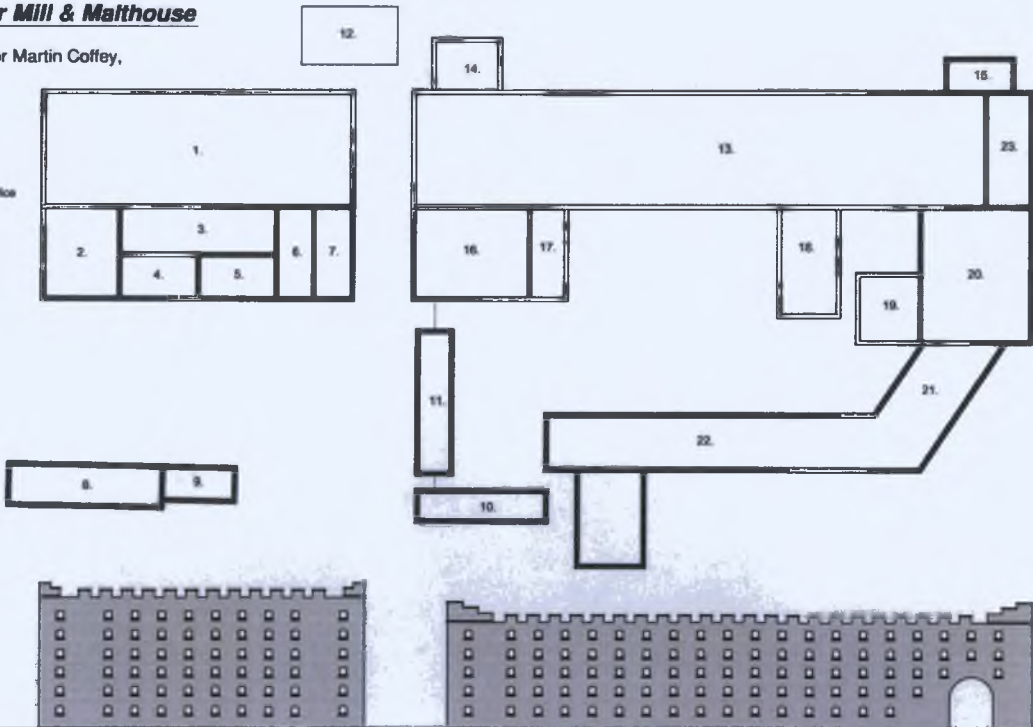


Milford Flour Mill & Malthouse

Survey by valuator Martin Coffey,
4th May 1843.

Legend

- 1. Flour Mill
- 2. Flour Kiln
- 3. Flour mill (addon)
- 4. Millwrights' workshop
- 5. Retail Store / Records office
- 6. Carpenter's workshop
- 7. Licensing office
- 8. Clerk's houses
- 9. Forge
- 10. Cowshed
- 11. Piggery
- 12. Water Wheel
- 13. Malt House
- 14. Storeroom
- 15. Storeroom
- 16. Malt kilns
- 17. Dwelling
- 18. Barley Kilns
- 19. Malt store
- 20. Malt kilns
- 21. Malthouse
- 22. Malthouse
- 23. Stores / offices



⁶ Ibid.

B7. Modern photograph of Strongsteam mill, the only surviving building (2015) of *John Alexander & Co*, Milford, Co. Carlow.⁷



B8. Modern photograph (2015) of the eastern gable of Strongsteam mill.⁸



⁷ Author's collection.

⁸ Ibid.

B9. The northern elevation of Strongstream mill (2015).⁹



B10. Photograph c. 1970, showing the northern elevation of *John Alexander & Co.*'s malthouse at Milford, Co. Carlow, built c. 1794. Now demolished.¹⁰

