

**The Brownes of Westport House: Aristocracy, Politics
and the Exercise of Power in County Mayo: 1780-1830**

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**A dissertation submitted to Dublin City University in fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.**

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December 2009.

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Abbreviations

B.L.:	British Library
N.A.I.:	National Archives of Ireland
N.L.I.:	National Library of Ireland
N.U.I.G.:	National University Ireland, Galway
R.C.B.:	Church of Ireland Library, Dublin
R.I.A.:	Royal Irish Academy

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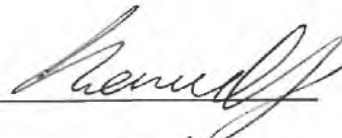
This thesis examines the political development of County Mayo during the years 1780-1830, through the lens of its leading political dynasty, the Browne family of Westport. The two central characters are John Denis Browne (1756-1809), third Lord Altamont and first marquess of Sligo, and his brother Denis Browne (1763-1828), long serving MP for the county and leading magistrate. By unlocking the personal and political history of the Brownes, the most economically powerful and politically influential family in the region, it is possible to identify and examine changing patterns of governance in Ireland. The public lives of the Brownes coincided with a gradual shift away from the patrician and paternalistic model of local governance towards a more centralised pattern emanating from Dublin and London.

Their political biographies cover pivotal stages in Irish history during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the ongoing Catholic question, the suppression of radicalism in the 1790s, the Union and manifestations of agrarian insurgency and poor relief. Throughout this period, the Brownes were in constant contact with senior officials in Dublin and this, often tense, relationship revealed a growing divergence between the ruling elite of Mayo and official government policy. The appointment of Robert Peel as Chief Secretary in 1813 intensified this divergence as the maintenance of law and order, for centuries the reserve of local gentry figures, was brought further under the direct control of Dublin.

As county Mayo moved from being a domain, controlled by a hand full of powerful families (the Brownes, Bingham, Cuffes, Dillons), to a more accessible and provincial part of the wider United Kingdom, the Brownes' political ambitions began to gradually recede, their political hegemony and influence eventually being replaced by the state and an emerging Catholic bourgeoisie in the wake of Emancipation.

Declaration:

This thesis is entirely my own work.

Signed: 

Date: 22/6/10.

Acknowledgements

Foremost thanks go to my supervisor, mentor and friend, Dr. Dáire Keogh. Without his endless patience, good humour and expertise this thesis would not have been possible. I am deeply grateful for all his help over the past four years.

I would also like to thank the staff of the History Department at St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, particularly Marian Lyons and Matthew Stout for their helpful advice and guidance. Also, to the staff of St. Patrick's College Library, a library that holds one of the finest history collections in the country.

Sincere thanks to Professor Thomas Bartlett, Professor Daniel Gahan and Professor Kevin Whelan, who read some of my chapters and gave insightful hints on how to improve them. Thanks to Dr. Sheila Mulloy and Dr. Gerry Moran for help and guidance at the initial stage of this thesis. Thanks also to Dr. Susan Hood, archivist at the RCB library. To my former colleagues, the staff of the National Library of Ireland, who put up with me with humour and good will. I am grateful to Dublin City Council for financial support and the Irish Research Council for the Humanities & Social Sciences, which provided me with a valuable research scholarship.

Most thanks, however, go to my family, who have put up with the whims and vagaries of a seemingly eternal student. To my brother Raymond and his wife Sandra for their solid advice and financial help when things got tough. My sister Emma and her husband Ian, for allowing me to get away to Manchester to recharge the batteries. To my nephews, Ciarán, Samuel and Michael and my beautiful niece, Aoife. Thanks also go to my good friends, Tim Hickey, Declan Nolan, Fergal O'Reilly, David O'Mahony, Mark Stanley, Martin Horan, Keith Murphy, Eileen Brodigan, David MacNaughton and Susan Downes.

The thesis, however, is dedicated to my parents, Ray and Joanne Kennedy, who have always supported me throughout my life with unconditional love and patience.

Introduction

The object of this thesis is to examine the shift in [regional] power in Ireland from the periphery to the centre through the lens of the political careers of John Denis Browne (1756-1809) and Denis Browne (1763-1828), two brothers from the leading aristocratic family in County Mayo — the Brownes of Westport and the Neale. The broader aim of these biographies is to use their stories in an attempt to understand and identify certain political and social changes that affected Ireland during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The central objective, however, is to demonstrate the gradual transfer in political hegemony in Ireland during this period. The public lives of the Brownes were co-terminous with a change in the political dynamics of governance in the remote parts of the kingdom. The paternal and patrician mode of local governance, pursued with rigour through the Grand Jury, Magistracy and Militia, was gradually but unmistakably superseded by a move towards a centralised government based in Dublin and London and enforced with a standardised police force that was recruited from outside the locality. The effects of this increased centralisation are demonstrated in the Brownes' political careers and the associated social aspirations that went with them.

During the 1780s and 1790s, the Brownes were the government's foremost figures of influence and consultation during periods of unrest or rebellion in the region. Denis Browne was relied upon to infiltrate agrarian organisations or inform Dublin Castle about United Irish attempts to organise in Mayo. Ironically, however, it was Denis that suffered most from the eventual centralisation of law and order. John Denis Browne, Lord Altamont at the time of the Union, was elevated to first marquess of Sligo, and his son, Howe Peter, second marquess, also enjoyed enhanced status and imperial employment as governor of Jamaica. Almost simultaneously, Denis Browne suffered both the opprobrium of the local population due to his heavy-handedness in 1798 and a gradual decline of his influence amongst senior political figures in Dublin and London. The

increasingly lukewarm responses to Browne's requests for patronage and his frequent security warnings were not unusual even during the reactionary loyalist campaigns that followed the rebellion.¹ However, while Browne was seen as 'Denis the Rope' within the popular memory of the Mayo peasantry, he became equally distanced from all establishment parties in Ireland – a shrill alarmist by the conciliatory Cornwallis administration and an inconsistent liberal by the more hawkish ultra-loyalists. Indeed, it can be argued that the attempt made by Browne to marry liberal views on Catholic Emancipation and social injustice with fiery reactionary displays in the face of sedition merely devalued his commitment to both causes.

Lord Altamont mirrored his brother's belief that social tranquillity could be achieved through a judicious mixture of coercion and concession, particularly when resident in an overwhelmingly Catholic county. However, his social standing, and his shorter parliamentary career, reduced the chances of any serious disagreements with government officials in Dublin. Denis, by contrast, had increasingly frequent clashes with figures such as Thomas Pelham, Charles Grant and most importantly, with Robert Peel. Indeed, Peel represented for the Brownes the personification of a misguided process of centralisation, which would ultimately extinguish the influence of the local gentry, the most effective agents of law and order in the country. In the face of such machinations, the Brownes sought to protect their influence and standing against all the varied threats that came against them during this period, whether it emanated from agrarian rebels, United Irishmen or an over-reaching and 'interfering' government.

The political hegemony of the Brownes in Mayo stemmed from an enduring presence they had maintained in parliament since the family conformed to Protestantism in the 1720s. Prior to this, the family had built up a large estate in Mayo following their arrival from England.² The penal laws induced John Browne (1709-1776) to conform and reverse the family's decline after the Jacobite wars. Browne was a keen agriculturist and set about improving the various farms on the estate. He also married the sister of Arthur

¹ James Kelly, *Sir Richard Musgrave, 1746-1818; ultra-Protestant ideologue* (Dublin, 2009), pp 16-17.

² See below pp 12-16.

Gore, the first Earl of Arran, which added several hundred acres to the family estate. Browne went on to establish a weaving industry at Westport and contributed personal funds to the development of the town. Browne supported the government on several occasions during the 1750s (notably voting for the Money Bill in 1753) and due to his 'industrious efforts' on their behalf, he was ennobled Baron Mount Eagle in 1760. His son Arthur was a Lieutenant Colonel in Lord Townshend's regiment, and when Townshend became Lord Lieutenant, he ennobled John Browne as Viscount Westport in 1768 and the first earl of Altamont in 1771.³ In 1752, his eldest son Peter Browne (1730-1780) married Elizabeth Kelly, the only child of Denis Kelly, then Chief Justice of Jamaica, from whom the Brownes inherited the Lisduff estate in Galway and several sugar plantations in Jamaica. This legacy made the Brownes of Westport 'Ireland's premier slave holding family'.⁴ Peter Browne's two sons were John Denis Browne and Denis Browne, the central characters of this thesis. By the time of Peter Browne's death in 1780, a very significant estate of over 100,000 acres had been built up through the purchase of new estates, the re-purchase of confiscated land and through strategic marital arrangements.⁵

In tandem with the first and second Earl's efforts to increase and improve the Browne estates, the family also established an enduring political presence in the Irish parliament. From 1760 to 1780, there were three Browne MPs representing Tuam, Mayo and Leitrim respectively. This parliamentary presence contributed greatly to the upward social mobility of the family as the eighteenth century progressed. And it was on this healthy foundation that John Denis and Denis Browne embarked on careers in both houses of parliament. Indeed, by the time Denis was returned as MP for Mayo in 1782, the Brownes enjoyed a virtual hegemony in political and official circles within the county. However, this dominance did not stem merely from large amounts of land acquisition, heightened nobility or a misplaced sense of ownership in the county. The Brownes

³ *The Parliamentary Register, or History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Commons of Ireland*, 17 vols. (Dublin 1781-97), cited in Edith Mary Johnston-Liik, *History of the Irish Parliament, 1692-1800* vol. ii. (Belfast, 2002), p. 279.

⁴ Nini Rodgers, *Ireland, Slavery and Anti-Slavery: 1612-1865* (London, 2007), p. 164.

always believed that it was their resident status that added a sense of intrinsic value to their hierarchical position in the social fabric of Mayo. They certainly believed in the precepts of paternalism when dealing with the local peasantry — an approach that they expected to be rewarded with due deference. This ‘moral economy’, or tacit understanding between governor and governed characterised the Brownes’ estates until, as Tom Bartlett asserts, it began to weaken during the violent upheavals of the 1790s.⁶ Lecky identified this complex relationship when he questioned the traditional view of landlord/tenant interaction during the eighteenth century. Instead of continuous resentment and heavy handedness, Lecky noted:

Among the many contradictions and anomalies of Irish life, nothing is more curious than the strong feudal attachment and reverence that frequently grew up between the resident Protestant landlord and his Catholic tenantry, in spite of all differences of race and creed and religion. It is a fact, which is attested by everything we know of Irish life in the eighteenth century and it subsisted side by side with the Whiteboy outrages, with vivid memories of old confiscations and with many other indications of war against property.⁷

The Brownes’ Jacobite legacy, combined with its tradition of marrying within landed Catholic families, also helped to bestow on them a unique loyalty that was not afforded by the peasantry to the absentee Bingham of Castlebar or the wayward and unreliable O’Donels of Newport Pratt. Added to this were the successful improvement initiatives adopted for the town of Westport and its economy, before and after the revolutionary wars of the 1790s and 1800s, when the ‘moral economy’ yielded to the ‘market economy’.⁸ Indeed, the family’s terrifying success in defeating the United Irishmen’s plans for Mayo added a sense of invincibility to their popular reputation, which in turn led to an uneasiness among its populace to embrace mass based agitation until the land war of the 1870s. This omnipresence of the Brownes, both militarily on the ground and politically in parliament, allowed the brothers to adopt the role of the undisputed agent of

⁵ Although the third marquis of Sligo sold 16,722 acres through the Encumbered Estates Court in 1854, he still retained by far the largest estate in Mayo, amounting to 114,881 acres: see *Return of Owners of Land of One Acre and Upward in the Several Counties and Towns in Ireland* (Dublin, 1876), p. 312.

⁶ Bartlett, Thomas, ‘An End to Moral Economy: The Irish Militia Disturbances of 1793’, in C.H.E. Philbin (ed.), *Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland* (Cambridge, 1987), pp 191-218.

⁷ William Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth century* (London, 1913), vol. iii, p. 415.

⁸ Bartlett, *Nationalism and Popular Protest*, p. 217.

government in the region, a role they enjoyed and exercised in a dictatorial fashion. As Lord Altamont succinctly put it: ‘nothing stirs in my county, without my knowledge’.⁹

The thesis is divided into chronological chapters, which examine the political and parliamentary careers of the Brownes, from the controversial election of Denis Browne in 1783, through the radical threat of the 1790s, the Union and their subsequent careers in the Imperial parliament. The first chapter of this section deals with the perception, among hostile commentators in Dublin, that the Brownes were unreliable as a political unit in parliament. Although conservative in nature, the brothers had no qualms in voting with the opposition when it suited the *real politick* of representing a Catholic county. The intention of this chapter is to examine whether this apparent unpredictability reflected *nuance* and conviction or a type of transparent self-indulgence. The second chapter of the thesis deals with the Brownes’ approach to law and order in Mayo during the United Irish threat of the 1790s and various agrarian insurgencies of the early nineteenth century. By the 1790s, the Brownes prided themselves as being the ‘eyes and ears’ of the Irish government in the west of Ireland. This chapter also examines how the Brownes harnessed their organisational skills to gather significant intelligence on the disposition of the northern Catholics that settled on their estates after the Orange pogroms of 1796.

The arrival of the northern refugees coincided with an increase of radical literature in Mayo as the United Irishmen tried desperately to politicise and organise the weakest counties in their revolutionary structure. Their arrival also coincided with the Bantry Bay scare. Indeed, Bantry was not only a watershed in the Brownes’ commitment to the security of county Mayo; it also marked a high point in their collective value to Dublin Castle. Mayo was quickly identified, correctly as it would turn out, as a potential staging post for any future attempt on Ireland by the French. As a result, the Brownes soon became an important national asset in securing the western flank of the Kingdom, while locally, as Dublin considered the Brownes to be the leading men of influence within the county, they also became a reliable buttress against any local collusion with the French. The Brownes’ steady flow of information to Dublin kept the Castle fully informed on the

⁹ Lord Altamont to Alexander Marsden, 25 Oct. 1800 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/9/104/3).

disposition of Mayo in the months leading up to the 1798 rebellion. While the west seemed to have escaped the horrors of Leinster the Brownes remained vigilant. Their frequent warnings to government were soon vindicated when a large number of peasants flocked to join a small French force, which landed in Mayo in August 1798. Indeed, the critical nature of the Brownes' role in the county increased significantly after this short-lived invasion.

The third chapter looks at the security situation in Mayo in the aftermath of the rebellion. Although the Brownes did not participate in any of the actual fighting during the French invasion, they were to the forefront of the reactionary campaign that followed in its wake. Denis Browne was particularly energetic in this role as he tried to come to terms with what he believed to have been a monstrous betrayal on the part of the peasantry of Mayo. An intense belief, that the very people that he and Lord Altamont had treated well on their estates, to whom they had given personal loans to improve their holdings, had willingly and in large numbers joined the French, caused a malignant bitterness within Denis Browne particularly. This bitterness was harnessed in the hunt for rebel fugitives after the collapse of the rebellion, and heightened by the fact that some of the outlaws had been personal friends before the outbreak. This chapter also examines the critical role that Denis Browne held in neutralising the agrarian threat of the Threshers in the years after the collapse of the United Irishmen. This secret society, which had more in common with the Whiteboy outbreaks of the 1760s than the United Irishmen, targeted local social grievances such as over-charging priests and tithe proctors. While the Special Commission of 1806, under the guidance of Browne, was crucial in reversing the group's momentum, its presence continued until the 1810s, when it was superseded by the more overtly sectarian and widespread sedition of the Ribbonmen.

The fourth chapter looks at the threat to county Mayo from Ribbon societies that were established in the neighbouring counties of Roscommon and Galway. The attempt to swear large parts of the county into this 'mutual defence' society was part of an early attempt to expand the writ of the society out of the natural strongholds of Leinster and

Ulster.¹⁰ Denis Browne and his nephew, the second marquess of Sligo, were to the forefront in defending the various crossings into Mayo and later successfully stopped, what one local landowner, described as being an attempt to initiate ‘the Rebellion of 1820’.¹¹ The struggle against the Ribbonmen was also remarkable because of the presence of the newly formed police constabulary, which had been dispatched to the area by the Dublin government. The local ‘magistrate and militia’ approach of Denis Browne came into conflict with the attempt by government to introduce a more impartial and centralised approach to policing. The fact that the Brownes believed that they had yet again delivered Mayo from an extensive conspiracy simply confirmed their belief in a tried and tested form of civil control. However, Peel’s successor, Charles Grant, was determined to press ahead with plans for a countrywide constabulary regardless of its lack-lustre display on the borders of Mayo.

The final chapter deals with the parliamentary careers of the Brownes after the Act of Union. In the aftermath of 1798, the brothers lobbied energetically for Pitt’s plan for an Anglo-Irish union and informed government officials of those in the county who were indifferent or antagonistic towards it. The new century was a time of great optimism for the Brownes, as they looked forward to harnessing the full power of a united parliament and Kingdom to reinvigorate the economy and society of the west in the wake of the recent rebellion. However, the sources of political patronage, which was needed to accomplish these grand designs, began to seep slowly away from Denis Browne in particular, which led to bitter recrimination on his part. His disillusionment with the economic hope of Union was vented in his economic manifesto of 1822, which identified the failings of the previous decades and the remedies that could be administered by an enlightened government. This section also examines the consistency that the Brownes showed throughout their lives in calling for Catholic relief and Emancipation. This demonstrated a driving principle that influenced most of their actions in parliament, a pattern that loyalists often mis-represented as opportunist and inconsistent. However, they were equally consistent in the view that reform and Emancipation should be within

¹⁰ Jennifer Kelly, *The Downfall of Hagan: Sligo Ribbonism in 1842* (Dublin, 2008), p. 51.

¹¹ J. C. Strickland to Denis Browne, 16 Jan. 1820 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers 2175/1).

the bounty or gift of government, and not at the behest of, or in response to, any illegal or conspiratorial endeavours on behalf of the people of Ireland. On the contrary, the Brownes believed that violence and illegality should always be swiftly and unequivocally crushed. The chronology of the last chapter may, at times, be concurrent with chapters three and four. However, the prime intention of all five chapters is to examine how the Brownes belief system and policies, which established their political hegemony in the region, ultimately contributed to their eclipse in a shifting socio-political landscape. It is also an attempt to understand the Brownes' particular and unique blend of politics and lobbying. There was something very idiosyncratic in their often conflicting principles. Their liberal exhortations in parliament often coincided with violent campaigns on the ground in Mayo. Several months after the 1798 rebellion, Lord Altamont defended the Royal College of Maynooth against a move for its closure by Lord Clare on account of the conduct of the clergy during the insurrection. Altamont, who intimated that only a tiny minority of the Catholic priesthood had been involved, was the sole dissenting voice in forwarding the bill to committee stage.¹² At the same time, Denis Browne was energetically involved in having two priests hanged in Castlebar, stating that they had been recruiting sergeants for the French. In 1805, Lord Sligo was corresponding with Denys Scully, an active member of the Catholic Association, while Denis believed the organisation was simply a cover for a new system of rebellion.