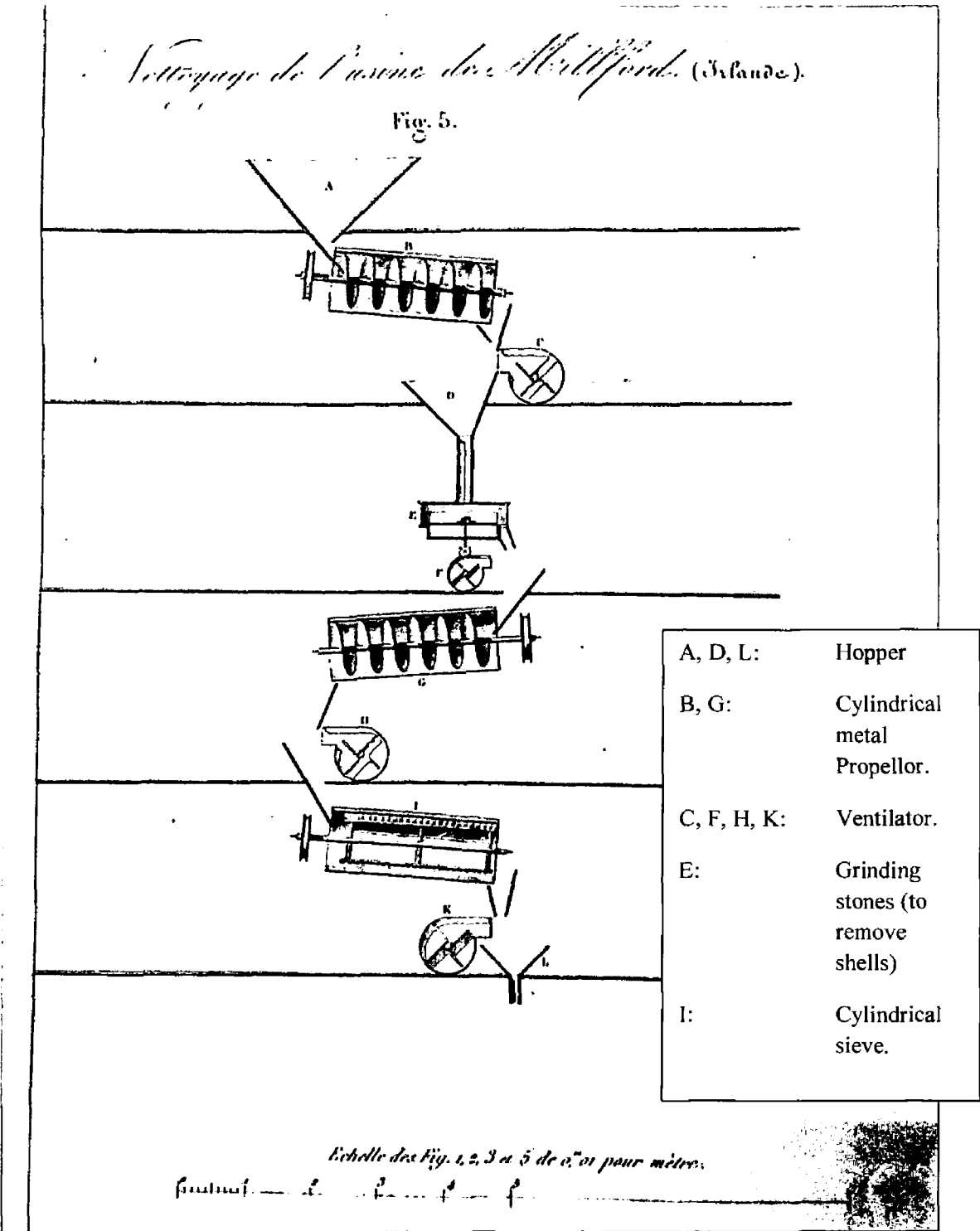


⁹ Image by Skyfly Photography Ltd., Co. Carlow. Courtesy of Mr Paul Brennan.

¹⁰ From photograph collection, APMH.

B11. 'Nettoyage de l'usine de Mill-ford (Irlande)': The grain-dressing apparatus used in Milford flour mill, c. 1845.¹¹

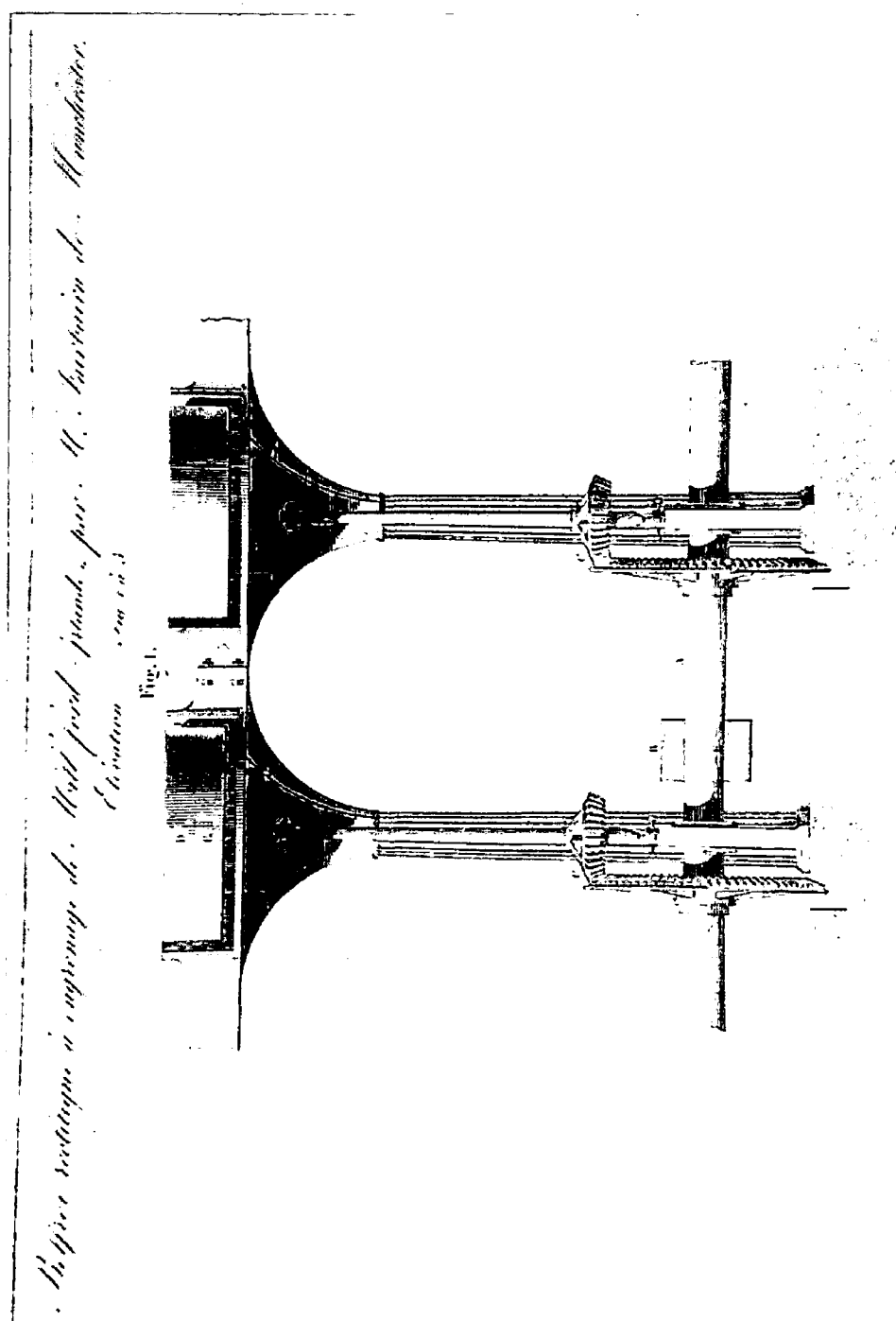
This system operated across five floors, until the grain reached the ground floor for grinding.



¹¹ 'Atlas' of Augustine Rollet, *Mémoire sur la meunerie, la boulangerie et la conservation des grains et des farines* ... (Paris, 1847), plate v, Fig. 5. ©British Library.

B12. 'Beffroi rectiligne á engrenage de Mill-ford (Irlande), par M. Fairbairn de Manchester'.¹²

Rollet's sketch showing a detail of William Fairbairn's gearings installed in Milford flour mill in the early 1830s, housed in a rectangular 'belfry' on site. 'C' shows the iron gears, communicating movement from the waterwheel to the superior and inferior grinding stones at 'D' and 'E' respectively.



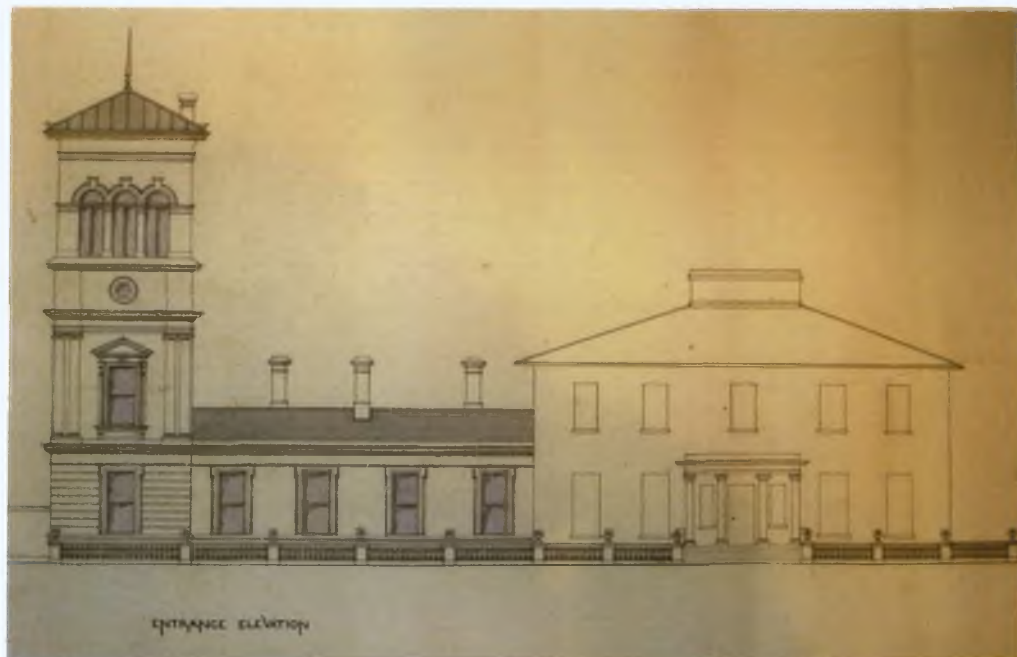
¹² Atlas' of Augustine Rollet, *Mémoire sur la meunerie, la boulangerie et la conservation des grains et des farines* ... (Paris, 1847), plate xvi, Fig. 1. ©British Library.

Appendix C

Photographs and Plans of Milford House, Co. Carlow



C1. Photograph of Milford House taken by A.H. Poole. 1913.¹

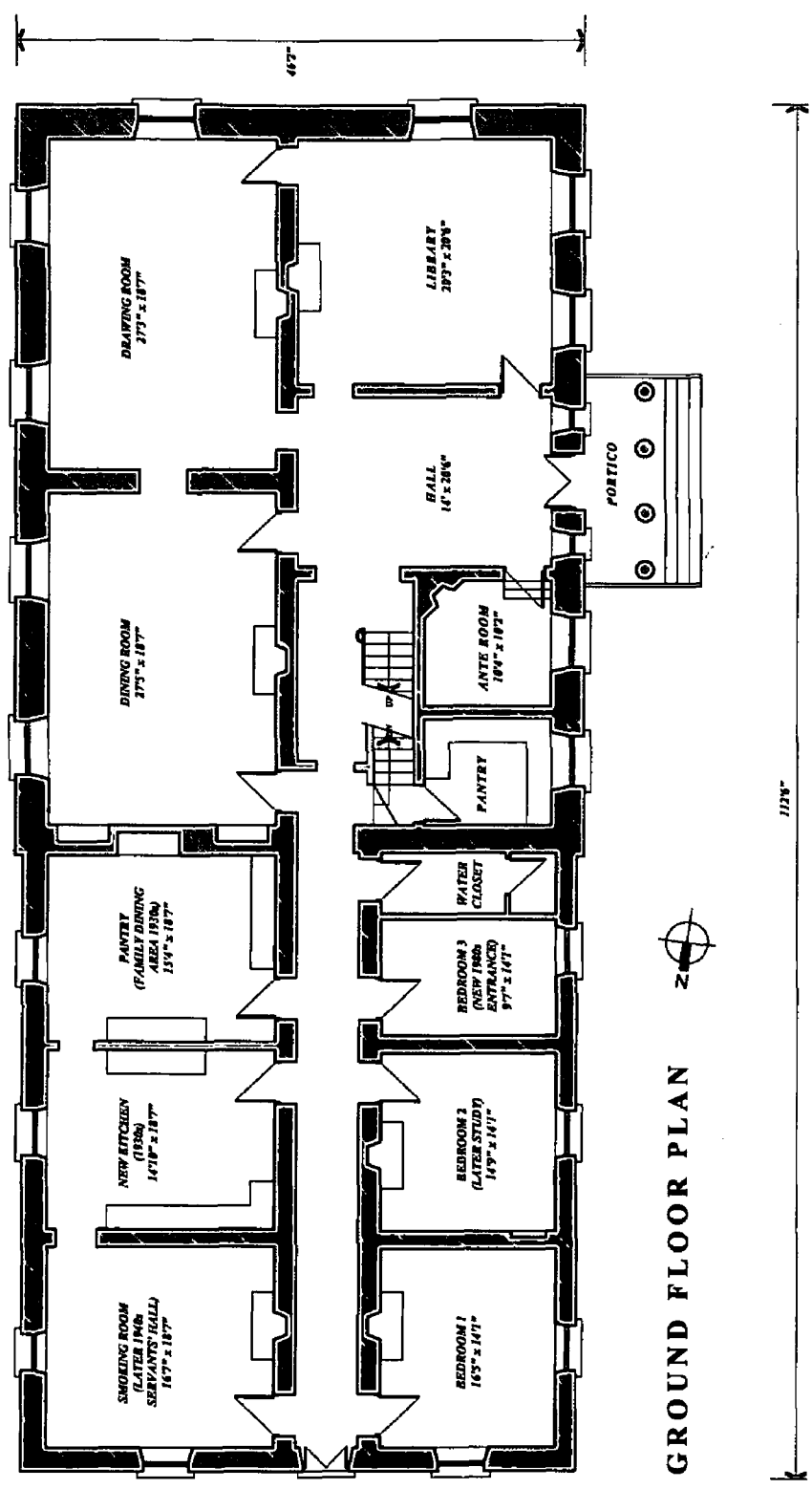


C2. Abandoned plan for a re-modelling and extension to Milford House, by architect John McCurdy, 1873.²

¹ Alexander photograph collection (APMH).