Such apparent contradictions were, for the most part, absent in the politics of their peers during this period. The political records of the largest families in Connacht broadly underline this peculiarity. The Bingham (Lucans) of Castlebar were consistently and bitterly opposed to emancipation, habitually absentee and pro-martial law in times of upheaval. Similarly, the O'Hara family of Annaghmore, County Sligo, was conservative in outlook. Charles O'Hara (1746-1822) took an active part in suppressing the 1798 rebellion and strongly opposed the Act of Union on loyalist principles. The Dillons of Clonbrock in counties Galway and Mayo were similarly consistent in their politics. However, unlike Denis Browne, third Baron Clonbrock, Robert Dillon (1807-93),

¹² James Kelly (ed.), *The proceedings of the Irish House of Lords, 1771-1800* (3 vols, I.M.C. Dublin, 2008) iii, 385.

successfully used the patronage and assistance of Peel to become a representative peer of Ireland by 1838, an honour that was never afforded to Browne.¹³ James Cuffe's (1747-1821) reliability as an MP for Mayo before the Union helped him to become Baron Tyrawley in 1797. However, the paucity of published (and unpublished) literature, relating to the influential gentlemen of county Mayo during this period, makes a comparative analysis with the Brownes extremely difficult. However, some comparative literature can be found, which focuses on influential landowners in other parts of Ireland. Unfortunately for this study, most of the work is not political in nature and concentrates on the management of landed estates within an economic and social framework. Nevertheless, there are some valuable recent publications, most notably within the *Maynooth Studies in Irish Local History* series.

Anthony Doyle's work on Charles Powell Leslie's estates in county Monaghan is of particular worth. The Leslie family, like the Brownes, had ancestral links with Catholic Jacobites and had conformed to Protestantism early in the eighteenth century. Similarly to Lord Altamont, Charles Powell Leslie [I] was interested in the development of his estates and was noted as an improving landlord.¹⁴ Charles Powell Leslie [II] came to national attention as colonel of the Monaghan militia during the suppression of the 1798 rebellion. However, unlike the Brownes, Leslie was a life-long opponent of Catholic reform, citing any concession as a diminution of Protestant ascendancy, which he believed was vital to the future success of his estates.¹⁵ While the study is helpful in identifying the social comparisons and contrasting political views of the family, it is essentially an economic study of Leslie's estate, with particular attention given towards the business of managing a landed estate after the Napoleonic wars. A similar work by William H. Crawford looks at the management of the Earl of Abercorn's estates in Tyrone and Donegal from 1757 to 1789. Abercorn's absenteeism often hindered the economic and social progress that he planned for his estates, his land agents often failing

¹³ R. G. Thorne, (ed.) *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons, 1790-1820* (5 vols. London, 1986) iii, p. 280. When Denis Browne retired in 1826, his son, James, requested a peerage for him. This was rejected by government.

¹⁴ Anthony Doyle, *Charles Powell Leslie II's estates at Glaslough, County Monaghan; 1800-1841* (Dublin, 2001), p. 7

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 58.

to cope with food crises and natural disasters.¹⁶ It was this type of absenteeism that Denis Browne fiercely attacked throughout his parliamentary career. He deemed it an irresponsible dereliction of duty that eroded the paternal relationship that a reliable landowner should have with his tenants. In Browne's view, the absence of a resident landlord often set a precedent for ensuing violence and outrage.

Denis Cronin's examination of the French estates in Galway offers fascinating insight into the dealings of leading 'improver', Robert French of Monivea, while Patricia Friel has described the impact Frederick Trench had on his estate in county Laois. Again, Cronin and Friel both concentrate on estate management and gradual aesthetic improvements. This material is important in analysing Lord Altamont's improvements to Westport, but the lack of political biography limits a comparable assessment between these important landowners and the Brownes.¹⁷ Similarly Gerry Lyne's study of the Lansdowne estates in Kerry examines the role of William Stuart Trench in its administration during the post-Famine period. Nevertheless, Lyne's book is helpful in explaining the rationale behind assisted emigration, a practice that Denis Browne supported in the 1820s and one which Howe Peter Browne eventually adopted in the late 1830s.¹⁸ Unfortunately, in the modern historical literature that examines the broader themes of Irish history, such as the 1798 rebellion, the Act of Union and the Catholic question, the contribution of the Brownes is largely overlooked, apart, perhaps, from Denis's reactionary campaign of 1798.

While Lord Altamont was elevated to marquess in 1801, he had hoped that a dukedom would be offered. Denis Browne received no further addition to the title of 'Right Honourable' during his lengthy career. Various attempts to pursue policies of terror with progressive legislation evidently confused both government officials and Catholics alike,

¹⁶ William H. Crawford, *The Management of a Major Ulster Estate in the late Eighteenth Century; The Eight Earl of Abercorn and his agents* (Dublin, 2001), p. 65.

¹⁷ Denis Cronin, *A Galway Gentleman in the Age of Improvement* (Dublin, 1995), Patricia Friel, *Frederick Trench (1746 - 1836) and Heywood, Queens County; The Creation of a Romantic Demesne* (Dublin, 2000).

¹⁸ Gerry Lyne, *The Lansdowne Estate in Kerry under the agency of William Stuart Trench, 1849-72* (Dublin, 2001), pp 25-59

and often blurred the Brownes' overall political agenda. Reflecting a Burkean political outlook, they regarded the clergy, the merchant middle-class and the remaining Catholic gentry as the 'natural leaders' of the lower class labourers and peasants. The Brownes strongly believed that the removal of Catholic grievances would induce these 'natural leaders' to become full beneficiaries of the British constitution and work in conjunction with the Protestant magistrates and MPs to ensure that a content and tranquil peasantry replaced the 'sullen and mischievous' disposition that had erupted at various periods through history. It was a sound theory, which was born out of a paternal interest in the well being of their tenants. However, the fact that this principle was always superseded by draconian and arbitrary action during periods of unrest led many Mayo Catholics to believe that it was held lightly by the family. This ongoing conflict also meant that the Brownes' importance to Dublin Castle varied as different political problems unfolded. As Mayo moved from being a virtual 'realm' that was controlled by a hand full of powerful families to a more accessible and provincial part of the wider United Kingdom, the Brownes' political ambitions were often met with mixed reactions, which ranged from heady encouragement to weary exasperation.



John Denis Browne (1756-1809).
Portrait by Sir William Opie.



Denis Browne (1763-1828).
Portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds.¹⁹

¹⁹ Portraits reproduced courtesy of Westport House.

Chapter One

Conviction or expediency? The Brownes and the politics of County Mayo, 1780-1802

At various times in their long political careers, both Browne brothers were chided for their apparent inconsistency. Denis Browne had been an MP for only eight years when an informed commentator, writing in 1790, described his career as erratic and largely unreliable, arguing that ‘at various times he [had] veered about to every point of the political compass’.¹ Indeed, an earlier comment by John R. Scott had predicted this inconsistency — ‘his parliamentary conduct is not easily described by any one specific term ... undulating from the Court party to opposition, in a course not unlike Hogarth’s line of beauty, but without any marked consistency or plan. What it will be hereafter no time past enables us to prognosticate’.² There was indeed unpredictability about their lengthy careers but the charges of self-service and opportunism failed to capture the very real challenges of representing an overwhelming Catholic county with one of the smallest bodies of freehold electors in the entire country. Many of these freeholders were loyal to the Brownes’ more traditional political adversaries, such as the Bingham and the O’Donels. While the political challenges they faced were not insignificant, their apparent inconsistency in Dublin and London often earned populist dividends where it mattered, on the ground in Mayo and Connacht.

The Brownes’ political path brought them on a curious and unpredictable journey — from duelling with opponents before elections, to aligning with the radicalised Catholic Committee of the 1790s; from supporting Irish economic freedom to their energetic support of the union in the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion. The parliamentary careers of

¹ Falkland [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. 76.

² Falkland [John Robert Scott], *A Review of the Principal Characters of the Irish House of Commons*, (Dublin, 1789), p. 165.

the Brownes also added considerable weight to their landed aristocratic status and consolidated their position as the leading men of influence and opinion in the county.

During the 1780s, 'Fighting' George Robert Fitzgerald, the unstable Mayo aristocrat, condemned the Mayo gentry as 'lazy vermin fattening on the flesh of the poor'.³ That Fitzgerald included the Brownes in this condemnation along with the established Bingham and Dillons was a measure of the social mobility that the Westport family had accomplished during the eighteenth century. By the time the legendary Fitzgerald had been hanged by Denis Browne (as High Sheriff) in 1786, the Brownes had become the leading names in this triumvirate of powerful families. Their hold on nearly all the levers of political, judicial and civic power in Mayo (combined with the absenteeism of the Bingham and the indebtedness of the Dillons) enabled them to become the dominant influence within the ruling elite of the county. This political influence, when combined with the largest ownership of acreage and rents in the county, could only have led to the type of political dominance that the family enjoyed for many decades in the province of Connacht and beyond.

This dominance was built upon a solid foundation that had been laid over several centuries by the wider Browne family. The family had originally come to Ireland from Sussex in England during the sixteenth century. Through marriage arrangements with native Irish landowners, such as the Bourkes, and by speculative purchase, they built up a small estate near the Neale in southern Mayo. As a Catholic family, they were fortunate that their lands were situated in Connacht, and therefore not part of the Cromwellian confiscations. John Browne III (1638-1711) was foremost in the early rise of the family. A successful lawyer, he married Maud Bourke, daughter of Viscount Mayo and descendant of the pirate queen, Grace O'Malley (1530-1603). Through this marital arrangement, Browne managed to increase his estate in Mayo and Galway.⁴ Browne supported the Jacobite cause during the Williamite wars, was appointed a Colonel in the army and kept up a steady supply of ammunition to the Jacobites from his iron mines

³ John F. Quinn, *A History of Mayo* (3 vols, Ballina, 1993), i, 16.

⁴ Denis Browne, *Westport House and the Brownes* (Westport, 1981), pp 11-14.

near Westport. Indeed, it was this John Browne that changed the name of the town from ‘Cathair na Mart’ to the more respectable (and less Gaelic sounding) ‘Westport’ by the 1680s.⁵ Browne was part of the negotiations which led to the Treaty of Limerick in 1691, a fact that not only saved his estates from division or destruction, but also provided the family with a high level of Catholic support in the county even after his grandson, John Browne IV (1709-76) conformed to the established church before being sent to Oxford University in 1725. This Catholic support was the great political strength of the Brownes and John Browne’s conversion was not viewed (by Catholics) as a cynical move of social promotion, but as a pragmatic and necessary bid to retain the family estate and, more importantly, to embark on a political career that could represent their needs in parliament. Browne entered parliamentary politics in 1744 and held the seat for Castlebar until 1760. However, hopes of a Catholic MP by proxy were soon dashed as John Browne was hopelessly inactive in parliament. Indeed, a warrant for his arrest was issued in December 1757 for defaulting on a call of the House of Commons without offering an excuse for non-attendance. Browne had to inform the Speaker that he had been injured in a fall from his horse, for the order to be rescinded.⁶ When he did attend, however, he was a strong supporter of the government and was nominated for a peerage when he announced his retirement from parliament in 1760. Later that decade (1768) he was created baron Monteagle.⁷

(i.) Early foundations:

Browne was far more interested in agriculture than in politics and he sought actively to extend his estate with further purchases and to replace the old village of Cathair na Mart with the new planned town of Westport, where he established a thriving linen industry, an important contribution to his significant wealth. He was also an excellent farmer and

⁵ Desmond McCabe, ‘Westport’ in Anngret Simms and J. H. Andrews (eds), *More Irish country towns* (Dublin, 1995), p. 135.

⁶ Edith Mary Johnston-Liik, *History of the Irish Parliament, 1692-1800* (6 vols, Belfast, 2002), iii, 287 (hereafter Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl*).

⁷ Browne, *Westport House*, p. 18.

improved the fertility of some of the most barren patches of the estate.⁸ Simultaneously, he began a programme to transform the family home at Westport House, employing the distinguished architect and engineer Richard Castle (Cassels), who had also designed Powerscourt House and Leinster House. Browne's upward mobility was further enhanced when he was created Viscount Westport in 1770 and finally, as the first Earl of Altamont in 1771.⁹ The primary reason behind this promotion in peerage lay in the fact that there was the potential to create a strong government bloc in the west due to the fact that his four sons all sat in parliament between 1768 and 1783. His eldest son and the second Earl, Peter Browne (1730-1780), was elected as MP for Mayo County in 1761 and held his seat for seven years.¹⁰ The election of 1761 clearly showed a change in the political balance and nature of interests in the county as the Gore and Cuffe families lost their seats to the Brownes and Bingham. Browne received 454 votes (237 £10 freehold, 217 40s freehold); Sir Charles Bingham, 444 votes (231 £10 freehold, 213 40s freehold); Richard Gore, 364 votes (117 £10 freehold, 247 40s freehold) and James Cuffe, 333 votes (120 £10 freehold, 213 40s freehold). Sir Roger Palmer came in a distant fifth place as his votes were not recorded.¹¹ Cuffe had been one of the incumbent MPs but was elderly and died the following year. Richard Gore (whose cousin had been the other sitting MP) managed to acquire one of the two Castlebar borough seats without any opposition. Bingham also retained his borough seat as recompense in case he lost the higher profile county seat in the future. The Castlebar borough had been granted in 1614 by King James I and throughout the eighteenth century it belonged to the Bingham family. By 1790, it was described as a closed borough with its electors consisting of a small number of burgesses (13 in all) who were non-resident and entirely under the patronage of the Bingham.¹²

Peter Browne added substantial tracts of land to the Browne estate when he married Elizabeth Kelly, the only child of Denis Kelly, the Chief Justice of Jamaica. It was

⁸ Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland*, vol. 1 (London, 1780), p. 359. Also, for earlier Browne improvements in the Westport region, see Dr Richard Pococke's *Tour in Ireland in 1752* (London, 1891), pp 97-8.

⁹ Browne, *Westport House*, p. 18.

¹⁰ Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, ii, 291.

¹¹ *Dublin Journal*, 16-19 May 1761.

¹² Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, ii, p. 299.

through this arrangement that the Brownes inherited the sugar plantations of Jamaica as well as the Lisduff estate in Co. Galway. After his marriage Browne insisted in being referred to as Peter Browne-Kelly. Browne-Kelly was the father of John Denis and Denis Browne, and the future dean of Ferns, the Rev. Peter Browne, who he fathered outside marriage. Rev. Browne played an important role as trustee to many of the deeds enacted by his half brother, the future marquess of Sligo.¹³

Peter Browne-Kelly's brothers held prominent parliamentary seats for the family during the eighteenth century: Arthur Browne, took the seat for Mayo County but only held it for three years between 1776 and 1779 before successfully passing it to his brother George, who held it until his death in 1782, when Denis Browne was returned for the seat. Before Denis Browne embarked on his parliamentary career, his uncle, James Browne, was the most consistent parliamentary performer of the family. He was MP for Jamestown, county Leitrim from 1768 to 1776 (taking the seat from Sir Roger Palmer who had also lost out to the Brownes in the 1761 Mayo election), for Tuam during 1776-83 and for Castlebar during the years 1783-90.¹⁴ It was James's seat in Jamestown that John Denis purchased from Gilbert King in 1776 and, in 1777, a parliamentary list noted that the Browne family were 'much united and attached to each other'.¹⁵

This solid presence in the Irish parliament was significant in giving the Browne family much-needed experience and exposure in Dublin and the influence to become the paramount political dynasty in Mayo by the 1770s. Their 'pro-Catholic' stance, which had the potential to cause electoral problems for the family, became a great advantage, particularly after 1793, when the relief act guaranteed a larger Catholic electorate in the county. Indeed, the pinnacle of the Brownes' representation in Mayo coincided with this period of increased Catholic enfranchisement until the forty shilling freehold was abolished in 1829. By 1784, there were 1,000 Protestant freehold voters in County Mayo; after the Catholic Relief Act of 1793 the register rose dramatically to approximately 12,000 in 1802. It dipped slightly in 1814 to 11,000 before peaking in 1815 at c.16,000.

¹³ Calendar of Westport Estate Papers, Collection List no.78, p. 15

¹⁴ Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, ii, 279-91.

¹⁵ Parliamentary List 1777 (vol. 1), cited in Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, ii, 289.

After Catholic Emancipation, the register collapsed to a mere 1,055.¹⁶ It is significant that even during periods of martial law, agrarian outbreaks and reactionary responses, the more open the electoral register was in County Mayo, the more popular the Brownes were in the eyes of its voters. Following Emancipation, the family's political fortunes diminished as a result of the reduced register, a depleted population following the Famine and the hostile machinations of an invigorated Catholic hierarchy led by the archbishop of Tuam, John MacHale.



Above: In Francis Wheatley's famous painting of the Irish House of Commons, Lord Altamont can be seen on the extreme right in blue coat and black hat and is sitting beside John Fitzgibbon [Lord Clare].

John Denis Browne became third earl of Altamont in December 1780, and he assumed the mantle of head of the Browne faction in parliament when the Lord Lieutenant, the duke of Portland, dismissed his uncle, James (MP for Tuam), from an influential legal post (Prime Sergeant), during 1782, in order to vacate the office for a personal friend,

¹⁶ R. G. Thorne, *The history of parliament*, ii, p. 675, Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, ii, p. 298; B.M. Walker (ed.), *Parliamentary election results in Ireland, 1801-1922* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 1978), p. 230.