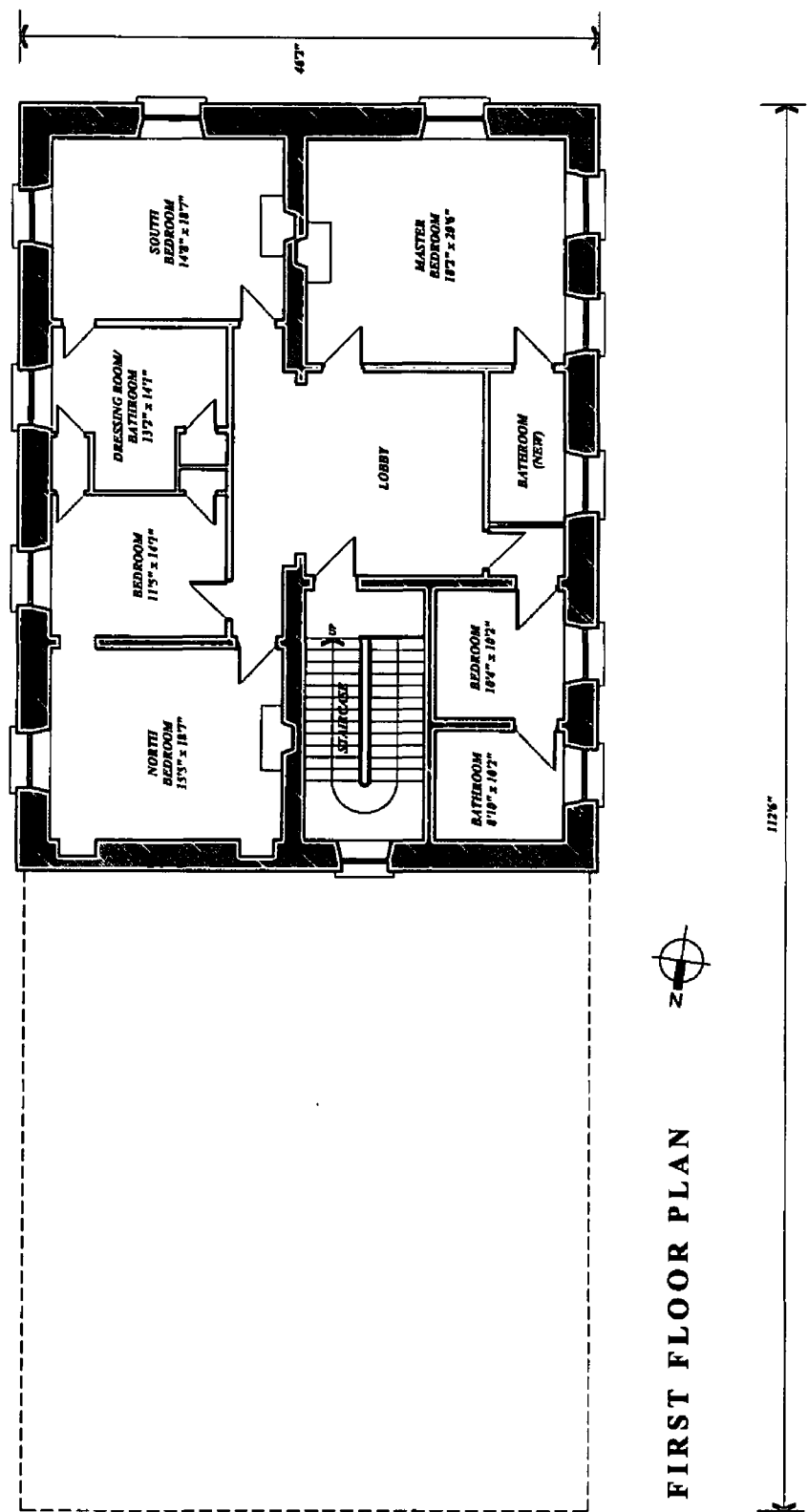
² 'Additions to Milford, Co. Carlow for John Alexander, Esq.' by John McCurdy, 1873 (APMH).

C3. Floor Plan of Milford House: Ground floor.³



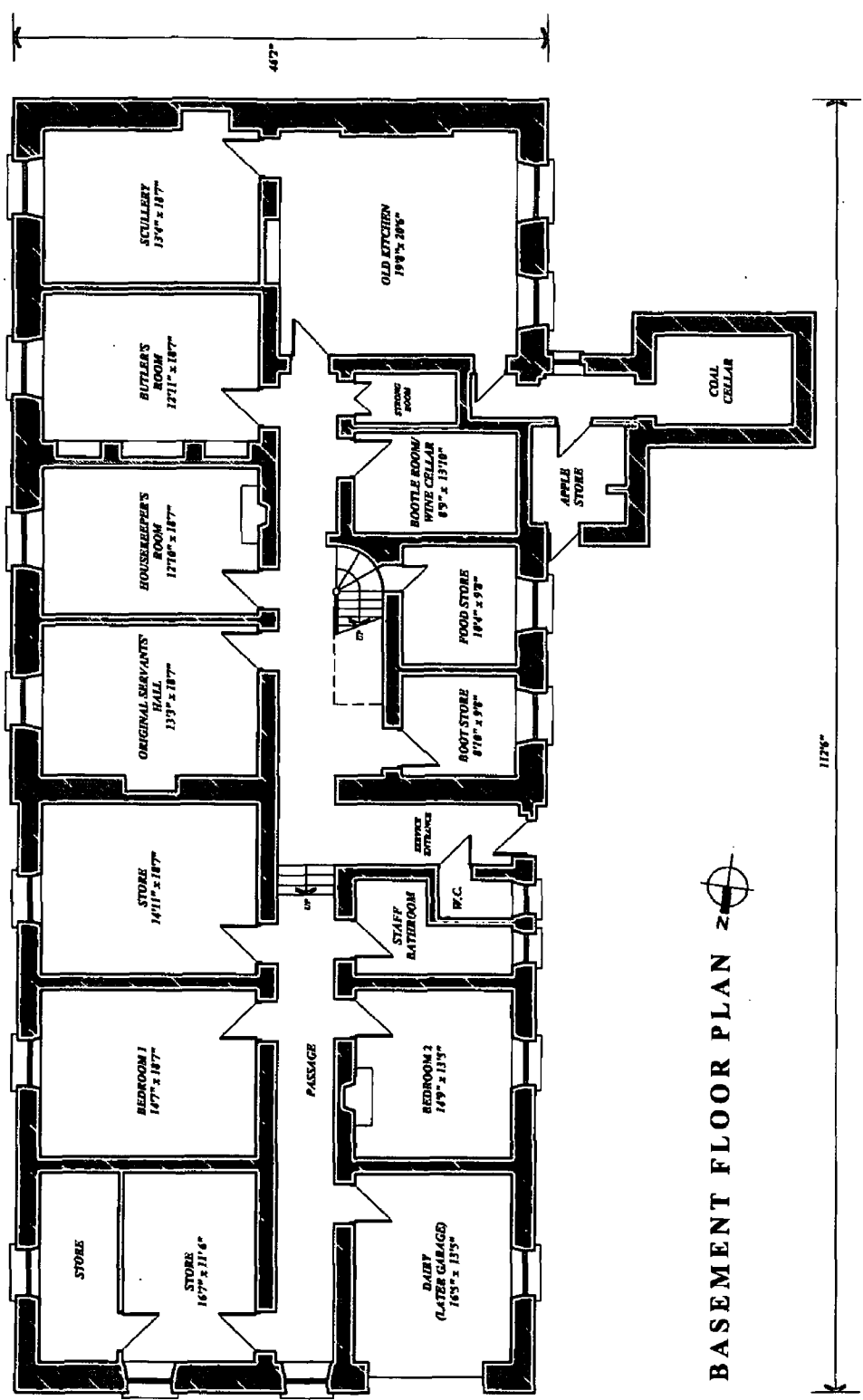
³ Plans by Paul Osborne, architect, 2015. Based on 'Survey of Milford House, Milford, Co. Carlow' by Beckett & Harrington Architects & Civil Engineers, 27 Oct. 1971, and plans entitled 'Additions to Milford Co. Carlow for John Alexander esq', by John McCurdy, architect, 1873 (APMH).