Walter Hussey Burgh.¹⁷ With this move, the whole family, which had been hitherto steadfast supporters of the government, went over to the opposition benches in the Dublin parliament. Altamont also resigned his governorship of county Mayo as a further protest. Furthermore, he wrote to Portland and threatened that the family could easily hold three Commons seats after the next election. When these were added ‘on any division’, he reminded the Lord Lieutenant that this could lead to ‘a difference of seven voices in the Commons and two in the House of Lords against the Government’.¹⁸ The 1782 Parliamentary List, with undisguised hostility, described the earl’s assumption of ‘Mr. Flood’s principles’ as a tactical exercise that had ‘given him a little popularity’, before labelling him ‘a weak, vain, stingy young man’.¹⁹

When James Browne was re-appointed Prime Sergeant by the Duke of Rutland in 1784, the family had no qualms in reverting back to the government benches for the next few years. During the 1770s, Browne had voted inconsistently, often supporting Henry Grattan’s motions for retrenchment and Catholic relief, while opposing his declaration of the ‘Rights of Ireland’ in 1780. In 1783, James Browne voted for Flood’s motion calling for parliamentary reform while in 1785, after his re-instatement, he voted with the government for the Commercial propositions.²⁰ The unpredictable, and undoubtedly opportunist, nature of the Brownes’ politics had shown itself during James’s career and this was to increase after Lord Altamont assured the return of his brother, Denis, as Member for Parliament for County Mayo, upon the death of his uncle, George Browne, in 1782.²¹ However, Denis had to stand for a popular vote the following year and eventually won the seat after a tempestuous election campaign. Indeed, the campaign between Browne and the other candidates, George and Charles Fitzgerald, (the father and brother of ‘Fighting’ George Robert Fitzgerald) proved to be so violent and divisive that a parliamentary select committee was dispatched from Dublin to investigate the election’s outcome. Browne was accused of employing ‘Oak boys’ to threaten and

¹⁷ Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, iii, 285

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Johnston-Liik does not identify the primary source for this quotation.

¹⁹ Parliamentary List 1782 (vol. 1), cited in *ibid.*, iii, 289.

²⁰ Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, iii, 286.

²¹ Parliamentary List 1782 (vol. 1), cited in *ibid.*, iii, 289.

intimidate potential supporters of the Fitzgeralds, and several witnesses were brought before the committee to examine the veracity of the accusation.²²

(ii.) The election of 1783 and its aftermath:

Henry Kearney, a freeholder from Castlebar, was called as a witness for the Fitzgeralds during the inquiry and he alleged that the Brownes had organised a serious campaign of violence and intimidation against undecided voters at the courthouse in Castlebar. Kearney stated that ‘on the last day of the election, a number of persons rushed into court with oak branches, but [I] could not form a judgement [of] how many there were’.²³ He continued that at the time the Fitzgeralds ‘had more to poll’ but were ‘afraid to remain in court’ because of the presence of so many men with ‘oak branches in their hats and cudgels in their hands’.²⁴ Another witness, William Downey, stated that he had intended to vote for the Fitzgeralds but that ‘the people who were on the session house stairs with oak boughs in their hats hindered him’. Downey also alleged that the ‘Oak boys were the freeholders of Colonel [Denis] Browne’.²⁵ As well as intimidation, bribery was also alleged against Browne and his fellow-sitting member for Mayo, Colonel James Cuffe.²⁶ James Masterson, a tenant of the Fitzgeralds, alleged that both gave him two guineas to change his vote and offered him three more for ‘every freeholder of Captain Fitzgerald’ that he could persuade to vote for them.²⁷ The Mayo election of 1783 merely reflected the realities of Irish politics in the late eighteenth century. Indeed, the tactics of Cuffe and Browne were widespread in Ireland and Britain and accepted as the cut and thrust of contemporary hustings.²⁸ As a result, the Select Committee viewed the contest to have been fairly fought and concluded that ‘the sitting members were duly elected and

²² *Minutes of evidence taken before the select committee on the Mayo election of 1783* (N.L.I. pamphlet LO 3285), pp 10-11 (hereafter *Minutes of evidence ... Mayo election ... 1783*).

²³ *Minutes of evidence taken before the select committee on the Mayo election of 1783* (N.L.I. pamphlet LO 3285), pp 10-11 (hereafter *Minutes of evidence ... Mayo election ... 1783*).

²⁴ *Minutes of evidence ... Mayo election ... 1783*, p. 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁶ Right Honourable James Cuffe M.P. (1747-1821), created Baron Tyrawley in 1797.

²⁷ *Minutes of evidence ... Mayo election ... 1783*, pp 29-30.

returned'.²⁹ However, the attempt by the Fitzgeralds to put an end to Denis Browne's embryonic parliamentary career was not lost on the Browne family.

Browne's first contribution to parliamentary politics came later in 1783 when he joined a group of opposition figures led by Henry Flood, which called for a curb on the national debt by reducing expenditure, particularly military expenditure. Flood attempted to demonstrate that the rise in the country's debt coincided with the augmentation of the army.³⁰ Browne swung resolutely behind the motion for retrenchment, citing the belief that a sizeable standing army would be 'an army of observation', that would watch for 'a favourable moment to enslave us'.³¹ Reflecting a preference for a volunteer force in time of emergency, Browne added that 'if 50,000 men were wanted for the common cause we would immediately have them'.³² On 10 November 1783, Flood presented a motion that aimed at reducing public expenditure by £250,000 a year but it prompted a wide ranging debate in which the value of the army to the kingdom and the empire was repeatedly cited.³³ Browne was nominated as teller for the 'Ayes' but Flood's motion was soundly defeated by 143 votes to 65.³⁴ Browne was disappointed by the defeat, but a month later, in December 1783, he delivered his first lengthy speech to the chamber, lamenting the absence of Henry Flood (through illness). He also spoke of the need to immediately retrench government spending and inform parliament of the plight of the 'beggars and lower classes' in county Mayo, 'who are obliged to sell their provisions to satisfy the landlord, who himself can only get the means of existing from his lands'.³⁵ It had been a confident start to Browne's parliamentary career and, for the time being, he positioned himself firmly in the small corps of opposition figures that included Lawrence Parsons, Capel Molyneux, John Philpot Curran, Isaac Corry and Luke Gardiner.³⁶

²⁸ James Kelly, *That Damn'd Thing called Honour: Duelling in Ireland, 1570-1860* (Cork, 1995), p. 141.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

³⁰ James Kelly, *Henry Flood; Patriots and Politics in Eighteenth Century Ireland* (Dublin, 1998), p. 354.

³¹ *Irish Parliamentary Register*, 3 Nov. 1783, vol. ii, p. 85.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Kelly, *Henry Flood*, p. 354

³⁴ *Irish Parliamentary Register*, 10 Nov. 1783, vol. ii, p. 107.

³⁵ *Irish Parliamentary Register*, 9 Dec. 1783, vol. ii, p. 319.

³⁶ Kelly, *Henry Flood*, p. 354

Back in Westport, Browne soon concentrated on the security problem posed by George Robert Fitzgerald, the wayward sibling of the Fitzgerald family. ‘Fighting’ George Robert Fitzgerald was a legendary character in Mayo during this period, and caused as much upset to his own family as he did to the wider establishment with his maverick and outlandish actions.³⁷ Fitzgerald was the eldest son of George Fitzgerald and Mary Harvey, one time Lady in Waiting to Princess Amelia, the future Queen, and was educated at Eton before he traveled extensively on the continent. The family was also connected, through marriage, to the Fitzgeralds of Leinster, while George Robert’s maternal uncle was the influential bishop of Derry, Frederick Augustus Hervey.³⁸ More often than not, Fitzgerald’s activities in Mayo garnered admiration from the local peasantry due to his constant scrapes with the law and persistent (but probably insincere) calls to alleviate the plight of the poor. Fitzgerald was also one of Ireland’s most aggressive duellists and fought at least twelve duels in the course of his short life.³⁹

By 1781 he had gathered a small army of followers around him as his ‘Volunteer Corps’ and after a fierce quarrel with his father, decided to manacle him to his pet bear before imprisoning him in a ‘cave’, which was actually an out-house near the family home.⁴⁰ Fitzgerald then placed a cannon and 200 men around his father’s house and cut off all communications for nearly five months. Fitzgerald was subsequently sentenced to three years in prison. He soon escaped and remained at large for several months before being re-arrested in Dublin and imprisoned for a further eighteen months. Ill health and the political influence of the bishop of Derry secured his release in March 1783. Fitzgerald traveled back to Mayo, with the intention of expanding his populist influence in the county. Denis Browne, however, was determined to bring his unofficial ‘reign’ in parts of the county to an abrupt halt.

³⁷ For contemporary and biographical accounts of George Robert Fitzgerald’s life, see *Memoirs of the late George Robert Fitzgerald ...interspersed with anecdotes ...by a gentleman of the County Mayo* (Dublin, 1786) and Mary McCarthy, *Fighting Fitzgerald and other papers* (London, 1930). See also James Kelly, ‘George Robert Fitzgerald’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004-08), <http://www.oxforddnb.com>.

³⁸ William E. H. Lecky, *A history of Ireland in the eighteenth century* (London, 1913), p. 367.

³⁹ Kelly, ‘*That Damn’d Thing called Honour*’, p. 157

⁴⁰ <http://www.oxforddnb.com>, p. 3.

The Brownes closely monitored Fitzgerald after his release in order to gather sufficient evidence to use against him when an opportunity arose. Fitzgerald was so incensed by this surveillance that he rode up to Westport House and killed Lord Altamont's prized wolfhound, declaring that 'until the noble peer became charitable to the poor ... I will not allow such a monster to be kept'.⁴¹ The Brownes were outraged but understood this as a ruse to goad the family into a reaction that would increase Fitzgerald's popularity in the region. However, Denis Browne could not be restrained when Fitzgerald called him a coward in public and christened him 'Mr. Collector Browne', in an attempt to label him as a parasite and an enemy of the poor.⁴² Both men agreed to a duel but the meeting ended acrimoniously before they had even chosen their weapons. They had agreed on the broadsword, but before the seconds had produced the weaponry, Fitzgerald fired his pistol at Browne, missing him by inches. Browne was so disgusted at Fitzgerald's behaviour that he refused to proceed with the duel, accusing his opponent of attempted murder.⁴³ This incident increased Denis Browne's contempt for Fitzgerald and when he was appointed High Sheriff of the county in 1786, he realised he now had the means to get rid of the renegade for good.⁴⁴

The odd career of Fitzgerald eventually came to an end during the summer of 1786 when he was implicated in the murders of Patrick Randle McDonnell and George Hipson. Characteristically, Fitzgerald had locked the men up in a room at Turlough House and as they attempted to escape, several of Fitzgerald's followers shot them dead. It was acknowledged that neither Fitzgerald nor his co-accused, Timothy Brecknock, had been present at the murders. However, they were put on trial, charged with the capital crime of 'procuring others to murder'.⁴⁵ This dubious charge delighted Denis Browne as he had had Fitzgerald committed to Castlebar prison on specific charges before, only to see him released on technicalities or as a result of political influence.⁴⁶ By this stage, however,

⁴¹ Quotation derived from local folklore, cited in Quinn, *A history of Mayo*, p. 37.

⁴² Quinn, *History of Mayo*, p. 38.

⁴³ Kelly, *'That Damn'd Thing called Honour'*, p. 156.

⁴⁴ John Kelville, 'Aughagower' in *Cathair na Mart: Journal of The Westport Historical Society*, 4, no.1 (1984), p. 26.

⁴⁵ Oliver J. Burke, *Anecdotes of the Connaught circuit* (Dublin, 1885), pp 141-3 (hereafter Burke, *Anecdotes*).

⁴⁶ Kelly, *'That Damn'd Thing called Honour'*, p. 156.

Fitzgerald had alienated, attacked or intimidated half of the gentry of Mayo and the verdict was never going to be much in doubt. Oddly, the main prosecution witness was the actual murderer himself, ‘Scotch’ Andrew Craig, whom Browne had managed to turn state’s witness in return for immunity. The whole procedure was little more than a show trial and when the guilty verdicts were delivered it was recommended that the executions should take place on the same night. The *Freeman’s Journal* noted that it ‘appeared as if the High Sheriff [Browne] and all the gentry of Mayo were afraid that if there were any delay, a reprieve might have been procured by means of his [Fitzgerald’s] high connections.’⁴⁷

At 11pm, on 12 June 1786, Browne agreed to Fitzgerald’s last request and he was allowed walk from Castlebar prison to the place of execution under his watchful eye. The execution was such a botched affair that it not only succeeded in adding further to the legend of Fitzgerald but it also gave rise to the popular perception of Denis Browne, that of a ruthless and efficient enforcer of law and order in the region. According to tradition, as Fitzgerald was dropped through the trap door, the rope around his neck broke under the strain, leading the condemned man to shout that ‘his life was his own’. Denis Browne was alleged to have replied, ‘not while there is another rope in Mayo and you will have one strong enough and speedily too’.⁴⁸ When the new rope was procured after a delay of about an hour, the unfortunate Fitzgerald was again dropped from the scaffold, but to Browne’s fury, the new rope was too long and his feet managed to touch the ground.⁴⁹

The dismayed Browne reprimanded the hangman and demanded that a third attempt be made, reminding him to ‘soap the rope’ before pulling the lever. While the people of Westport allege that Browne derived the moniker ‘Soap the Rope Browne’ from the execution of Johnny Gibbons in 1811, the folklore of Castlebar and Aughagower (the hangman’s village) suggests that this derogatory nickname actually dated from this brutal execution of Fitzgerald in 1786.⁵⁰ Indeed, the whole spectacle of his rushed trial and

⁴⁷ *Freeman’s Journal*, 4 June 1786.

⁴⁸ Burke, *Anecdotes*, p. 147.

⁴⁹ Quinn, *History of Mayo*, p. 24.

⁵⁰ Kelville, ‘Aughagower’, p. 26.

execution managed to give George Robert Fitzgerald a heightened status among the peasantry as a legendary anti-establishment figure, a posthumous reputation that his violent and narcissistic temperament hardly deserved. Regardless of the sentiments of the peasantry, Denis Browne was immensely satisfied to have marked his year as High Sheriff with the execution of Fitzgerald and the dissolution of his army of outlaws. He believed he had set a strong example for all classes of society in Mayo. A subtle declaration that the law in Mayo transcended all ranks and that even a connected man of property could find himself on the scaffold if they chose the path of murder and treason. Browne believed in the power of the local magistrate, enforced by a trusted and reliable constabulary. Soon after Fitzgerald's death, Browne asserted his belief in local law enforcement during a parliamentary debate. Supporting a motion for the better execution of law, he stated that; 'he would much rather have the laws enforced by 3,000 constables under the direction of the civil magistrates than 15,000 soldiers under military law'.⁵¹

(iii.) Parliament 1788-1793:

In January 1788, Denis Browne left the opposition benches and once again crossed the floor to support the government. Ironically, the reason for his shift in allegiance was loyalty to the same person that had caused the Browne family to defect to the opposition in 1782, James Browne, Prime Sergeant (on the King's Council). Soon after being reinstated to the position in 1784, James Browne retired on a pension of £1,000 per annum. However, the Whig MP for Drogheda, John Forbes, questioned the generosity of Browne's stipend during a debate concerning the profligacy of government pensions and patronage.⁵² Browne angrily dismissed the insinuation that any member of his family was 'supported by the public money'. Referring to his uncle, Denis Browne stated that he (James Browne) had held a lucrative position in the law department but that ill health had caused to leave it. He considered the queried pension as nothing more than what was due to a retired public officer. Browne concluded coolly by saying that Forbes's kind words

⁵¹ *Irish Parliamentary Register*, 2 April 1787, vol. vii, p. 446.

⁵² *Irish Parliamentary Register*, 31 Jan. 1788, vol. viii, pp 73-4.

about his uncle ‘were indifferent to him and his relation’.⁵³ Browne’s detachment from the opposition worsened in February 1788 when it put forward a motion, which proposed a limitation on government pensions and patronage. Already insulted by Forbes’s inquiry, and believing that the payment of pensions was an indispensable part of modern government, Browne stood up in its defence and told the opposition MPs of a conversation he had had with the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Buckingham, about the propriety of such payments. Browne declared that Buckingham had said that ‘he would sooner put his right hand into the fire than give an unmerited pension’.⁵⁴ This declaration provoked laughter among the opposition benches. John Philpot Curran rose to ask Browne whether his defence of government spending was merely a tactic to secure a controversial pension for himself. Browne angrily replied that he ‘had never received place, pension or emolument from any government’ and challenged Curran to state the same. Curran scoffed at the challenge while Sir Henry Cavendish joined the attack on Browne, warning him that he had once taken down the words of an MP who had made a similar declaration of probity, only to discover subsequently ‘that the member was in possession of both place and pension’.⁵⁵ He also warned Browne that he was also noting his words to make sure that his declaration concurred with reality.

The opposition’s motion was easily defeated but Browne felt personally offended by the debate and resolved to support the government for the rest of its term. In 1789 he voted against a regency and in 1790 he voted against Henry Grattan’s motion to reduce the influence of the crown.⁵⁶ He also restrained his reformist principles when he voted for the election of John Foster, the *bête noire* of the opposition, as speaker of the House of Commons.⁵⁷ However, after a contentious election in 1790 between Browne and John Bingham for the second county seat, Browne became more outspoken in his beliefs on the Catholic question. This led to a healthy relationship with the Catholic bourgeoisie of

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ S. Bernard to William Wyndham Grenville, 29 Feb. 1788, *Fortescue MSS, 13th Report, appendix 3*, (London, 1892), i, 306-07.

⁵⁵ Bernard to Grenville, 29 Feb. 1788 (*Fortescue Manuscripts*, i, 307). John Philpot Curran (1750-1817). Curran was a consistent supporter of Catholic relief and parliamentary reform. As a lawyer he defended many of the leading United Irishmen in the 1790s, but refused to become involved in the movement itself.

⁵⁶ Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, iii, 283.

county Mayo and an increased involvement in the wider campaign to secure Catholic relief during the early 1790s. Browne, who had started his parliamentary career as a vocal patriot, and then become a solid government supporter, was now apparently willing to endorse the popular policies of an invigorated Catholic campaign to secure civic inclusion.

The general election of 1790 was a tight affair. James Cuffe was expected to hold his seat. The second county seat was expected to go to either Browne or Bingham, with Browne attracting support from Westport and southern Mayo, and the Bingham family from freeholders situated around 'their' borough of Castlebar.⁵⁸ Indeed, by 1790 Castlebar was described as a 'close[d] borough, its electors consisting of a small number of burgesses who are entirely under the dominion of the Bingham family'.⁵⁹ The Parliamentary List of 1790 also predicted a close contest. It predicted that Cuffe was safe but anticipated that 'the Hon. Denis Browne, his colleague in office, will probably experience a most powerful opponent in the Hon. Mr. Bingham, Lord Lucan's son.'⁶⁰ However, the report overstated Lucan's influence. Since 1781, the family had resided in England and the Castlebar borough had become the temporary property of the highest bidder during the 1783 election. The addition of John Bingham to the county ticket in 1790 was an attempt by the family to extend their influence in the wider Castlebar/south Mayo region at the expense of the Cuffe/Browne hegemony. The election soon descended into a personal battle between Denis Browne and John Bingham, as it appeared that Cuffe was indeed safe and that the second county seat would be decided by a small number of votes.