D6. Floor Plan of Milford House: first floor.⁴



⁴ Ibid.

D7. Floor Plan of Milford House basement level.⁵

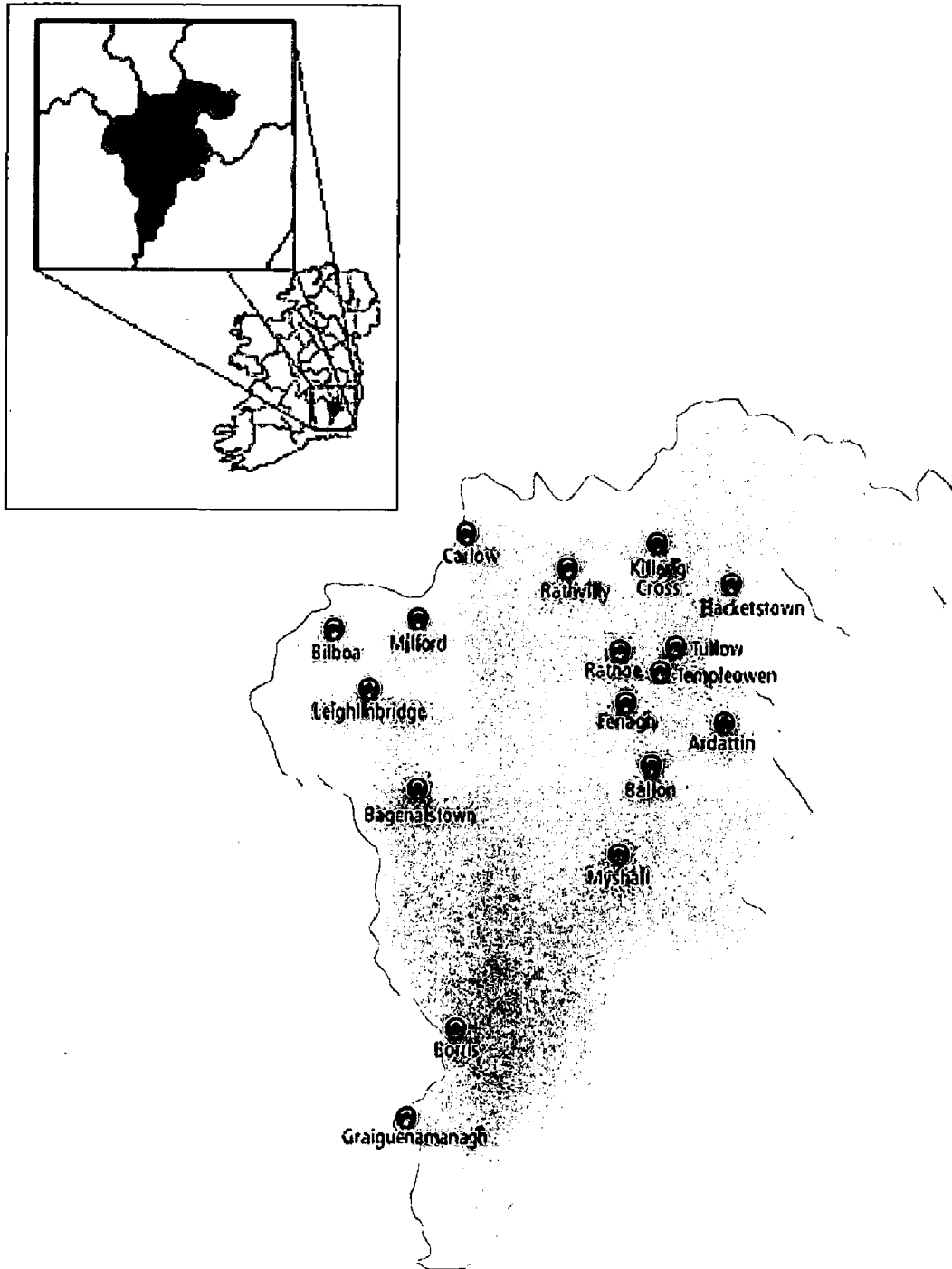


⁵ Ibid.

Appendix D

Maps showing the location of Milford landed estate, barony of Idrone west, Co. Carlow.

D1. Towns and villages of Co. Carlow, including Milford, c. 1840.¹



¹ Image from <http://www.from-ireland.net/county-carlow-genealogy/>, accessed 12 Apr. 2015.

D2. Modern-day map showing Milford landed estate in north western Co. Carlow.²

This image shows the adjacent location of the five townlands which comprised the landed estate of John Alexander I from c 1810 onwards: Ballinabranna, Ballygowan, Craanluskey, Tomard Lower and Clochristic.

X= The location of Milford House.

Y= The millyard of *John Alexander & Co.*

↑ North to Carlow
Town



↓ To Leighlinbridge.

² ©OpenStreetMap contributors. Licence CC BY-SA, and copyright regulations available at <http://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright>, accessed 35 Apr. 2015. Image modified with townland labels by author.

Appendix E

Surviving rentals of the Milford landed estate, 1824-1900.¹

Year	Rental £ s d	Total Money received. £ s d	% of Rental	Arrears Due Next Year	Arrears as % of Rental
1824	1095.18.6	1355.13.5	124%	1201.4.5	109%
1826	1735.17.3	1660.92	95.7%	75.8.1	4.3%
1827	1927.11.1½	2001.4.0	103.8%	89.16.4½	4.6%
1828	1925.9.4½	1863.9.4	96.8%	137.2.10	7.1%
1830	1952.10.3	2006.1.10½	102.8%	276.8.7½	14.1%
1831	1956.9.11½	2043.3.2½	104.5%	178.12.3	9.1%
1832	1956.10.0½	1965.9.0½	100.5%	238.8.10	12.2%
1834	1971.9.6½	1916.18.3	97.2%	242.10.3	12.3%
1835	2056.2.9	2029.4.9½	98.7%	257.3.2½	12.5%
1836	2058.9.3	2053.11.4	99.8%	194.9.7	9.5%
1837	2060.11.7½	1984.5.11	96.3%	225.5.11½	10.9%
1838	2145.1.0	2016.15.6	94.0%	322.11.6½	15.0%
1839	2187.18.5	1753.7.9	80.2%	744.18.3½	34.0%
1840	2407.0.9	2139.17.4	88.9%	1002.7.8	41.6%
1841	2382.7.3	2236.19.5	93.9%	1137.5.7	47.7%
1842	2384.10.8	2355.3.2	98.8%	1154.11.5	48.4%
1848	2205.19.1	1343.3.7	60.9%	846.11.3	38.4%
1849		1444.19.3 (partial rental)			
1855	2224.9.9	2215.0.3	99.6%	32.19.8	1.4%
1856	2217.17.0	2231.19.11	100.6%	18.16.9	0.81%
1857	2220.12.8	2212.16.8	99.6%	12.0.9	0.5%
1858	2217.11.6	2201.18.10	99.3%	27.13.5	1.2%
1859	2230.6.6	2220.0.10	99.6%	37.19.1	1.7%
1861	2195.18.7½	2148.9.1½	97.9%	111.12.3	5.1%
1862	2262.79	2226.10.2½	98.4%	103.15.0	4.6%
1863	2267.11.10	2275.14.10½	100.4%	34.8.8	1.5%
1864	2268.0.8	2168.9.11½	95.6%	133.19.9	5.9%
1865	2268.18.3	2257.9.4	99.6%	145.8.8	6.4%
1866	2327.7.6	2330.4.6	100.1%	142.11.8	6.1%
1867	2387.16.9	2370.12.11	99.3%	159.15.6	6.7%
1868	2387.16.9	2386.13.8	99.9%	160.18.7	6.7%

¹ Rentals for the Milford estate of the Alexander family, comprising the townlands of Ballinabranna, Ballygowan, Craanluskey, Tomard Lower and Clochristic (the latter up to 1869), 1824 ~ 1900 (APMH).

1869	2359.15.1	2386.13.11	101%	133.19.9	5.6%
1870	1920.9.8	2054.9.5½	107%	—	—
1871	2016.8.8	2016.8.8	100%	—	—
1872	2030.4.8	1962.1.2	96.6%	68.3.6	3.3%
1873	2039.10.8	2079.1.6	102%	12.1.8	0.6%
1874	2028.10.8	2009.7.9	100%	31.4.7	1.5%
1875	2032.5.1	2051.8.0	101%	12.1.8	0.6%
1879	2088.15.3	2077.14.3	99.5%	11.1.0	0.5%
1880	2078.2.2	1917.1.8	92.3%	338.10.10	16.3%
1881	2013.6.7	1944.17.1½	96.6%	307.0.3	15.3%
1888	1552.3.4	1337.3.7	86.1%	71.19.6	4.6%
1889	1509.15.9	1263.18.6	83.7%	104.6.6	6.9%
1890	1095.6.1	1019.14.1	93.1%	173.3.0	15.8%
1891	1063.18.7	1198.3.6	113%	31.5.7	2.9%
1892	1128.16.9	964.10.4	85.5%	105.15.5	9.3%
1893	1128.16.9	1086.2.2	96.3%	223.10.0	19.8%
1894	1053.11.9	1036.6.11	98.4%	32.4.10	3%
1895	1028.9.9	1029.5.4	100%	18.15.0	1.8%
1896	1023.9.9	1018.13.0	99.5%	18.1.9	1.8%
1897	1035.6.9	1038.4.7	100%	7.13.11	0.7%
1898	1035.1.3	1034.6.5	99.9%	8.8.9	0.8%
1899	1025.17.5	1025.17.5	100%	8.8.9	0.8%
1900	1013.5.7	1009.16.4	99.6%	9.9.9	0.9%

Appendix F

Position of John Alexander I and John Alexander II on printed lists of Carlow's Grand Jury, 1818 – 1870.¹

F1. John Alexander I on the Grand Jury of Co. Carlow,

Date	Position on printed lists of the grand jury's 23 jurors
26 Mar. 1818	23 rd
25 Mar. 1819	20 th
2 Aug. 1819	17 th
20 Mar. 1820	22 nd
22 Jul. 1822	12 th
7 Jul. 1823	9 th
29 Jul. 1824	Not on jury (John II as High Sheriff)
4 Aug. 1825	13 th
20 Mar. 1826	15 th
2 Apr. 1827	18 th
20 Mar. 1828	18 th
15 Mar. 1829	15 th
22 Mar. 1830	15 th
14 Jul. 1831	16 th
26 Mar. 1832	Not on Jury (Present for selection, but not called)
13 Jul. 1833	14 th
5 Jul. 1834	16 th
28 Mar. 1835	18 th
2 Jul. 1836	14 th
18 Mar. 1837	2 nd (However, the list is given alphabetically here)
17 Mar. 1838	9 th
15 Mar. 1839	11 th
7 Mar. 1840	Not on jury, but John II is.
24 Jul. 1841	20 th
2 Jul. 1842	Not on jury
11 Mar. 1843	14 th

¹ Various editions of *Carlow Sentinel*, *Carlow Morning Post*, *Belfast Newsletter*, *Freeman's Journal*, *Finn's Leinster Journal*, *Morning Chronicle* from 1818 to 1870.