Browne used every piece of influence that he and Lord Altamont could muster to acquire the votes of the undecided. The brothers spread insinuations and criticisms that targeted the Bingham's absenteeism in an attempt to convince freeholders that their interests lay with a resident family that could be relied upon in times of trouble. This negativity was

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* John Foster (1740-1828), Chancellor of the Irish Exchequer in 1784, Speaker of the Irish House of Commons, 1785-1800. He opposed Catholic relief, seeing it as a threat to the Protestant State.

⁵⁸ John Bingham (1762-1821), created Lord Clanmorris after the Union.

⁵⁹ Parliamentary List 1790 (vol. i), cited in Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, ii, 299.

countered by the Bingham, who accused Denis of being little more than a 'Castle Hack', a comment that rankled with Browne's broadly Whiggish outlook.⁶¹ Never one to take a personal insult lightly, Browne immediately challenged Bingham to a duel. When the two men met, Browne fired his last shot in the air after Bingham had missed him with his two bullets. Browne stated that had he not done so, 'he must have mortally wounded his antagonist'.⁶² Browne's chivalry won him popular appeal and the most credit among the remaining voters and he was successfully returned as the second member for Mayo County, a prize that carried much more prestige than the borough seat in Castlebar, and one that would take the Bingham another thirty years to win.⁶³

In the aftermath of the 1790 election, the Brownes continued to marginalize the political strength of the Bingham in south Mayo. Crucially, they identified the Catholic population of the county as a means to counter any further threat to the parliamentary seat. The Bingham had traditionally opposed any concessions on Catholic relief. The Brownes, however, displayed a more liberal approach to the Catholic majority in the county. In 1778, John Denis Browne (then Lord Westport and MP for Jamestown) voted in favour of Luke Gardiner's relief bill, (which inaugurated the process of Catholic emancipation).⁶⁴ The central concession of the relief bill was to allow Catholics to purchase land on the same terms as Protestants. In the end, the concessions were limited but the work of demolishing the disabilities had begun.⁶⁵ And Edmund Burke confidently predicted that the principles behind the bill would 'extend further' in time.⁶⁶ This view was vindicated by Thomas Wyse after the emancipation bill of 1829 when he cited Gardiner's relief act as 'the first step which really emancipated'.⁶⁷ The two sitting Mayo MPs were divided on the 1778 Bill. Arthur Browne voted for the measure while James Cuffe voted against it. This clash on Catholic relief continued when Denis Browne took

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Kelly, *'That Damn'd Thing called Honour'*, p. 146.

⁶² *Dublin Chronicle*, 11 May 1790.

⁶³ Kelly, *'That Damn'd Thing called Honour'*, p. 146.

⁶⁴ Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, iii, 290.

⁶⁵ James Kelly, 'Inter-denominational relations and religious toleration in late eighteenth-century Ireland' in *Eighteenth Century Ireland*, no. 3 (1988), pp 41-2.

⁶⁶ Dáire Keogh, *The French disease: the Catholic Church and Irish radicalism, 1790-1800* (Dublin, 1993), p. 20.

⁶⁷ Thomas Wyse, *Historical sketch of the late Catholic Association of Ireland*, vol. i (Dublin, 1829), p. 101.

his uncle's seat in 1782 and lasted until Cuffe was created Lord Tyrawley and retired in 1797. The Volunteer period and the establishment of legislative independence in 1782 encouraged an increased mood of toleration within broad swathes of Protestant political opinion. Leading opposition figures such as Henry Flood and Lord Charlemont began to call for further civil and economic (but not political) rights for Catholics.⁶⁸ The early constitutional phase of the French Revolution, which aimed at a constitutional monarchy also fed into this progressive mood for change. Indeed, the legitimacy of the Protestant ascendancy and the structures of state were also challenged by an invigorated Catholic Committee, which launched an energetic renewal of their campaign and had replaced the more conservative elements, such as Lord Kenmare, with aggressive bourgeois campaigners like John Keogh and Edward Byrne.⁶⁹

(iv.) Browne and the Catholic Committee:

By the early 1790s, the Brownes viewed Catholic relief as both morally justified and as a means to further their political hegemony of the county; supporting limited Catholic enfranchisement would be immensely popular and act as a means to erode the future political power of the (anti-relief) Bingham. The bitter opposition of fellow MP, James Cuffe, to any Catholic relief bill also favoured the Brownes. Their pro-Catholic stance paid off handsomely after the 1793 Relief Act when the electorate of county Mayo increased from about 1,000 to nearly 12,000 freeholders.⁷⁰ This Catholic register was never likely to support the Bingham and, at a stroke, their political aspirations in the county were dashed for a generation. James Cuffe was replaced by George Jackson during the 1797 election. However, the Brownes' support for Catholic relief was not unqualified and before the 1793 Relief Act had passed through parliament, they had become increasingly uneasy about the course of events in France and the associated

⁶⁸ James Kelly, 'Conservative Protestant political thought in late eighteenth-century Ireland' in S. J. Connolly (ed.), *Political ideas in eighteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2000), p. 195.

⁶⁹ Eamon O'Flaherty, 'Irish Catholics and the French Revolution' in Hugh Gough and David Dickson (eds), *Ireland and the French Revolution* (Dublin, 1990), p. 56.

⁷⁰ Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, ii, 298.

radicalisation of the Catholic Committee. Indeed, this uneasiness brought upon Denis Browne the fiery opprobrium of the Committee's secretary, Theobald Wolfe Tone.

Tone's central strategy was to combine the campaign for Catholic relief with the movement for radical parliamentary reform. He stated in his influential pamphlet, *An Argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, that the so-called 'revolution' of 1782 was unworthy of the name as it had left 'three fourths of our countrymen slaves as it found them'.⁷¹ In July 1792, he was appointed agent to the Catholic Committee in succession to Richard Burke and hopes were high that a further relaxation of the penal code was possible after English Catholics had been granted a relief act in 1791.⁷² The assertiveness of Irish Catholics caused deep unease for the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Westmorland and other senior politicians in Britain and Ireland such as Lord Grenville and Henry Dundas. The appointment of Tone to the Catholic Committee and the presence of Catholic activists at the formation of the Dublin Society of United Irishmen in 1791 also gave rise to a fear in government circles of an ominous alliance between Presbyterians and Catholics in the pursuit of radical reform. Reforms similar to those in England were passed in April 1792, but the lack of any political concessions merely doubled the resolve of Irish Catholics to bid for further relief, particularly voting rights and the right to sit in parliament. In order to press for these demands, the Catholic Committee initiated two key strategies; the Catholic leadership were to sign a declaration of civil principles, necessitated by a lingering Protestant sense of Catholic political unreliability and subservience to papal dictat. The Committee also renounced all interests in forfeited estates and declared that, should Catholics be restored to the elective franchise, they would not use that privilege 'to disturb and weaken the establishment of the Protestant religion or Protestant government in the country'.⁷³ Secondly, and of

⁷¹ O'Flaherty, 'Irish Catholics and the French Revolution', p. 60. For an account of Tone's activities with the Catholic committee, see T.W. Moody, R.B. McDowell, C.J. Woods (eds), *The writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone, 1763-98*, (3 vols, Oxford, 2008), vol. i., pp 104-188. Thomas Bartlett, *The fall and rise of the Irish nation: the Catholic Question, 1690-1830* (Dublin, 1992), Dáire Keogh, 'Archbishop Troy, the Catholic Church and Irish radicalism, 1791-1793' in David Dickson, Dáire Keogh and Kevin Whelan (eds), *The United Irishmen, republicanism, radicalism and rebellion* (Dublin, 1994), pp 124-34.

⁷² Introduction to Thomas Bartlett (ed.), *The life of Theobald Wolfe Tone* (Dublin, 1998), p. xxi.

⁷³ Keogh, *French disease*, p. 56.

greater importance, was the plan to elect delegates from around the country for the purpose of attending a national Catholic Convention in Dublin at the end of 1792.

The election of delegates to the 'Back Lane Parliament' continued throughout the summer of 1792 and created considerable momentum for the Catholic Committee with numerous meetings and selections in towns all over Ireland. The selection of the Mayo delegates, however, caused Tone to clash bitterly with Denis Browne's more conservative approach to Catholic reform. Browne's misgivings were by no means restricted to 'liberal' Irish gentry, as members of the Catholic hierarchy grew increasingly uneasy about the Francophile nature of the plan, liking it to the French National Assembly. Indeed, Denis Browne's Burkean approach to Catholic relief was shared by prominent bishops, such as John Troy and Francis Moylan. Edmund Burke's advice to the bishops summed up the political tightrope they had to navigate between their own misgivings and the increasing popular support of the Committee. Burke urged minimal involvement with the Committee's business, while at the same time avoiding any suggestion that they opposed the aspirations of the Catholic laity.⁷⁴ The hierarchy's concerns about the Convention were also shared by the Dublin government and more cautious members of the Catholic gentry, such as Lords Fingall, Kenmare and Gormanstown.⁷⁵ The Brownes, too, were becoming more conservative and they began to view the proposed gathering as potentially seditious and ultimately counter-productive. Indeed, the word 'convention' echoed, not just the Patriot Dungannon Convention of 1782, but the Jacobin Convention in Paris, which declared the sovereignty of the French people above the monarchy and aristocracy. There was real concern amongst the Irish establishment, that the Catholic Convention would be used by radicals as a means to both present Irish Catholics as the legitimate Irish nation and reflect the unrepresentative nature of the Dublin parliament. Moreover, there was also a threat of a radical politicisation of the country, which had happened in France after the elections to the Estates General in 1790. The Catholic bishop of Killala, Dominic Bellew, called for the hierarchy to have greater control over the Committee in order to curtail the more radical

⁷⁴ Edmund Burke to Francis Moylan, 18 Nov. 1792 in *The correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. Thomas Copeland (10 vols, Cambridge, 1958-78), vii, 293.

⁷⁵ Keogh, 'Archbishop Troy', p. 127

elements within it. Tone sarcastically thanked Bellew, saying that he was ‘damned kind’.⁷⁶ During late summer and autumn of 1792, Tone and John Keogh traveled extensively throughout the north and west of Ireland in order to iron out any regional or logistical difficulties before the proposed Convention met in December.⁷⁷

In July 1792, Tone wrote to all the Grand Juries of Ireland to appeal for their support for further Catholic relief and to request the delegate elections to be observed and policed peacefully.⁷⁸ By early October 1792, however, it was clear that the Brownes, as the leading members of the Mayo Grand Jury, were not prepared to support either the election of delegates or the proposed Convention itself. They observed that the Grand Juries in Derry, Limerick and Wexford had passed resolutions condemning the plan for a Convention. The Grand Jury of Mayo consisted of twenty three freeholders and in early October, fourteen of the jurors passed anti-Convention resolutions causing the remaining nine men to publish a condemnation of their fellow jury members.⁷⁹ Denis Browne also learned of a plan that the Convention wished to ratify when it eventually met - to petition the King directly and over the head of the Castle administration. This was to display the supposed equality of the two kingdoms rather than show defiance to the Irish executive, but an increasing number of Catholic figures were becoming uneasy about the whole venture. Indeed, the person who eventually seconded the proposal to petition the King was the Mayo delegate and future United Irish leader in the county, James Joseph MacDonnell.⁸⁰ On the 4 October 1792, Tone could hardly conceal his contempt for Browne as he sided with the conservative elements within the Catholic establishment and tried to dissuade the Mayo Catholics from attending the Convention:

Denis Browne is playing tricks [in Mayo]. Recommends a separate petition and condemns the plan. He is damned kind! Wishes, if he could, to act the patron to the Catholics, that he might make sale of 3,000,000 of clients at the Castle. A blockhead, without parts or principles! But it won't do. The XX [Catholics] here [in Dublin] smoke him. Last winter they used to stare at me for speaking

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 131.

⁷⁷ Bartlett, *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, p. xxii.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ *Dublin Evening Post*, 11 Oct. 1792.

⁸⁰ Bartlett, *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, p. 69.

contemptuously of him, a man who was brother to a lord, and a member of parliament! They have got over all that now. Wonderful improvements in their sentiments.⁸¹

However radicalised the leadership of the Catholic Committee were in Dublin, the Catholic gentry in Mayo were still doubtful as to whether they would support the whole enterprise and the hostility of the Brownes to the plan could only have added to this indecision. Indeed, this cautiousness undoubtedly reflected the influence and weight of the Brownes as a political force in Mayo. In equal measure this influence increased the frustration of the more radical members of the Catholic movement. Tone quickly organised another trip to the west and arrived in Ballinasloe on the 6 October where he arranged to meet several Catholic gentry figures from both counties. On meeting certain committee members from Mayo, he was disappointed to find them 'cool, or adverse' to the election of delegates and concluded that 'Denis Browne [had] been tampering with them', an allegation that again reflected Browne's influence among the county's gentry.⁸²

A meeting with the leading Mayo Catholics was arranged for the following week to coincide with the races at Castlebar, and Tone returned to Dublin. In an attempt to outflank Denis Browne, it was decided to send James Plunkett (a member of the north Connacht Committee) to the meeting in the company of the wary Viscount Dillon, with the view, in the words of Tone, of 'converting his lordship [Dillon] by exposing the game which Denis Browne is playing, endeavoring to become the *Padrone* of the Mayo Catholics and establish thereby a strong interest in the county, which might enable him thereafter to hold Lord Dillon at defiance'.⁸³ In effect, Tone and the radicals in the Catholic Committee hoped to exploit a division in the Mayo gentry to press ahead with organisation of the Catholic dissension there. Tone was well aware of the Machiavellian approach and gloated, '*Capot me, but it wears a face!*'.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Diary of T. W. Tone, 4 Oct. 1792, in *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, ed. Woods, i, 301.

⁸² Diary of T. W. Tone, 7 Oct. 1792, in *ibid.*, 308.

⁸³ Diary of T. W. Tone, 4 Oct. 1792, in *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, ed. Woods, i, 309. Charles Dillon, twelfth Viscount Dillon. Like the Brownes, Dillon had conformed to the established church in the mid-eighteenth century and his claim to be viscount was allowed by House of Lords in 1788. His son and successor Henry Dillon married Henrietta Browne, daughter of Dominick Browne M.P.

⁸⁴ Diary of T. W. Tone, 9 Oct. 1792, in *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, ed. Woods, i, 310. The term 'Capot me' refers to piquet and one player taking all the tricks.

Tone's scheme, however, was less than successful and on 26 October 1792, little more than a month before the Convention assembled, he thundered in his diary:

Denis Browne has been playing the rascal in Mayo. Procured a meeting on the 16th, and knocked up our plan by securing the measure of a separate petition from that county. Damn him! Yet he talks of his love for the cause etc. The Catholics here in a terrible rage. More and more losing their respect for the brothers of lords and members of parliament.⁸⁵

Tone's frustration with Mayo's indecision was calmed, however, when Randal MacDonnell, a Committee member from Dublin, received a letter from James J. MacDonnell, the secretary of the Mayo Catholics who had been at Denis Browne's meeting on the 16 October.⁸⁶ J.J. MacDonnell, (no relation to Randal MacDonnell) informed the Central Committee that it was possible that Mayo would still send delegates to the planned Convention. On hearing this, Tone immediately wrote 'a letter from the Sub-committee exhorting them to that measure'.⁸⁷ By the first week in November, most of the delegate returns had been received in Dublin. Mayo, however, had still not returned, but there was a hint of optimism that the situation would soon be rectified:

We have this day returns from twenty five counties and all the great cities of Ireland, with a strong confidence that we shall have the remainder before the day of the meeting. Mayo has been off and on three or four times, owing to the manoeuvres of that rascal Denis Browne ... now they seem stout again.⁸⁸

However, Tone's anger was not directed at Browne alone. Criticising the Mayo Catholics as supine, he wrote that 'the Connaught gentry [are] more valiant than wise, easily led, especially by a great man, or a great man's man [ie. Browne, Lord Altamont's brother]'.⁸⁹ Still, Tone and the committee remained optimistic about Mayo and they declared that if the returns were made before December, it would have been 'a great victory' over

⁸⁵ Diary of T. W. Tone, 26 Oct. 1792 in *ibid.*, 317.

⁸⁶ Randal McDonnell was a wealthy merchant from Dublin. He represented County Kildare at the Catholic Convention.

⁸⁷ Diary of T. W. Tone, 27 Oct. 1792, in *Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, ed. Woods, i, 317.

⁸⁸ Diary of T. W. Tone, 10 Nov. 1792, in *ibid.*, 325.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Browne and the other Protestant conservatives in the county.⁹⁰ Their ‘victory’ was not long in coming.

On the 18 November, Tone met with James Plunkett, the delegate from Roscommon, and JJ MacDonnell in Dublin. MacDonnell brought with him the delegate returns from Mayo, which listed his own name along with Edmund Dillon, Andrew Crean Lynch, Nicholas Fitzgerald and Theodore Mahon. Tone’s strategy to introduce Viscount Dillon’s influence into Mayo had worked (Dillon was essentially based in county Galway) and Browne was deeply irritated by the decision to send delegates to Dublin without his approval. Tone revelled in Browne’s defeat in a characteristically ebullient manner:

Mayo has returned, in spite of Denis Browne who is as vexed as the Devil and cannot help himself. Huzza!⁹¹

Denis Browne’s fear that the convention would be counter-productive in attracting Protestant support for the Catholic cause was not an over-reaction. The Convention of December 1792 was a success for the Catholic Committee; even the usually reserved bishops, Troy and Moylan, became effusive during the proceedings and pledged to ‘rise or fall with the people’.⁹² The presence of so many United Irishmen applauding Troy’s speech led to grave fears of a radical Catholic movement that crossed class boundaries, headed by the Irish hierarchy. Loyalist interpretations of the Convention viewed it as the beginning of a popish plot to subvert the ascendancy and violently regain lost estates and property.⁹³ The decision to ratify a direct petition to King George also gave rise to Protestant fears of an emboldened Catholic population that was keen to stretch the patience of government to breaking point.