F2. John Alexander II on Grand Jury of Co. Carlow

7 Mar. 1840	18 th
23 Mar. 1844	8 th
22 Mar. 1845	12 th
5 Jul. 1845	7 th
14 Mar. 1846	11 th
4 Jul. 1846	6 th
13 Mar. 1847	8 th
31 Jul. 1847	9 th
11 Mar. 1848	10 th
29 Jul. 1848	12 th
1849	Not on Jury
16 Mar. 1850	11 th
20 Jul. 1850	8 th
8 Mar. 1851	11 th
26 Jul. 1851	8 th
6 Mar. 1852	10 th
10 Jul. 1852	9 th
12 Mar. 1853	5 th
16 Jul. 1853	5 th
11 Mar. 1854	7 th
22 Jul. 1854	6 th
10 Mar. 1855	7 th
1856	12 th
1857	11 th
1858	10 th
1859	9 th
1860	11 th
16 Mar. 1861	9 th
1862	12 th
1863	11 th
1864	9 th
18 Mar. 1865	11 th
4 Aug. 1866	8 th
16 Mar. 1867	11 th
14 Mar. 1868	10 th
24 Jul. 1869	9 th
19 Mar. 1870	9 th

Appendix G

Election Results for Carlow County, 1830 – 1841.¹

The candidates in bold print for each election were successfully returned.

Year	Candidate	Affiliation	Votes
1830			
	Col. Henry Bruen	Tory	242
	Thomas Kavanagh	Tory	216
	Horace Rochfort	Reformer	174

Year	Candidate	Affiliation	Votes
1831			
	Walter Blackney	Reformer	
	Sir John Milley Doyle	Reformer	

Year	Candidate	Affiliation	Votes
1832			
	Walter Blackney	Reformer	657
	Thomas Wallace	Liberal	657
	Col. Henry Bruen	Conservative	483
	Thomas Kavanagh	Conservative	470

Year	Candidate	Affiliation	Votes
1835 (Jan)			
	Col. Henry Bruen	Conservative	588
	Thomas Kavanagh	Conservative	587
	Maurice O'Connell	Liberal / Reformer	554
	Michael Cahill	Liberal / Reformer	553

(On petition, Bruen and Kavanagh unseated and new writ issued)

Year	Candidate	Affiliation	Votes
1835 (Jun)			
	N.A. Vigors	Liberal / Reformer	627
	Alexander Raphael	Liberal	626
	Thomas Kavanagh	Conservative	572
	Col. Henry Bruen	Conservative	571

(On petition, Vigors and Raphael unseated and Kavanagh and Bruen declared elected, 19 Aug. 1835. Poll amended and 105 votes for Vigors and Raphael struck off)

Year	Candidate	Affiliation	Votes
1837 (Feb)			
	N.A. Vigors	Liberal / Reformer	669
	Thomas Bunbury	Conservative	633

(By-election on death of Thomas Kavanagh)

¹ Brian Walker (ed.), *Parliamentary election results in Ireland, 1801-1922* (Dublin, 1978), and Malcomson, *The Carlow Parliamentary roll* (Dublin, 1872).

Year	Candidate	Affiliation	Votes
1837 (Aug)			
	N.A. Vigors	Liberal / Reformer	730
	J.A. Yates	Liberal	730
	Col. Henry Bruen	Conservative	643
	Thomas Bunbury	Conservative	643

Year	Candidate	Affiliation	Votes
1840			
	Col. Henry Bruen	Conservative	722
	Hon. Frederick Ponsonby	Liberal	555

(By-election on death of Vigors)

Year	Candidate	Affiliation	Votes
1841			
	Col. Henry Bruen	Conservative	705
	Thomas Bunbury	Conservative	704
	J.A. Yates	Liberal	697
	Daniel O' Connell jun.	Reformer	696

Appendix H

‘Address of Fr. [Patrick] Kehoe to his congregation, from the altar of the Chapel at Leighlinbridge, on Sunday the 14th of June, 1835’.¹

‘Is there any one here who will barter his soul for his landlord? There is one wretch that has done so. Do you know who I mean? I mean Pat Neill, the hypocritical apostate lickspittle, Pat Neill and his brother. [At these words there was great laughter and some groans.] This miscreant got 70*l.* a year for voting against his country, his religion and his God on the last election, and he now expects to have that increased to 150*l.*; besides, his landlord bribes him in every possible manner, and the base wretch, who once acknowledged that if he was a scholar he would be hanged, but he is no scholar, but the most ignorant brute in the country, now exults in being the lickspittle of his landlord. Now see how he makes his apostate gain; he has a horse worth 10*l.*, and gets 20*l.* for it, and so for everything else. I say, Pat Neill, you are a detestable hypocritical apostate lickspittle, a ruffian and a miscreant, to be held up by the finger to scorn and detestation and contempt; and what are you the richer than any honest freeholder after all when your debts are paid? [Here there were bursts of laughter.] About the oath you have to take at the election, boys, I want to speak a few words to you. [After reading the bribery oath, Father Kehoe dwelt on the word ‘indirectly’.] Mark this, good people— ‘indirectly’, that is if one gets leave to draw turf, is lent sacks, is taken into his landlord’s employment, or other things of that kind for his vote. Now this is the way Pat Neill is bribed by Alexander; he gets leave to take what land he likes, is made his process-server, his time-server, and his devils-server, and he (I mean Pat Neill) goes about to the other freeholders, striving to tempt them, as the devil tried to tempt the Saviour, and says, ‘All these things will Alexander give you if you will worship him.’ ‘I expect’, say Pat Neill, ‘to have a higher post after this election, for I will have 150*l.* a year, and then you may step into my present post’. Oh the wretch! But do not barter your soul and sell your country, your religion and your God, for Alexander, or any other tyrannical landlord.

¹ PP, 1835 (547) *Report from select committee on bribery at elections; together with the minutes of evidence, appendix and index*, pp. 650-2. The above is an abridged version of the text given in the evidence of Thomas Harris Carroll who, as editor of the *Carlow Sentinel*, first published the text on 4 July 1835. For an account of the original shorthand notes made of the speech, see the evidence of Carter Hall in *ibid*, pp 712-3.

God people, I am told policemen come here; look out for them, and if you see any policemen here who are not Catholics, their only object must be to create a disturbance, therefore mark down their names and I will soon take care that they shall not long have occasion to wear their green coats and black belts. [Here every eye was directed up to the gallery and along the seats for several minutes.] [...] And who are these bloody landlords, these tyrannical despots? Why, they are fellows whose names were not known when your ancestors possessed the land they now possess; but a time will soon come that will oblige them to prove what right and title they have to their possessions. Well, good people, will you now be true to your religion, your country, and your God, in spite of the tyranny of your landlords, in spite of Alexander and his son, the two who first obliged their tenants to pay blood-stained tithes; who, after the last election, because their tenants voted for their country and their conscience, issued latitats, the expense of which amounted to 2*l.* 5*s.* 6*d.*, to enforce the payment of sums of money not exceeding 6*l.* I am told that two Conservative brats, sons of this Alexander, are now at the Cross below terrifying the freeholders as they are coming to mass, but I will teach these chaps not to terrify honest freeholders. [...] The Protestant clergy are now very different from what they were, they are no longer the fine gentlemen they were, but are in a sad hobble, and we will make them in a greater hobble; for instead of bringing up their sons and daughters to be gentlemen and ladies, they will be glad to bring them up as farmers and tradesmen, like yourselves, good people — [here, there was great laughter, and various expressions of assent.] Boys! Vigors and Raphael intend to speak to you after mass, and I desire that you will not leave the chapel yard till you have heard them. These Orange Conservatives are very confident, like the Devil when he tempted our Saviour in the wilderness; but we will strike fear and terror into their hearts on Tuesday. I hope it will not be necessary to draw the sword, for I hope the very sight of the scabbard will be enough to frighten them. But I tell you, boys, if the Conservatives gain this election — they cannot gain it — but if by perjury, threats and violence, they do gain it, if they do trick us out of our representatives on this, as they did at the last election, and be beat, more blood will flow than there is water in the River Barrow. Come then, good people, to the poll at once; I denounce that man who will not come to the poll at once, as one who is tampering with his landlord, as one who is waiting to see on which side the scales may turn, and I will suspect that man to be a renegade and an apostate.'

Appendix I

Address produced by John Alexander II in Carlow courthouse on
17 January 1853, during the nomination process for the
parliamentary seat of Carlow borough.¹

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ADDRESS

TO

JOHN ALEXANDER, ESQ.

DEAR SIR,

We, the Undersigned, being tenants on your Estate, having read with feelings of the greatest surprise and indignation certain Placards, in which you have been grossly maligned, and your character as a gentleman and a landlord abused and slandered, beg to address you, and to say that the entire statement is one got up for electioneering purposes, by parties totally unacquainted with the manner in which your property has been managed, and who are anxious to conceal the truth and pervert the facts. For many years we have held land under your father and yourself, and have invariably found you honourable, kind, and indulgent landlords. The present condition of your estate amply testifies to the manner in which you have discharged the responsible duties of Resident Proprietor for many of us, who, when we became your tenants, lived in small thatched cottages, now dwell in comfortable slated houses, built at your request, the expenses of which were generously allowed to us by you. Our farms have been improved by the same means; and through your kindness we now enjoy comparative comfort and wealth. As an employer it would be uncalled for in us to make any observations for the numerous families that obtain, not only their daily bread, but many of the comforts of life, by employment on your estate, and at the mills,—establishments the most extensive of the kind in Ireland, bear testimony, in terms of the deepest gratitude, for the kindness and benevolence which at all times have been shown them by you and your family.

That God may bless you, and spare you for a long time to us, is, Dear Sir, the sincere wish of your attached and faithful Tenantry,

William Roche,
Thomas Fitzsimons,
Tim. Hughes,
William Kenny,
Patrick Murphy,
James Keating,
James Murphy,
Francis Nolan,
John Bolton,
Martin Dillon,
Edward Horahan,
John Horahan,
Michael Horahan,
Charley Mahon,
James Whelan,
Denis Whelan,
Michael Ryan,
John Gillis,
Michael Trinity.

Michael Dillon,
James Bowe,
Pat. Costigan,
William Berigan,
Bryan McGrath,
Thomas McGrath,
Michael Kinsella,
Michael Cummins,
Martin Whelan,
James Curran,
James Kelly,
Thomas Foster,
Pat. Kelly,
Mick Nolan,
Joseph Keefe,
John Nolan,
Henry Giltrap,
Mathew Whelan,
Michael Brennan.

¹ PRONI, Rathdonnell papers, MIC 632 G6/6/143. With thanks to Turtle Bunbury for permission to include this image here.

Appendix J

Portraits and photographs of members of the Alexander family,
Milford Co. Carlow.



J1. Lithograph of John Alexander I (1764–1843), c. 1836.¹



J2. Portrait of John Alexander I (1764–1843) in 1840.²

¹ 'John Alexander' by Richard James Lane, a lithograph of 1846, NPG D21694. ©National Portrait Gallery, London [Academic licence granted].

² Portrait in oils by Martin Cregan (1840) in family possession at Milford House, Milford, Co. Carlow.



J3. Portrait of John Alexander II (1802–1885) in 1855.³



J4. Photograph of John Alexander II (1802–1885), c. 1860.⁴

³ Portrait in oils by Stephen Catterson Smith (1855) in family possession at Milford House, Milford, Co. Carlow.

⁴ Photograph courtesy of Mrs Mary McNicol and Mrs Judy Barradell Smith.



J5. Portrait of Mrs Christian Izod Alexander, née Nickson (1778-1864), wife of John Alexander I of Milford.⁵



J6. Photograph of Mrs Christian Izod Alexander (1778-1864), c. 1862.⁶

⁵ Portrait in oils by Martin Cregan (1839) in family possession at Milford House, Milford, Co. Carlow.

⁶ Photograph courtesy of Mrs Mary McNicol and Mrs Judy Barradell Smith.



J7. Portrait of Mrs Esther Alexander, née Brinkley (1824–1901), wife of John Alexander II of Milford.⁷



J8. Photograph of Mrs Esther Alexander (1824–1901), wife of John Alexander II of Milford, c. 1862.⁸

⁷ Portrait in oils by Stephen Catterson Smith (1855) in family possession at Milford House, Milford, Co. Carlow.

⁸ Photograph courtesy of Mrs Mary McNicol and Mrs Judy Barradell Smith.

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5. Interviews.

The author conducted a series of interviews with John Alexander V (1927 -) of Milford House on his family's history, between 12 Oct. 2011 and 4 May 2015, as well as an interview in Mar. 2000.