In the light of this criticism, the Catholic bishops chose to distance themselves from the radical trappings of the Convention and during the House of Commons’ debate on the

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Diary of T. W. Tone, 18 Nov. 1792, in *ibid.*, 328.

⁹² Keogh, *French disease*, p. 61.

⁹³ Louis M. Cullen, ‘The Internal Politics of the United Irishmen’ in Dickson, Keogh and Whelan (eds), *United Irishmen*, pp 176-196.

proposed relief bill, the hierarchy issued a pastoral in which they denounced the recent outbreak of Defenderism and called for the people to avoid ‘idle assemblies’ and riotous behaviour.⁹⁴ Denis Browne noted a need for deference in the debates concerning any relief bill that might make its way through the Commons. He made it clear in parliament that he expected the Catholics of Ireland to display signs of gratitude to the house and the king for lifting restraints on their behalf. Browne rose and addressed the Catholics who would benefit from any relief bill, which he characterised as an act of royal bounty:

If ever they [the Catholics] should for a moment forget what they owe to their beneficial sovereign, I will be ashamed of what now is my pride and my boast – my attachment to them. Tied to them by every principle, I pledge myself to them, to this House and to the world, that my exertions for their cause shall cease only with their perfect liberation from the disgraceful state of civil disability in which they stand.⁹⁵

Browne went on to implore the Catholic movement not to over reach in their petitions and recommended that they should not ‘embarrass the measure by unreasonable demands’, a characteristically conservative statement that sat comfortably with the chastened Catholic hierarchy but alienated him further from the more radical elements in the Catholic relief movement.⁹⁶

(v.) The struggle against radicalism:

The outbreak of war with France in February 1793 forced the hand of William Pitt, and conscious of the need to conciliate Catholic opinion in Ireland (and to enlist Irish Catholic in the armed forces), Hobart’s relief act offered Irish Catholics the county franchise on the same terms as Irish Protestants.⁹⁷ However, a controversial oath, which affirmed the principle of Protestant Ascendancy, accompanied the bill. Moreover, John FitzGibbon, chancellor and speaker of the lords, introduced an amendment that ruled out

⁹⁴ Bishop John Troy, *A Pastoral Address on the Duties of Christian citizens* (Dublin, 1793), p. 17.

⁹⁵ *Irish Parliamentary Register*, 10 Jan. 1793, vol. xiii (Dublin, 1793), 15-16.

⁹⁶ *Irish Parliamentary Register*, 10 Jan. 1793, vol. xiii, p. 16.

⁹⁷ Robert Hobart, fourth earl of Buckinghamshire, Chief Secretary of Ireland, 1789-93.

the possibility of any institutions being exclusively for Catholic education, which made the bill, according to Archbishop Troy, ‘useless, at least as far as it regards clerical education’.⁹⁸ This alluded to the bishop’s priority to establish a domestic seminary to replace the colleges closed by the Revolution in France. Radicals were also disappointed. Tone condemned it as ‘partial and illusory’, and was further incensed by the debates that had accompanied the bill in parliament, where he alleged that the Catholic Committee had been labelled ‘a rabble of porter drinking mechanicks’.⁹⁹ Angered by this abuse and the failure to win outright emancipation, the radicals in the Committee resolved to continue their campaign even when the Catholic hierarchy favoured a dissolution of the reform movement. Similarly, while disappointed that full emancipation had been avoided, the Brownes were content that the government had acted in good faith and that any worrying potential alliance between Catholic advocates and political radicals had been judiciously nipped in the bud. The attention of all loyal subjects in Ireland needed now to be fixed on the common threat from revolutionary France. Indeed, the war with France and the Relief Act of 1793 essentially acted as a cut off point for many of the Irish gentry in their vocal demands for parliamentary and religious reform.

Indeed, the government’s strategy to neutralise radicalism in 1793 was a mix of concession and coercion. The relief act being was soon accompanied by a triumvirate of reactionary legislation, the Gunpowder Act, the Militia Act and the Convention Act. Referring obviously to the effrontery shown by the Catholic ‘Back Lane Parliament’, John Fitzgibbon boasted that the Convention Act ‘in ten lines did no more than declare that there should only be one parliament in Ireland’.¹⁰⁰ FitzGibbon cited the 1793 ‘revolution’ as the point when union between the two countries became inevitable and unavoidable.¹⁰¹ The Brownes fully accepted the Castle’s decision to implement reactionary legislation in the wake of recent Catholic assertiveness and the war with France. It was noted in the Irish parliament that many of the country gentlemen that were usually found on the opposition benches were now supporting the government. The

⁹⁸ Keogh, *French disease*, p. 70.

⁹⁹ Bartlett, *Fall and rise of the Irish nation*, p. 147.

¹⁰⁰ *Dublin Evening Post*, 11 July 1793.

¹⁰¹ Bartlett, *Fall and rise of the Irish nation*, pp 146-7.

Brownes, in both Houses, were obvious examples of this newly garnered support and Denis duly voted with the government in favour of the Convention Act, leaving only a rump of 27 members in opposition. Browne found himself in the unusual position of voting in concurrence with his fellow member for Mayo, James Cuffe.¹⁰²

Nevertheless, Browne's activity in parliament on behalf of the Catholics of Mayo did not go unnoticed. On the 20 May 1793, a meeting of Catholic gentry in Castlebar voted to send official thanks to Browne for his 'exertions' in 'their support'. Browne published a reciprocal letter of thanks in various local and national newspapers, stating that it was the 'pride of his life' that Catholics had at last 'obtained political importance'.¹⁰³ Wolfe Tone's belief that he had out manoeuvred Browne and radicalised the Mayo Catholics had been clearly over optimistic. The government were also keen to reward Browne for his sober approach to the convention and relief bill, and appointed him to the Irish Privy Council on the 20 January 1794, an honour that Browne was keen to undertake as soon as possible. Although, the power of the Privy Council had been eroded somewhat by legislative independence in 1782, it still continued to play an important part in the process of making law in Ireland, due to its continuing role in certifying bills received from the legislature.¹⁰⁴ Membership of the Council was also an important status symbol for Browne and gave him a chance to join Lord Altamont who had been appointed to it in 1785. With a Catholic relief bill successfully passed through parliament and his support for government being actively rewarded, Denis Browne's political strategy – to pursue Catholic claims through moderation and unreserved loyalty was delivering both local and national dividends.

From 1793 to 1798, the Brownes remained largely in Mayo, travelling only rarely to Dublin. Their most notable contribution to parliamentary business during this period was a display of thanks to Lord Carhampton for his successful campaign against an outbreak of Defenderism in Connacht during 1795.¹⁰⁵ Carhampton's campaign was seen as a

¹⁰² Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, iii, 283.

¹⁰³ *The Hibernian Journal*, 12 July 1793.

¹⁰⁴ James Kelly, *Poyning's Law and the making of law in Ireland, 1660-1800* (Dublin, 2007), p. 258.

¹⁰⁵ Henry Lawes Luttrell, second earl of Carhampton.

successful combination of measured terror, which pressed suspects into naval service or banished them for life, often on the most modest of pretexts. The Lord Lieutenant, Earl Camden was uneasy about the excesses of the troops under the command of Carhampton, but was secretly satisfied with the results they brought about. He wrote to Lord Portland and described that Carhampton had sent ‘all lurking strangers’ to the fleet and that this had had ‘the desired effect’ on the areas affected in Connacht.¹⁰⁶ However, Camden was furious that these illegal measures had not been carried out more covertly by the various participating magistrates.¹⁰⁷ Under protests from the opposition in parliament about the legality of Carhampton’s actions, Camden was forced to admit privately that ‘Lord Carhampton found it necessary to act in some instances in a summary manner and certainly did not confine himself to the full letter of the law’.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Carhampton’s strategy was martial law in all but name. In each county affected by Defenderism (particularly, Leitrim, Sligo and Roscommon), he assembled the notable land owners and magistrates, examined the charges and the evidence against the alleged ringleaders. In Galway, the Mahons of Castlegar (related by marriage to the Brownes) were involved in this campaign. When witnesses failed to materialise, Carhampton simply sent the men to a naval tender stationed in Sligo and pressed them into service with the crown forces.¹⁰⁹

While Camden supported the campaign, its illegality was evident and an Indemnity Act was rushed through parliament in February 1796, in order to protect magistrates or officers accused of practising summary justice.¹¹⁰ It was an ominous precedent for the future conduct of the military in Ireland, yet it was one that the Brownes wholeheartedly welcomed. Denis Browne, however, was later critical of Carhampton’s ‘leniency’ as he pressed government for martial law to deal with the Ribbon threat of 1819-20. During 1795, however, the Brownes were effusive in their praise of the campaign and in the need to indemnify any associated magistrates. Lord Altamont stated that he ‘highly approved

¹⁰⁶ Lord Camden to Lord Portland, July 1795 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/22/19).

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Bartlett, ‘Counter-insurgency and rebellion’ in idem and Keith Jeffrey (eds), *A military history of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 261.

¹⁰⁸ Lord Camden to Lord Portland, 6 Nov. 1795, cited in Liam Kelly, *A flame now quenched: rebels and Frenchmen in Leitrim, 1793-1798* (Dublin, 1998), p. 44.

¹⁰⁹ Lord Altamont to Ross Mahon, 6 May, 1795 (National Library of Ireland, Mahon Papers, MS 12,375). Thanks to Dr. Conor McNamara for access to this collection.

¹¹⁰ Richard Musgrave, *Memoirs of the Irish rebellion of 1798* (4th edn., Wexford, 1995), p. 127.

of the noble Earl's exertions, and of the [Indemnity] bill before the House', and hoped that 'their lordships would give that nobleman their unanimous thanks, as a further testimony of their approbation'.¹¹¹ The bill was passed unanimously in February 1796.

The war with France heightened the urgency of establishing law and order in Mayo and any display of dissent in Mayo caused deep suspicion and usually necessitated a speedy bulletin to the government in Dublin. One of Denis Browne's earliest warnings to government concerning the growing radicalism of the ordinary peasant in Mayo came at the same time as he was voting for the Convention Act. In June 1793, he reported to the Castle that 'incendiaries' from Dublin were polluting the region with cheap propaganda sheets and even copies of Paine's *Rights of Man*. Browne blamed shopkeepers for the illegal distribution of radical literature in Mayo, believing that when they travelled to Dublin for supplies, they were 'illuminated' by United Irishmen.¹¹² The influx of northern migrants into Mayo during 1794 and 1795 and the paranoia that occurred in the wake of the Bantry Bay invasion made sure that local concerns in Mayo converged with the wider national crisis of the decade. Moreover, while the government policies of coercion and conciliation during this period had a temporary calming effect in rural areas, the political life of the country was brought to near crisis by the Fitzwilliam episode, which continued throughout 1795.

When Fitzwilliam arrived in Ireland on 4 January 1795, the most immediate effect was on the Whig opposition in parliament, which had been floundering since war had begun. The Irish Whigs hoped that with their English counter-parts going into coalition government in London, and with Fitzwilliam being appointed to Dublin, they would gain positions of power within the Irish political establishment.¹¹³ The prospect of further movement on the Catholic question was also heightened by the fact that Fitzwilliam was widely known for his pro-emancipation stance. Although there were tensions within the Catholic movement between the more radical proponents of parliamentary reform and

¹¹¹ See entry for 12 Feb. 1796 in James Kelly (ed.), *The proceedings of the Irish House of Lords, 1771-1800* (3 vols, I.M.C., Dublin, 2008), iii, 14.

¹¹² Denis Browne to Dublin Castle, 6 June 1793 (P.R.O., H.O. 100/44/115-8).

more conservative elements, both parties put their differences aside as there now seemed a real prospect of full emancipation. However, before Fitzwilliam had even spent three months in his new post, he was recalled to London and removed by the British government, which had become alarmed at the pace of the Viceroy's actions, particularly his removal of key members of the Irish administration.¹¹⁴ Fitzwilliam was instructed not to support the Catholic Relief Bill that Grattan had introduced into the House of Commons in early 1795, and on 25 March 1795, he left the country. The sense of betrayal and disappointment felt among Catholics was heightened by the decision of Dublin Corporation to draw up a petition to the King against any further Catholic relief. Catholic meetings were held throughout March and April to discuss the fallout of the Fitzwilliam affair, the most notable one being in Francis Street in Dublin on the 9 April. With John Sweetman in the chair, the speakers included John Keogh and William MacNevin, and the speeches composed of various calls to unite in the face of this latest English 'betrayal'.¹¹⁵

The tone of the Francis Street meeting was uncomfortable for moderates such as Henry Grattan, who had become more outspoken in his support for the Catholic Committee in the aftermath of the recall. Edmund Burke complained of the 'wholly Jacobinal' tone of the meeting and feared that it would retard further concessions on the Catholic franchise.¹¹⁶ The Brownes positioned themselves firmly in this moderate camp, and although they voted for Grattan's Bill, this grouping was criticised by the 'Francis Street' radicals as being supine supporters of government. The new Lord Lieutenant, Earl Camden, surrounded himself with protestant hardliners, such as John FitzGibbon, John Foster, Robert Stewart (Lord Castlereagh) and Edward Cooke. In College Green, there were calls from the opposition for a committee to be formed to discuss the 'state of the nation' in the aftermath of Fitzwilliam's recall. Denis Browne, uncomfortable at the radical hue of the proposal, took the side of the government and dismissed the need for a

¹¹³ Deirdre Lindsay, 'The Fitzwilliam episode revisited' in Dickson, Keogh and Whelan (eds), *United Irishmen*, pp 197-8.

¹¹⁴ David Wilkinson, 'The Fitzwilliam Episode, 1795: A Reinterpretation of the Role of the Duke of Portland', in *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 115 (May, 1995), p. 324.

¹¹⁵ Lindsay, 'The Fitzwilliam episode', p. 203.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

committee out of hand. He believed that a committee would be useless as ‘no evidence could be produced that would enable it to come to any conclusion at all’.¹¹⁷ The Fitzwilliam debacle, the forceful Carhampton campaign and the formation of the Orange order in Armagh during the summer of 1795 all pointed to an increasingly vigorous form of ultra-Protestantism that was reflected in Camden’s ‘Castle Junto’.

Nevertheless, Denis Browne hoped that further concessions to Catholics could be made, stating that they ‘would not be dangerous, but beneficial to the state’.¹¹⁸ At a local level, Browne was able to distinguish between the radical politics of the age and the agrarian disturbances that had precipitated Carhampton’s campaign. These disturbances, he believed, were not part of the broader Catholic question, but a base attempt at ‘plunder and property’, and while the passage of Grattan’s bill would neither stop nor increase the violence, it would bring benefit to the Catholic nobility and gentry, whose ‘advocate’ he was ‘proud to be’.¹¹⁹ The relief bill was defeated and Browne returned to Mayo to assist Lord Altamont with the influx of northern migrants into the estates fleeing the sectarian pogroms in Ulster. Indeed, Browne’s declaration of solidarity with the Catholic bourgeois in Mayo was his last contribution to the Irish parliament until after the 1798 rebellion, when his sense of betrayal and anger gave way to a markedly less liberal and tolerant outlook.

(vi.) *Union:*

The ruling elite of Mayo might well have been expected to react in a hostile manner to the proposed Act of Union. During the winter of 1798, a vicious campaign of retribution and vengeance was waged against the rebel fugitives in the county and the relatively lenient directives emanating from Lord Cornwallis dismayed the more reactionary elements of the gentry, of whom Denis Browne was a leading advocate. However, the Brownes’ political antennae were sensitive enough to realise that a serious clash with the

¹¹⁷ *Irish Parliamentary Register*, 21 Apr. 1795, vol. xv (Dublin, 1795), 187.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Irish Parliamentary Register*, 4 May 1795, vol. xv (Dublin, 1795), p. 217.

Castle administration on this issue would eventually lead them into a cul de sac of political impotence.¹²⁰ Prime Minister Pitt had long believed that a legislative union between the two kingdoms was the only answer to the myriad of problems that existed between them. Following the rebellion, Pitt believed that the Irish government, like the Irish treasury, was bankrupt and the appointment of Cornwallis as Lord Lieutenant marked a complete departure from Camden.¹²¹ Directed by the Chief Secretary, Lord Castlereagh, the government sought to overturn what was at first a parliamentary majority against the idea of union. The Irish gentry were split on the issue, with a sizeable number of land owners believing that their power would be eroded by the measure. Catholic views were equally divided but with the hierarchy approving of the measure, the majority of Catholics hoped that it would negate the rigidity of the Protestant Ascendancy and eventually deliver on full emancipation. The Brownes were from the outset, firm proponents of a united kingdom. They viewed it primarily as a measure of parliamentary reform rather than the destruction of the Irish parliament in Dublin. Moreover, they had very little in common with the leaders of the loyalist campaign against the proposal, men such as Lord Downshire, whose Militia regiment had behaved provocatively in the west before the outbreak of the rebellion. They knew instinctively that to oppose the Union would be irresponsible when a solid display of support could potentially carry with it the reward of increased upward mobility and political status. With all the resources of Pitt's government to back the proposal, the Brownes, who had come within an ace of losing everything in 1798, believed that they could possibly benefit from the fallout of the rebellion and from the determination of Britain to rush the union through the Irish parliament. However, besides the *real* politics of the occasion, the thought of being part of a union of equals with its associated security and prosperity also fitted the Brownes' overall political outlook. The most pressing issue now was to ascertain what rewards

¹²⁰ For the passing of the Act of Union in Ireland see *Correspondence of Charles, first Marquis Cornwallis*, ed. Charles Ross (London, 1859), Patrick M Geoghegan, *The Act of Union: a study in high politics, 1798-1801* (Dublin, 1999), Michael Brown, Patrick M Geoghegan and James Kelly (eds), *The Irish Act of Union, 1800: bicentennial essays* (Dublin, 2003), G. C. Bolton, *The passing of the Irish Act of Union* (Oxford, 1966).

¹²¹ David Dickson, *New foundations: Ireland, 1660-1800* (Dublin, 2000), p. 218.

could be wrought from government in return for their 'warmest interest' in the eventual 'success of our projected Union'.¹²²

In parliament, Denis Browne was keen to show his support for the proposal at the earliest opportunity. On 23 January 1799, the Commons voted by a narrow majority to remove a paragraph advocating the union from an address to the Lord Lieutenant.¹²³ Browne voted on the side of the Castle administration and was as irritated as them by its rejection. However, this was to be the high water mark of the anti-union opposition as the government resolved to re-double its efforts in the coming year to win over the ruling elite of Ireland, with a strategy that included targeted diplomacy, inducements and a gamut of stratagems that typified contemporary political culture. Indeed, the Castle spent the equivalent of a decade's worth of patronage in the attempt to woo the uncommitted over to the proposal.¹²⁴ Browne's enthusiasm was tempered slightly by the suggestion that the Irish MPs in a unified parliament would be selected on a basis of one per county and from the eighteen largest towns. This would put Browne under serious pressure from the Bingham and the other sitting member, Colonel George Jackson, for the single county seat.¹²⁵ However, in the aftermath of the setback in parliament, Lord Castlereagh and Cornwallis amended the proposals to conclude that the counties would return two members each. The borough owners, such as the Bingham in Castlebar, would be compensated for the loss of their interests and local influence. These amendments essentially guaranteed that by early 1799, all four members from Mayo, Denis Browne, George Jackson, and the two borough members for Castlebar, Thomas Lindsey senior and junior, were noted by government as being solidly pro-union, even when it meant that the Lindseys would lose their seats, and Richard Bingham his borough.

As Edward Cooke and other leading members of the castle administration travelled throughout Ireland securing support for the union, Lord Altamont wrote to him to

¹²² Lord Altamont to Edward Cooke, 26 May 1799 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers 620/9/104/3).

¹²³ James Quinn, 'Dublin Castle and the Act of Union' in Brown et al. (eds), *The Irish Act of Union*, p. 97.

¹²⁴ Dickson, *New foundations*, p. 219.

¹²⁵ George Jackson (1761-1805). A colonel of the North Mayo Militia, Jackson was essentially a compromise M.P. who was returned through the interests of his maternal relatives, the Cuffes, and with the support of the Brownes.

appraise him of the situation in the west, where efforts were being made to alienate influential Catholics against the measure. Interestingly, he began his letter by complimenting Cooke for being the ‘only one of the government appearing not to throw cold water on it (the union)’. It is probable that the barbed comment was either a put down to Cornwallis, whose handling of both the aftermath of the rebellion and the promotion of union had given serious doubts to many conservatives, or a criticism directed at the Foster and FitzGibbon clique. The Brownes felt that they had shown leadership in Mayo on the Catholic question in 1792-3 and that their influence still counted among Catholic leaders there. Altamont warned Cooke that popular opinion would be necessary to carry the measure and that Catholic resentment was to be avoided at all costs. Alluding to the means necessary to carry public support in the west, Altamont stated that ‘with the least aid, I venture to say, I shall have from Mayo more general concurrence than in most parts of Ireland’.¹²⁶ However, patronage and money was going to be important if influential Catholics were to be able to associate the Union with Catholic advancement.

Altamont stated to Cooke that he could not use the same strategy that he had used after the rebellion to steer people away from radicalism and violence, ‘namely countenancing and protecting their relatives and friends that have been implicated in the rebellion’.¹²⁷ It is fairly certain that the peasantry of Mayo cared little for the high politics of union after the traumatic year they had experienced, but it showed an awareness on the part of Browne that if the educated ‘natural leaders’ of the ‘lower orders’, the clergy and the Catholic bourgeois, could be sold on the idea, then the threat of future violent upheavals could be, at least, reduced. Indeed, the Catholics of Ireland had no real attachment to the Protestant parliament in College Green and all meaningful relief measures had hitherto been conceded at the behest of London. To the leading clergymen of Ireland, the Protestant ascendancy was the real enemy, not the king or the British government.¹²⁸ Indeed, Bishop Thomas Hussey, who had been amongst Edmund Burke’s principal

¹²⁶ Lord Altamont to Edward Cooke, 26 May 1799 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers 620/9/104/3).

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Dáire Keogh, ‘Catholic responses to the Act of Union’ in Dáire Keogh and Kevin Whelan (eds), *Acts of Union: the causes, contexts and consequences of the Act of Union* (Dublin, 2001), p. 165.

correspondents, stated a preference to live under ‘the Beys and Marmalukes of Egypt’ than a continuation of a Castle junto, or the ‘Marmalukes of Ireland’ as he called them.¹²⁹ While the Catholic hierarchy refused to actively canvass for the measure, several unionist petitions were signed by the clergy throughout the country.¹³⁰ Much of this effort was a willingness to display loyalty in the wake of the rebellion, but with the proposed union failing to bar further Catholic claims, there was also an expectation that emancipation could follow if it was delicately pursued. Bishop Troy also urged Bishop Bellew of Killala to present a resolution, which derided the folly of rebellion and urged a loyal adherence to the king. Similar resolutions were signed throughout the country’s twenty six Catholic dioceses.¹³¹ However, the seemingly unqualified support for the government aroused considerable resentment among the laity, particularly in Dublin, Meath and Wexford. In Galway, Bishop Dillon was reluctant to sign a pro-union address for fear of being labelled ‘an Orange bishop’.¹³²

While in Galway, Lord Altamont concluded that popular opinion in the county was behind the proposal, stating that it was ‘bought over fairly well to the measure’ and that ‘the property [were] completely with it, with the Catholics as forward as their neighbours’.¹³³ Annoyed that the MP for Athenry, William Blakeney, had gone over to the anti-unionist camp, Altamont urged Cooke to take immediate action against him and his family. He warned that Blakeney held ‘one of the best offices (a gauger in Galway) and if he be not stopped instantly, there will be county meetings and the gentlemen of the county who have stood forward on the decision (pro-union) will be in very awkward predicaments, having to war with an angry and raised mob’.¹³⁴ However, with these warnings came more constructive advice about the means of placing potential supporters into key positions in Mayo. He recommended that Martin Kirwan, a Mayo lawyer living in Dublin, should be given a ‘commission of the barracks board’ in order to counter the anti-unionist threat from the local Militia commander, General Trench, who opposed the

¹²⁹ Keogh, *French disease*, p. 214.

¹³⁰ Keogh, ‘Catholic responses to the Act of Union’, pp 168-70.

¹³¹ Keogh, *French disease*, p. 215.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹³³ Lord Altamont to Edward Cooke, 26 May 1799 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers 620/9/104/3).

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

measure on ‘patriot’ grounds. The O’Donels from Newport, already antagonistic towards the Brownes, were further isolated by Altamont for their support of Trench. Altamont interpreted the opposition of the O’Donels to the union as petty jealousy, and of no significance, ‘the O’Donels and General Trench are the only persons that openly take part against us, but we have some neutrals. The conduct of the O’Donels in the county has so lowered them with every gentleman that they can do no prejudice whatever, and General Trench has no weight but that of his situation’.¹³⁵

On a visit to Dublin, Altamont also wrote to the second earl of Lucan, Richard Bingham, who had succeeded his father in 1795 and had established a closer working relationship with the Brownes.¹³⁶ Both families were decidedly pro-Union. Browne gave him an account of the meeting between the leaders of the opposition in the house of Lord Charlemont on 20 January 1800.¹³⁷ The meeting drew together figures from disparate political hues and culminated in a circular letter being prepared and signed by Lord Downshire, Lord Charlemont and William Brabazon Ponsonby, the three central figures in the opposition ranks. The circular letter was essentially an appeal to country MPs to reject the government proposals on patriotic grounds. Browne reported that the meeting had not targeted Mayo but that one of those present, James Moore O’Donel, brother of Neal O’Donel from Newport, and MP for Ratoath in Meath, was militant in his opposition to Union and had not ruled out a change of opinion in his home county:

Expresses have been sent around the kingdom to promote calls of the counties, and ambassadors [have] gone down to promote them, and though at Lord Charlemont’s meeting it was resolved to give up Mayo at a lost game, Mr. O’Donel conceives his eloquence may move mountains.¹³⁸

Although Browne viewed O’Donel’s challenge as fanciful, he was not complacent and ordered his agent, George Clendenning, to object to any open meetings in Westport on the grounds that they would be provocative. He then assured Bingham that ‘all Westport

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Richard Bingham (1764-1839), became second earl of Lucan in 1795, supported the Union and was made an Irish representative peer in the U.K. parliament.

¹³⁷ Francis William Caulfeild (1775-1863), second earl of Charlemont.

¹³⁸ Lord Altamont to Lord Lucan, 23 Jan. 1800 (N.U.I., Galway, Hardiman Library Collection, P48/2/1).

will attend at your summons and indeed the whole county is so entirely with us that I cannot conceive he [O'Donel] would not be beaten anywhere'.¹³⁹ Lord Altamont, with the knowledge that rebels were still at large in the west, concluded his letter to Bingham with a prophecy that the opposition intended to destroy the proposal by stoking up the animosity between Protestants and Catholics:

The object of these meetings is avowedly to raise a civil war and therefore more consequential than the general plans of idle and ignorant and mischievous blackguards, that under the semblance of principle, which they disregard in every other act of their lives, want to lead others to be instrumental to their own objects. I hear that the Catholics throughout the Kingdom have been tampered with and to the Northerners, they [the opposition] have given out that all leases are to be broken when the Union passes.¹⁴⁰

Browne knew the potential of rumour and innuendo in a political crisis and when he wrote to Bingham several days later, he informed him that his brother, John Bingham, was considering a move to the opposition unless the Chief Secretary, Lord Castlereagh, agreed to match the bid of £20,000 which he had been offered for his borough and his votes. John Bingham, the MP for Tuam, gave Castlereagh a day to make up his mind. He eventually received £15,000 and the title Baron Clanmorris of Newbrook for the borough seats of Castlebar.¹⁴¹ Browne hoped that Richard Bingham would not confront his brother on his word, 'I trust any vanity you may feel at the conduct of your kinsman won't induce you to quote your authority, lest a bullet in the thorax or a thrust through the small guts should be the consequence'.¹⁴² This feigned concern probably covered a hope that the story would sow disunity the Bingham brothers.

However, the Brownes were still convinced that treachery and sedition were at work in the county in an attempt to bring down the union and to re-ignite recent rebellious sentiments. While the opposition to union comprised both ultra Protestants, who feared a dissolution of Protestant ascendancy, and Whig patriots, who wished to maintain the

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, ii, 299

¹⁴² Lord Altamont to Lord Lucan, 25 Jan. 1800 (N.U.I. Galway, Lucan Papers, Hardiman Library Collection, P48/2/2).

legislative independence that was won in the 1780s, the Brownes believed that campaigns of both groups ran the risk of inflaming or inciting the peasantry to embark upon another rebellion.¹⁴³ The correspondence of the Brownes during this period reveals a belief that any opposition to union would help ‘engines of disturbance’ to seize their moment and finish the project that they had started in the 1790s. The ultra-Protestants, whom the Brownes had blamed for provoking the peasantry during 1798, and the Whigs, whom they viewed as the appeasers of the United Irishmen, both needed to be faced down if the safety of property and rank in Ireland was to be secured.

Lord Altamont wasted little time in appraising government of his suspicions. In a dispatch to the Castle from his town house in Sackville Street, he warned of a national conspiracy concentrated in Dublin, which had sent ‘an express down to Kerry’ in an effort to call on their ‘brethern to step forward in opposing the union in conjunction with their friends and associates’.¹⁴⁴ Unwilling to go over the heads of the local gentry, he urged the government to nip any Catholic dissent in the bud: ‘it may be right to speak to the Knight of Kerry to attend to it immediately, but pray my name may not be mentioned and still less my authority’.¹⁴⁵

A violent altercation was brought about by the union debates, but it took place in Mayo between James Moore O’Donel and another of the Bingham brothers, Denis. The O’Donel’s had long resented the allegations by the Brownes and Bingham that their wealth in Newport had been built upon the lucrative smuggling routes of the west and this bitterness had been exacerbated by earlier clashes with the Bingham during the 1790 election. This bitterness was compounded by the eclipse of Newport as a bustling trading port by Westport after it had been modernised with the help of government funds solicited by the Brownes. In one of his more radical speeches against the union, O’Donel had declared that, ‘If the Parliament of Ireland should be mean enough to vote away the legislative independence of Ireland, the people of Ireland would not be mean enough to

¹⁴³ For opposition to the Union see James Kelly, ‘The failure of opposition’ and James Quinn, ‘Dublin Castle and the Act of Union’ in Brown et al. (eds), *The Irish Act of Union*, pp 97, 108-28.

¹⁴⁴ Lord Altamont to Dublin Castle, 19 Jan. 1800 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers 620/57/35a).

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

submit to it, they would assert their rights, die as freemen rather than live as slaves'.¹⁴⁶ He denounced the Bingham as traitors and then gladly accepted the challenge that was immediately given by Major Bingham. Duels between military figures and civilians tended to be serious affairs that ended in severe wounds or death; in this instance Bingham killed O'Donel with his second shot.¹⁴⁷ O'Donel, perhaps realising the danger of the duel, left a farewell address, which urged the 'independents' of the county to rally together against what he termed as a bid to make Mayo a closed borough.¹⁴⁸ This was a direct reference to the Browne and Bingham hegemony in politics and influence.

For his part, Altamont was disgusted at the reckless behaviour of the opposition MPs in the debating chambers of College Green in the run up to Union vote and the effect it was having on the political temper of the country. He maintained that, 'not a pedlar comes up from Castlebar or Westport or Tuam that doesn't wait from morning till night to get admission to the House of Commons and they could scarce find a better school for treason and sedition'.¹⁴⁹ However, Altamont over-estimated the power and threat of the opposition, believing that, 'the Speaker [John Foster] and Lord Downshire are as desperate as Napper Tandy'.¹⁵⁰ The Act of Union eventually received the sanction of Browne and the rest of the House of Lords in June 1800 and the parliament itself ceased to exist two months later. Browne still believed that the opposition politicians had done their best to sow discontent throughout the country and he revelled in their defeat. He took a less active involvement in politics after the Union and hoped to add further to the improvements of Westport House and its demesne in the coming years. Altamont also looked forward to the rewards that were promised for backing the government's Union proposals. In a piece of self-deprecating humour to Lord Lucan, he believed that the opposition as well as he made better farmers than politicians:

The Union goes on in progress and every thinking man, not a politician, without one exception that I have ever met, approve it. The anti's don't mean to give

¹⁴⁶ Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, v, 386.

¹⁴⁷ Kelly, *That Damn'd Thing called Honour*, p. 227.

¹⁴⁸ Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, ii, 299.

¹⁴⁹ Lord Altamont to Lord Lucan, 15 Mar. 1800 (N.U.I.Galway, Hardiman Library Collection, P48/2/3).

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

further direct opposition, some have gone out of Parliament and others have gone to attend fairs and buy cows and calves, a trade more suited to them, and indeed to myself too, than parliamentary politics.¹⁵¹

Before long Altamont wrote to the Castle to gently remind the administration of the favours and honours that he felt were now due to him. In August 1800, he wrote to the Under Secretary, Alexander Marsden, and informed him that he wished his new title to bear the names of a ‘district of the country where [his] fortune was placed’. Altamont was duly made a Knight of St. Patrick on the 5 August 1800 and was eager to follow this up as quickly as possible with the marquessette he had been assured for his support of the Union. This support, he reminded Marsden, had been crucial in several counties in Connacht, particularly Mayo, Leitrim and Galway — ‘my weight and that of my family within it may be judged of by the part taken almost throughout it. The late occasion [was] begun, raised and carried through in more counties than one or two by its influence and exertions’.¹⁵² Indeed, Browne reminded Marsden that he expected what was due to him:

I speak more freely on this point now that I have only to offer my return [of title name] for marked and distinguished honours and kindnesses [sic], which I have received, than I would do if I had anything to ask or wish for. My acknowledgements are due to Lord Cornwallis and he has few, if any, more zealous and more steadfast friend[s].¹⁵³

However, the name of this marquessate was contentious as ‘Mayo’, ‘Galway’ and ‘Roscommon’ were all taken by Irish lords. Even ‘Westport’ had been taken as a courtesy title by his son, Howe Peter. Thus began a lengthy correspondence between government and Westport House that contained suggestions and rejections that must have been frustrating for Browne and utterly exasperating for both Cornwallis and Marsden. Cornwallis had already written about his disdain for the avarice of the Irish gentry in 1799 when he exclaimed that he longed to ‘kick those whom my public duty obliges me to court! If I did not hope to get out of this country, I should most earnestly pray for

¹⁵¹ Lord Altamont to Lord Lucan, 31 May 1800 (N.U.I. Galway, Hardiman Library Collection, P48/2/4).

¹⁵² Lord Altamont to Alexander Marsden, 20 Aug. 1800 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/9/104/3).

¹⁵³ Ibid.

immediate death'.¹⁵⁴ The vanity of the Irish gentry now vying for suitable title descriptions must have added to his growing disillusionment. The first of Browne's suggestions to Cornwallis was the 'marquess of Connaught', however it was in use by a member of the royal family, Prince William Frederick, the sixth duke of Gloucester, as being part of his long list of titles. Lord Altamont even went as far as to send an unnamed acquaintance on an unsuccessful mission to Britain, in an effort to get the Duke to change his mind. On being told by Cornwallis that Gloucester still disapproved, Altamont then suggested the title of 'Monteagle of Connaught' adding that it represented the province where he had 'some claims of distinction'.¹⁵⁵ Although this title was rejected due to its grandiose claim of an entire province, Browne was later made Baron Monteagle of Westport County Mayo, which tempered his disappointment.

Browne then put forward the rather wordy suggestion of 'Marquess of Eyre Connaught in the County of Galway' and added that there could be no objections or 'obstacles ... which were before considered insurmountable, the Royal family and the district'.¹⁵⁶ It was nearly two months before Cornwallis replied to him that he thought the name unwieldy and proposed that he take the name of 'Marquess of Westport'. Browne disagreed and still held out for Eyre Connaught, adding a spiky retort to Marsden that Connaught was his preference for two reasons - 'my family has resided [there] for some hundred years, but as sounding Irish, to which I have not the same objection as may be felt by many of my countrymen'.¹⁵⁷ After Connaught, Westport and Limerick were rejected by either Browne or Cornwallis, Lord Altamont was eventually created first marquess of Sligo on 29 December 1800 and became a lifelong representative peer in the United Kingdom's House of Lords. Lord Cornwallis happily left Ireland the following year.

An interesting detail about Browne's marquessate is that Cornwallis offered to make Denis Browne's family a remainder to the title in case of sudden death or lack of issue.

¹⁵⁴ Cornwallis to Ross, 20 May 1799 in *Correspondence of Charles, first Marquis Cornwallis*, ed. Rosse, iii, 100.

¹⁵⁵ Lord Altamont to Alexander Marsden, 18 Aug. 1800 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/9/104/3).

¹⁵⁶ Lord Altamont to Alexander Marsden, 30 Aug. 1800 (ibid.).

Altamont seemed surprised at this offer and stated that he had not sought the additional clause. Altamont told Denis about the prospect of possibly becoming a Marquess, but he seemed to be very luke warm about the subject. Lord Altamont explained to Marsden that Denis was ‘not anxious on the subject and therefore I rather wish it should not be thought of further’.¹⁵⁸ The *sang-froid* attitude of Denis Browne towards the remainder might be explained by the counter-insurgency campaign in the county at the time. This was, after all, his main concern. However, it might also display what the tenth marquess of Sligo described as Denis Browne’s ‘jealousy towards his elder brother’.¹⁵⁹ Unlike Lord Altamont, Denis harboured a lingering sense that the Castle had failed to acknowledge his work on promoting the Act of Union in the west and for the successful pacification of Mayo following the 1798 Rebellion. The offer of a ‘mere’ remainder to his brother’s title could have been viewed as a paltry reward for his active loyalism. Whatever the reason, Browne rejected the offer and was content to accept the more civic title of the ‘Right Honourable’ for the rest of his life. Contemporary politics and the security of the region soon combined to divert his attention away from any perceived injustice and within a short period Denis Browne used the weight of his brother’s title to his particular advantage. The election of 1802, the first of the new united parliament, was to be an early example of this useful familial connection.

The Brownes were adamant that there should be no contest in the first Mayo election to the United parliament in 1802. They felt that there had been enough upheaval in the county after the rebellion and, as both the sitting MPs Denis Browne and Colonel George Jackson had both supported the Union, it was deemed only fair and necessary that they would maintain their seats and that no threat should come from either the Bingham or the O’Donels. The two borough seats had also been abolished, which left the Bingham without any representation in London. However, a problem for the Brownes soon arose when Jackson admitted that he was not going to put himself forward for re-election to the imperial parliament for financial reasons.¹⁶⁰ Like Denis Browne, Jackson, the equal in

¹⁵⁷ Lord Altamont to Alexander Marsden, 26 Oct. 1800 (ibid.).

¹⁵⁸ Lord Altamont to Alexander Marsden, 18 Aug. 1800 (ibid.).

¹⁵⁹ Browne, *Westport House*, p. 32.

¹⁶⁰ George Jackson (1761-1805), colonel of the North Mayo Militia and M.P. for Mayo County, 1800-02.

military rank to Lord Sligo, felt somewhat embittered by what he perceived to have been a personal snub to him after his service in the rebellion and his active support for the Union. He had wanted a baronetcy for himself in return for this support, but this had been denied to him by the castle administration as being unnecessary due to his close bonds with the Brownes and the Cuffes, both strongly pro-union families. The colonel had obviously banked on his projected elevation to the peerage as he was deeply in debt when the 1802 election approached. He confided in Lord Tyrawley that he had not enough finance available to him to guarantee an uncontested election.¹⁶¹ This decision gave the Bingham and the O'Donels an opportunity to use their large wealth to put forward candidates that were closely connected to their family interests. However, before they could put their plans into shape, Denis Browne flatly declared that he would challenge any man who dared take the seat of George Jackson to a duel.¹⁶²

Browne's declaration incensed the Bingham and Lord Sligo was forced to intercede in the dispute in order to put an end to any threat of violence. As a compromise, Sligo proposed the uncontested election of a 'neutral' candidate that would be acceptable to all. He put forward Henry Augustus Dillon, the thirteenth Viscount Dillon, as the most acceptable compromise candidate. Dillon was in fact related to the Brownes through marriage but was described as being a character with little real interest in politics. However, Richard Bingham wrote to Lord Sligo and asked why there had been such a rush to bring forward such a character and whether the Brownes had paid him for the purpose. Sligo thundered back:

You asked me did I give or receive [money] to bring Dillon in for Mayo. On my honour, I did not directly not indirectly, but I would have given without scruple if necessary to stop a contest. Was I consulted [?], I was, and a party to it, however, when I was consulted, [I] did it on the express condition of your approbation and the reason it was not waited for was that there was not time possibly.¹⁶³

However, Sligo wrote to Alexander Marsden in July 1802 and described, in a more diplomatic way than he had told Bingham, of why he has chosen Dillon to represent the

¹⁶¹ James Cuffe M.P. (1747-1821), created Baron Tyrawley in 1797.

¹⁶² Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, ii, 298.

county with Denis. He also showed some annoyance at his brother's 'fire-eating' ways, which were now obviously an embarrassment to a newly created marquess:

I understand we are to have no contest here, no opposition was intended against my brother and for the sake of peace, I have consented to a compromise as to the second member... I neither like fighting, drinking, trouble nor expense...I am quite ready to suit my country politics to the wishes and views of the government everywhere, not only from duty but from inclination also.¹⁶⁴

It could not have been lost on Lord Sligo that Denis Browne's first contest to the united parliament in 1802 had been as controversial (and nearly as violent) as his election to the Irish parliament back in 1783. However, Dillon was friendly with members of the opposition in London and Sligo hoped that this would not diminish his standing in the county or affect the considerable patronage that he enjoyed.¹⁶⁵ The unpredictable nature of the Brownes' political careers during the eighteenth century reflected their precarious role amongst the ruling elite in a Catholic county. Only 11,000 people out of a population of about 150,000 had a right to vote, but the conduct of the elected officials in a Catholic county trickled down to the lowliest peasant through the use of patronage, the magistracy, the local militia and even the very right to hold a market. A midpoint between ultra-loyalism and Catholic radicalism was identified by the Brownes as being the surest way to maintain the social hierarchy that existed in eighteenth century Mayo

The Brownes were held in high regard by the local Catholic population until the radicalism of the 1790s saw them retreat from liberal advocacy into paranoia and reaction. This peak of active loyalism naturally coincided with the very period when their reputation amongst the lower classes was at an all time low. However, the fortunes of the family improved in the 1810s when Denis Browne began to make rather radical pronouncements in favour of Catholic emancipation. The paternalistic approach to governance of 'the lower orders' was deemed an efficient system by the family, which rewarded loyal service and encouraged the local populace to keep 'outsiders' and troublemakers at arms length. This system failed in the 1790s, due to the national

¹⁶³ Lord Altamont to Lord Lucan, July 1802 (N.U.I.Galway, Hardiman Library Collection, P48/3/1).

¹⁶⁴ Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, 19 July 1802 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/18a/4).

mobilisation of the United Irishmen, but worked remarkably well in the early nineteenth century. The stern lesson that had been handed out to wayward-minded peasants during 1798-99 was not easily forgotten and the carrot and stick approach of the Brownes to local governance continued for many years into the new century. Gradually, the sense of betrayal they felt towards the local Catholic populace dissipated at around the same time their disillusionment with the Act of Union became more intense. Vocal condemnations in parliament of the broken promises of Catholic emancipation and economic development made them unpopular with government but helped rehabilitate their liberal reputations at home. The Brownes' political loyalties had come full circle.

¹⁶⁵ Thorne, *History of Parliament*, ii, 676.



Above: Murdoch Mackenzie's rudimentary map of Westport in the 1780s shows Westport House and its wooded demesne dominating the area before the town's development under Lord Altamont.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Detail of Murdoch Mackenzie's map [circa 1785], courtesy of Sarah Gearty, Royal Irish Academy.

Chapter Two

'As I hear of them, they shall hear of me': The Brownes, the United Irishmen and Mayo Security 1796-1799.

On 22 August 1798, Denis Browne wrote to Lord Cornwallis, appraising him of the security situation in county Mayo. As with the rest of Connacht, Mayo had been untouched by the horrific violence that had engulfed the east coast in May and June. While the Lord Lieutenant was confident that the recent insurrection had been crushed, Browne stressed that he sensed a rebellious spirit in the west that only needed a spark to ignite it.¹ Rumours of an Orange 'extermination oath' which had preceded the outbreaks in Kildare and Wexford, were now permeating Mayo society:

Very alarming symptoms of disturbance begin to show themselves in this hitherto peaceable county – a report circulated by some incendiaries that Orangemen were about to rise and destroy the Catholics. I would think little of this in ordinary times but I am afraid of it from knowing it to have been an engine of disturbance in Leinster and Munster. There are no associations or Orangemen in Mayo [and] consequently no ground at all for this mischief. I conceive it to be a pretext for rebellion. I cannot avoid advising an increase to the military force of Mayo and a man to direct this force and the county.²

The rumours were aggravated by reports of bigoted indiscipline by Lord Downshire's militia regiment in the neighbouring Galway. However, this forewarning was only the latest in a long sequence between the Brownes and Dublin Castle after 1796. This channel of communication catalogued two years of intelligence by both brothers to

¹ For Cornwallis in Ireland see Charles Ross, (ed.) *Correspondence of Charles, First Marquis Cornwallis* (3 vols. London, 1859); W.N. Osbourne 'Legal aspects of the 1798 rising, its suppression and the aftermath' in Bartlett, Dickson, Keogh, Whelan (eds.) *1798 A Bicentenary Perspective* (Dublin, 2003); Thomas Bartlett, 'Clemency and Compensation: The treatment of defeated rebels and suffering loyalists after the 1798 rebellion' in Jim Smyth (ed.) *Revolution, Counter- Revolution and Union, Ireland in the 1790s* (Cambridge, 2000) pp 99-128; Michael Durey 'Marquess Cornwallis and the fate of Irish rebel prisoners in the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion' in *ibid.* pp 128-146.

² Denis Browne to Lord Cornwallis, 22 Aug. 1798 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/39/195).

ensure that the seeds of sedition and rebellion did not take root in 'their' county. Obtaining information through surveillance, informers and spies was their forte and it was key in neutering any rebel threat in the west. The Brownes believed this threat had increased significantly during 1796 because of two particular events: the increased migration of northern Catholics into Connacht and the aborted French landing at Bantry Bay.

There had been a tradition of Ulster migration into Connacht during the eighteenth century. During the 1740s and 1750s, there had been a steady trickle of Presbyterian immigrants to the county, which coincided with the expansion of the linen industry there.³ However the Catholic influx of the 1790s was markedly different in cause and effect. The worsening of sectarian tension and serious clashes between the Defenders, Peep O'Day Boys (from 1795, the Orange Order) provoked this exodus westwards.⁴ The Brownes reacted to the initial influx with paternalistic concern and sympathy. But as replicated throughout Ireland, the arrival of the French fleet off Bantry bay in late 1796 changed everything irrevocably.⁵ The subsequent realisation among Irish loyalists that the Royal Navy had been outwitted and that their worst fears had very nearly become a reality led to palpable feelings of dread and fear that a second attempt could easily be attempted with the aid of Irish allies. The immediate reaction of the Brownes to this near calamity was to petition the government for a stronger military presence to cover Mayo's vulnerable coastline. They also redoubled their efforts to acquire vital information about the new northern residents on their estates and to communicate to the Castle any reports of seditious interaction between them and the Mayo peasantry.

As Browne wrote to Lord Cornwallis about the Orange extermination rumours, he had no knowledge that his worst fears were already becoming a reality fifty miles north of Westport at Kilcummin harbour, where three French ships were landing 1,100 men and 6,000 muskets, the vanguard of a larger fleet that was to make a second attempt on

³ L.M. Cullen, *The Emergence of Modern Ireland 1600-1900* (London, 1981), pp 57-58.

⁴ Jim Smyth, *The Men of No Property, Irish Radicals and Popular Politics in the Late Eighteenth Century* (London, 1998), pp 157-173.

⁵ John A Murphy (ed.) *The French Are In The Bay, The Expedition to Bantry Bay 1796* (Dublin, 1997).

Ireland.⁶ The eagerness of the Mayo peasantry to join the French troops in large numbers during the short-lived invasion was subsequently cited by the Brownes to vindicate the warnings they had sent to government and to admonish their slowness in reacting. The corollary of this was the Government's increasing belief that, although the brothers were evidently not the shrill alarmists they had hitherto believed, their patriotic wishes to lead government troops in battle was merely bluff and aristocratic posture. Government officials noted that when the French threat was at its height, the brothers fled from the region as fast as they could. Denis returned to lead his Yeoman cavalry only when the French had been defeated at Ballinamuck while Lord Altamont arrived back when the courts martial had been initiated in late September. The 1798 Rebellion also irrevocably changed the reputation of the Brownes in the eyes of the Mayo peasantry, which was subjected to the worst of the terror that followed the French collapse. The acceptance of the family as liberal and humane landlords yielded to a popular perception of the brothers as sanguinary rebel hunters, a perception that took decades to reverse. In the immediate aftermath, however, as leading gentry figures who had warned government about conspiracy in the county, the Brownes were acknowledged, by government and peasantry alike, as the foremost enforcers of law and order as Mayo entered the nineteenth century.

(i.) *'Poisoned in their Principles'? Northern immigrants to Mayo, 1796-97.*

The civil and military careers of John Denis and Denis Browne began in the late 1770s and early 1780s. Lord Altamont was High Sheriff of Mayo in 1779 and became governor of the county in 1781. During the crisis period of 1797-1800, he was joint governor of the county along with James Cuffe. During the 1780s Altamont was Third Major in the Mayo Legion Volunteer Corps, a rank he kept when the South Mayo Militia was formed

⁶ For the rebellion in Mayo see Richard Hayes *The Last Invasion of Ireland: When Connacht Rose* (Dublin, 1979). Also, Harman Murtagh, 'General Humbert's futile campaign' in Bartlett et al *1798 A Bicentenary Perspective*, pp 174-187.

in 1793.⁷ Denis Browne also rose rapidly in influence after his election to parliament in 1782. He became High Sheriff for Mayo in January 1786 and in January 1794 was appointed to the Irish Privy Council. Browne was commissioned as a Colonel of the Fifth Royal Irish Dragoons from 1779-84 before parliamentary business induced him to retire from regular military life. While an MP, he remained an officer in the Ashford Volunteers and became a Colonel of the South Mayo Militia in 1793. He was also a captain in the Murrisk Yeoman Cavalry during the critical years of 1796-99. In his later years he again took command as captain of the Claremorris Infantry during the Ribbon threat of 1822.⁸ While the Brownes were considered by government and the wider establishment to be liberal 'patriots' with a concern for Catholic grievances, by 1796 they were acknowledged by Dublin Castle as being a solidly loyal presence in an overwhelmingly Catholic county - a resource that could be harnessed to provide reliable intelligence of sedition and direct government strategy against it. With the continued influx of Ulster Catholic refugees into the county during 1796 and the gradual deterioration of the national situation, the Brownes importance to government in the region markedly increased.

In September 1795, the 'Battle of the Diamond' in Armagh became the pretext for substantial expulsions of Catholics from Ulster and during that winter most of the refugees sought protection in Connacht.⁹ The initial trickle of migrants became a flood in 1796 when the Indemnity and Insurrection Acts exacerbated the worsening situation.¹⁰ The migrants who arrived in Mayo generally headed to the estates of Lord Altamont that were located near Croagh Patrick and Denis Browne's estate, Mount Browne, near the

⁷ Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, ii, 290. For the South Mayo Battalion of the Irish Militia, see Ivan F Nelson *The Irish Militia 1793-1802* (Dublin, 2007), p. 110, p. 177. (A green flag on display in Westport House purports to be one carried by rebels in 1798. However, the flag displays a harp with a crown and the words 'Mayo Legion'. It is most probably the flag of Lord Altamont's Volunteer Corps which has been erroneously labelled. Alternatively, it is possible that the rebels seized the flag and used it during their campaign. This often happened during the Wexford rebellion).

⁸ Johnston-Liik, *Hist. Ir. Parl.*, ii, 282.

⁹ For the most complete narrative of the northern migration to Connacht, see Patrick Tohall, 'The Diamond fight of 1795 and the resultant expulsions', in *Seanchas Ardmhaca* Vol.3 No.1 (1958), Patrick Hogan, 'The Migration of Ulster Catholics to Connaught 1795-96', in *Seanchas Ardmhaca* Vol. 9 No. 2 (1979); Tomás Ó Fiaich, 'The Migration from Ulster to Co. Mayo in 1795-96', in *The North Mayo Archaeological and Historical Journal 1989/1990* and Jim Smyth, *The Men of No Property*, pp 157-183.

¹⁰ Hogan, 'The Migration of Ulster Catholics to Connaught 1795-96', pp 287-288.

village of Aughagower. The only other significant landowner who experienced an influx from Ulster onto his estates was James Cuffe of Deel Castle, Crossmolina in northern Mayo. Cuffe was a Mayo MP, magistrate and captain of two companies of mounted yeomanry in Kilmaine and Tyrawley. He was made a Lieutenant Colonel of the North Mayo Militia in February 1797 and created Baron Tyrawley later that same year.¹¹

During the summer of 1796 Lord Altamont sought advice from Camden, the Lord Lieutenant, on how best to treat the ‘unfortunate’ migrants that were situated on his land. He even put forward a nest-feathering scheme:

Having witnessed the wretched helpless state of the persons who have been driven from their homes in the counties of Armagh and Tyrone and being aware that men are never so good subjects as which [are] comfortably situated, nor ever so dangerous as when driven to desperacy [sic] by misfortunes, I do hereby offer to pay into the hands of such trustees as shall be named by government for that purpose, the sum of £1000, provided a sum of £2000 is added to it from the public funds towards building houses for those unhappy sufferers who have been obliged to fly from their own homes by a merciless and unheard of persecution and have taken refuge on my estates.¹²

While Altamont was concerned with the accommodation of the new arrivals, Denis Browne was busy collecting information on the ground and forwarding early statistics about the migration to Thomas Pelham, the Chief Secretary.¹³

Browne assured the government that all necessary steps were being taken to address the problem:

In respect to the petition of the unfortunate persons from the north of the kingdom that have taken shelter in and about Westport, their case requires the most serious and immediate consideration. The 100 persons whose petition I submitted through you to government have above 400 in family. There are besides this 390 families [approx. 1,500-2,000 people] that have last come to our neighbourhood. Their names have been sent to General Johnston by Lord

¹¹ Ibid. p. 294.

¹² Lord Altamont to Earl Camden, 27 June 1796 (N.A.I, State of the Country Papers 1015/21).

¹³ Thomas Pelham (1756-1826) Chief Secretary to Lord Camden from 1795-1798.

Altamont in order to their characters and intentions being [ascertained], a precaution ... necessary for the publick safety.¹⁴

Clearly, Browne's strongest instinct and that of his family was to help the new arrivals; 'their dependence on our family led them to seek protection under us, which we will give them'.¹⁵ This was consistent with their political philosophy, which linked paternal care with peace and prosperity. Their commitment to assuaging Catholic grievances was part of this philosophy and was deemed successful and cost-effective by the brothers. However, the Brownes were extremely sensitive to any recourse to illegal and rebellious means to rectify any perceived injustice. When this line was crossed, they acted ruthlessly. Illegality was intolerable to the Brownes, even when they realised that many of the contemporary laws were unjust and outdated.

To Lord Altamont, a pleasing development of the migration was that many of the arrivals were weavers from the booming Ulster linen industry. If their loyalty and reliability could be assured then their arrival had the potential to boost the local economy of the region. Like many 'improving' landlords of the period, Altamont was anxious to stimulate local markets and commerce in the area in order to increase currency circulation and through higher rents improve the towns and villages surrounding his estate. Additionally, he observed that the Catholic refugees believed their persecutors to be largely Presbyterian and in doing so displayed an absence of any United Irish 'infection'.¹⁶ However, Altamont's hope that northern Catholics had eschewed radicalism was shortlived. Two weeks later he sent a fresh report to Cooke:

I have very little doubt that emissaries of sedition have been sent to us as well as to other parts of the kingdom. Those I have suspected most are pretended Prophets. They carry about with them little prints of the crucifixion with a ladder

¹⁴ Denis Browne to Thomas Pelham, 29 June 1796 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/23/206).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The northern Presbyterians were deemed to have been deeply democratised and 'republicanised' by the American and French revolutions and the corner stone of the United movement in Belfast. However, senior Presbyterian figures still entertained doubts about the Catholic question and the ability of Catholics in general to aspire to liberty. Tone's *Argument of behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* had been written in 1790 with the intention of changing this perception amongst Presbyterians. See Kevin Whelan, 'United and Disunited Irishmen', in Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty, Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of The Irish Identity 1760-1830* (Cork, 1996), p. 63.

added to it and tied up with little blue ribbon. I have lately examined a priest upon the subject. He calls these prints scapulars and says they belong to devotion, but I do not think the account satisfactory.¹⁷

As Browne suspected, the scapulars and ‘prophets’ were not as benign as the local clergy described. The Masonic image of the ladder combined with the documented use of scapulars by the Mayo insurgents in the subsequent rebellion suggest that at least some the northern immigrants were sworn Defenders or United Irishmen when they arrived in Mayo.¹⁸ During the rebellion, the rector of Lacken, James Little, described in his diary how radicals in the west used scapulars and confraternities to mobilise the peasantry.¹⁹ Indeed, after Little’s criticisms, the Catholic archbishop of Tuam, Edward Dillon, issued a pastoral in 1799, seeking to regulate the use of scapulars, which he believed had sorrowfully become ‘badges of sedition’.²⁰ Browne further stated that ‘an idea has gone about that the persecutions in the north have been fermented by government and however diabolical and absurd such a measure would be for the purpose of politics, it has gained belief and has disaffected a body of the Catholics’.²¹

Although Lord Altamont was appalled by the rumour that the government had supported the violence against the northern Catholics, the alleged collusion was of less surprise to other establishment figures.²² In August 1796, Thomas Knox, the military commander in Ulster wrote to Cooke and outlined the necessity of tolerating Orange violence, ‘We must to a certain degree uphold them, for with all their licentiousness, on them we must rely for the preservation of our lives and properties should critical times occur’.²³ Jimmy Hope, the most socially aware of the United Irish leaders, commented that he had ‘heard the peep o’ day men boasting of the indulgence they got from their magistrates for

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Although a hostile account, for the use of scapulars in the Mayo rebellion see Richard Musgrave, *Memoirs of The Irish Rebellion of 1798* (4th edition, Wexford 1995) pp 530-31.

¹⁹ James Little, ‘Little’s Diary of the French Landing in 1798’, in *Analectica Hibernicum* vol.ii, p. 67.

²⁰ Dáire Keogh, ‘Postscript to 1798: five letters of Myles Prendergast’, in *Archivium Hibernicum* (2009), pp 244-5.

²¹ Lord Altamont to Edward Cooke, 27 July 1796 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/24/62).

²² Francis Plowden *An Historical Review of The State of Ireland* (London, 1803), p. 555. Plowden was a Catholic lawyer and historian and wrote of the ‘supine-ness, partiality and bigotry’ of the Armagh magistracy in its response to the pogroms.

²³ Thomas Knox to Edward Cooke, 13 Aug. 1796 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/24/106).

wrecking and beating the papists and the snug bits of land that their friends got when the papists fled to Connaught'.²⁴ Indeed, it had been similar conduct by local magistrates and crown forces (coupled with Carhampton's campaign in Connacht) that had necessitated the Indemnity Act (1796), described above.²⁵

While Denis Browne set about taking detailed lists of names and enumerating the overall numbers of the migrants, Altamont dealt with alarming intelligence that emanated from the northerners. He was told of a local rising that was planned for the 20 August 1796, which would coincide with a fair in the county. The culprit spreading the rumour in Westport was immediately arrested by Altamont and 'upon examination we traced it to have come from the emigrants from the north of Ireland, the numbers of whom are daily increasing in these parts'.²⁶ Although sceptical, Browne believed the peaceful state of the county had been disturbed by their presence. What was needed was a sufficient show of strength by the government, and Browne outlined a provisional plan; 'that the troops in Castlebar, Ballinrobe and in this town [Westport] should be kept in readiness on the 20th... to be brought forward in case of necessity.'²⁷

This false alarm was further proof to Lord Altamont that the Ulstermen had the potential, if not yet the intention, to disturb the tranquillity of his estates and the 'contented' peasantry residing upon them. His initial sympathy towards the outsiders was rapidly replaced by mistrust and disquiet:

The number of people coming daily from Derry, Tyrone, Down and Armagh is incredible [and] the accounts they give of themselves, in many instances, [are] unsatisfactory. I am by no means clear that they have come here with a good intention and if they have any view to do mischief, their number already is enough for it.²⁸

²⁴ Tohall, 'The Diamond fight of 1795 and the Resultant Expulsions', p. 27.

²⁵ See above, p. 38.

²⁶ Lord Altamont to Thomas Pelham, 17 Aug. 1796 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/24/122).

²⁷ Lord Altamont to Thomas Pelham, 17 Aug. 1796 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/24/122).

²⁸ Ibid.

During the winter months of 1796, Lord Altamont, Denis Browne and James Cuffe finalised and dispatched instalments of a rudimentary census of migrants to Dublin Castle, which included details of children and the baronies of origin. Denis Browne warned against the reduction of military strength in the area, but also reassured Pelham that there was not 'any danger or appearance of it, other than an apparent sympathy between the banished of the north and the [local] inhabitants arising from similarity of religious persuasion'.²⁹ Browne apologised to Pelham for the lack of detail in the initial lists but stated that the migrants were 'very unwilling to give [information] from suspicion of the motive of inquiry – naturally enough in their aggrieved and distressed situation'.³⁰ Hoping that the government would send an official to Mayo to examine the claims of the refugees, Browne was prophetic in his analysis of the wider political situation. Looking towards the quickening crisis in national and international politics, he correctly identified the Ulster expulsions as another important step in the radicalisation of Irish political thinking:

No circumstance that has happened in Ireland for a hundred years past has gone so decidedly to separate the mind of the country from the government as this unfortunate and untimely business.³¹

Denis Browne sent a total of five lists to government with 1,074 names from various counties in Ulster. Estimating that each name represented a wife and about four or five children, Browne surmised that when his and Lord Altamont's lists were combined, there were more than four thousand migrants on their estates in southern Mayo.³² Lord Altamont confirmed this when he wrote to Thomas Pelham in November 1796, and informed him of the lists which he had himself recommended:

My brother, at your desire, endeavoured to procure lists of such of the emigrants from the north of Ireland as had settled in our immediate neighbourhood ... I have no reason to doubt that the truth of it, that near 4,000 of these unhappy

²⁹ Denis Browne to Thomas Pelham, 7 Nov. 1796, (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/56/20).

³⁰ Denis Browne to Thomas Pelham, 5 Nov. 1796, (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/56/19).

³¹ Ibid.

³² For an excellent analysis of the names and origins of the migrants see, Tohall, 'The Diamond fight of 1795 and the Resultant Expulsions', pp 30-40.

given that it had been mustered in so short a time and it was quite obvious that Browne believed the threat to be real as he sent his family away from Westport to Claremorris. In this report, Browne was buoyed by this loyalty and unusually, let slip a disparaging remark about the loyalty of the local ‘papists’:

All are loyal here, we have 70 men in the barracks armed with the spare arms of the Prince of Wales Regiment ... From the revenue cruiser we have got six small cannon with powder and 100 shot. The wall of the barrack is 20 feet high. We have therefore a rallying point ready for the loyalty of the county. I have sent my family away. Government can therefore command me and my men. We are ready to go anywhere we are ordered. I hope and trust that there will be a cry of loyalty from one end of Ireland to the other. You need not be afraid of the King of the Romans [Bonaparte] and the Papists.³⁶

The near invasion and the possibility that the French might return polarised the various classes of society. The peasantry and the urban poor began to believe that the revolutionary promise of the United Irishmen was not just empty rhetoric. Nationally, United Irish activists such as Thomas Russell, James Coigly and James Hope began to further absorb the Defenders into the ranks of a broader United Irish movement. In the west there were vague reports of leading United men attempting to enlist Defenders but the only written account was from Tobey Payton, an elderly ‘squire’ from county Leitrim. He reported to government that he had seen James Hope in the Leitrim town of Kesh-Carrigan (ten miles from the Roscommon border) but added that the ‘emissary’ had fled on being recognised.³⁷ At the same time, the government moved to activate measures in counter-insurgency combining both emergency legislation and martial law tactics. This culminated in General Gerard Lake’s ‘dragooning’ of Ulster in the spring and summer of 1797, where his subordinate General Knox described the province to be *à la Vendee* and that it would be brought to heel ‘by spreading devastation through the most disaffected parts.’³⁸ Bantry Bay radicalised Irish loyalists and invigorated United Irish zeal in equal measure.

³⁵ William Bermingham to Thomas Pelham, 24 Dec. 1796, (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/26/153).

³⁶ Denis Browne to Edward Cooke, 29 Dec. 1796, (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/28/7a).

³⁷ Tohall, ‘The Diamond fight of 1795 and the Resultant Expulsions’, p. 30.

³⁸ General Knox to Abercromby, 21 March 1797. PRONI T.2542/1B3/6/10, cited in Thomas Bartlett, ‘Defence, Counter-insurgency and Rebellion: Ireland, 1793-1803’, in Thomas Bartlett, Keith Jeffrey (eds.) *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 270.

Similar to the efforts made by Father James Coigly in south Ulster, James Joseph MacDonnell, the leading United Irishman of Mayo increased his efforts to politicise and revolutionise the local peasantry. Like the counties of south Ulster, Mayo was populated by some of the poorest, most isolated and most homogenous communities in Ireland.³⁹ MacDonnell knew that the Defenders had long penetrated Connacht and concluded that their millenarianism and Francophilia could be exploited and absorbed into the broader United movement.⁴⁰ Defenderism had flourished after the Armagh outrages and MacDonnell was keen to include the Mayo refugees in what James Hope called 'this plan of union'.⁴¹ By 1797, the United Irishmen in county Mayo were radicalising the peasantry through the medium of prophesies, cheap pamphlets and newspapers, the classic literature of the United Irish effort to 'make every man a politician'.⁴² Denis Browne had seized copies of Paine's *Rights of Man* in Westport in June 1793 and soon noted that shopkeepers who had returned from Dublin with fresh stock were the chief suspects for the appearance of these cheap copies.⁴³

This radicalisation was heightened by the arrival of the migrants from the north who often had harrowing personal experience to add to the ideological force of these texts. Added to this were reports from elsewhere that schoolmasters, shopkeepers and other men of education were giving public readings of radical literature in taverns and hostelries, in an attempt to politicise even the most illiterate peasant.⁴⁴ Moreover, several leading United Irishmen in Mayo held official positions that brought them into contact with large numbers of people. John Gibbons, who was the estate agent of Lord Altamont, was also the secretary and treasurer of the Mayo United Irishmen and as such, had direct or at least secondary access to nearly every tenant on Altamont's vast estates. The

³⁹ Kevin Whelan, 'Introduction to Section III' in Bartlett et al, *1798 A Bicentenary Perspective*, p. 193.

⁴⁰ For an account of James Joseph MacDonnell see Sheila Mulloy, 'James Joseph MacDonnell, The Best Known of the United Irish Chiefs of the West' in *Cathair na Mart, Journal of The Westport Historical Society*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1985), pp 67-80.

⁴¹ Marianne Elliot, 'The Defenders In Ulster' in Dickson, Keogh, Whelan (eds), *The United Irishmen, Republicanism, Radicalism And Rebellion* (Dublin, 1994), p. 231.

⁴² Kevin Whelan, 'The Republic in The Village', in Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty*, p. 63.

⁴³ Denis Browne to government, 6 June 1793, PRO HO 100/44/115-8, cited in Whelan, *Tree of Liberty*, p. 64.

⁴⁴ Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty*, p. 63.

Brownes' estates also contained the vast majority of northern migrants with whom Gibbons had daily contact.

Denis Browne feared that this migrant community was likely to be exposed to United Irish 'infection' and immediately set about establishing communication within their ranks. Over the eighteen months prior to Humbert's landing in Killala, the majority of security reports sent by the Brownes to government contained a reference to the disposition of the northern migrants. Unluckily for Denis, the first Ulster Catholic he recruited as an informer only provided a rather dated account of the principles of the United Irish movement:

[An] intelligent man of the name of O'Neill from the county of Tyrone who came here lately has informed me of the principles and intentions of the United Irishmen of the north of which I suspect he was one. He says their object is to obtain a universal combination of persons through the kingdom in favour of [the] reform of parliament...but he said they would not join an invading enemy certainly.⁴⁵

However, O'Neill, a teacher (a prominent profession amongst Defender and United Irish ranks) was deliberately feeding Browne misinformation. Indeed, educated Catholics like O'Neill concerned Browne as a school teacher in Kildare had recently been arrested for attempting to swear Bartholomew Horan, a private of the South Mayo Militia, into the Defenders.⁴⁶ The reliability of O'Neill (and the judgement of Browne) was further damaged in May 1797 when George Manning, an acquaintance of Lord Altamont, wrote to him and requested that his information be forwarded to Denis. Manning's information indicated that O'Neill was still meeting regularly with MacDonnell, the leader of the United movement in Mayo. Manning wrote that the United Irish 'meetings [were] held at O'Neill's, a northern schoolmaster on every Wednesday and Sunday night – he (Manning's informer) says he saw 15 men sitting at a table, one of whom was writing; [James Joseph] McDonnell is called the officer'.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Denis Browne to Edward Cooke, 30 Dec. 1796, (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/26/184).

⁴⁶ Liam Chambers, *Rebellion in Kildare 1790-1803* (Dublin, 1998), p. 34. The Kildare Defender, Lawrence O'Connor, was executed for the offence in Sept. 1795.

⁴⁷ G.A Manning to Lord Altamont, May 1797 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/30/7).

Denis Browne advised the government to react to the situation with a restraint that he would have considered irresponsible six months later:

I hope the evidence of loyalty which this kingdom has now given will convince England [that] we deserve well of her. If gracious measures follow this trial of Ireland (Bantry), both of commercial arrangements and internal regulation, I do not think there will be a more united or secure country in the world. But much I fear that the short sighted policy of selfishness will mar this prospect and prevent cordial union with England and ourselves.⁴⁸

Writing to Cooke just three days after his appeal for enlightened leadership, he announced that he had taken steps for the northern migrants to take the oath of allegiance. This was quite a common practice undertaken by magistrates and military officers during the 1790s, but few believed that it achieved much. Magistrates often attempted to harness the potential of the Catholic church as an organisational body in order to instil loyalty. Andrew Newton of Coagh, in Tyrone claimed to have been one of the first magistrates to encourage Catholics to a resolution of loyalty. Throughout 1797, Newton repeated this practice throughout Ulster and came to the conclusion that he had successfully made ‘a split between them [Catholics] and the Presbyterians’.⁴⁹ This mirrored the Brownes’ earlier hope, that if Catholics were kept from the politicised Presbyterians, then they would not be radicalised. Other loyalists viewed these oaths and resolutions of loyalty with scepticism, but hoped, like the Marquis of Downshire, that they might at least separate ‘some of these poor deluded fools’ from the conspiracy.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Browne insisted on an oath of allegiance and sought advice as to where government needed him most:

The emigrant northerners have been obliged to come forward and take the oaths of allegiance. Nothing has been left undone that depended on the inhabitants for the security and the good order of the country ... I beg to know whether it is the desire of government that I should remain in Mayo or attend in Dublin.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Denis Browne to Edward Cooke, 4 Jan. 1797 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/28/40).

⁴⁹ Andrew Newton to _____, 1 Feb. 1798 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/37/72).

⁵⁰ Marquis of Downshire to _____, 14 Jan. 1798 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/35/34).

⁵¹ Denis Browne to Edward Cooke, 7 Jan. 1797 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/28/40).

Over the next several months Browne's value to government intelligence was heightened significantly. The first real sign of the Brownes moving from local to national importance was the decision to appoint Denis to the Privy Council back in 1794. The war with France and the strategic importance of the west of Ireland also heightened their significance over the following years. This was underlined when Lord Altamont was declared joint-governor of Mayo in 1797 with James Cuffe (Baron Tyrawley) and when Denis Browne was invited to take part in the House of Commons Secret Committee of the same year. This Committee reflected the government's attempt to crack down on United Irish structures throughout the country before the expected return of the French. The inclusion of Browne in this committee also had a significant effect on his own personal beliefs. His views on the northern migrants and the United Irish threat in Mayo altered radically after he heard the reports from the various informers reporting to it. Browne kept personal minutes of the meetings and copied the reports of two government informers, Edward Newell and John Smith (alias William Bird).⁵² Browne was acutely interested in Newell's evidence, which related to the west and he found that he had hopelessly underestimated the scale of sedition there:

The witness [Newell] always understood that the intended landing was at Galway bay, as being the most central place. There was a military committee to supervise discipline and regulate oaths for the men to take to their officers – and how the men armed with pikes and guns could act together. Twenty-seven officers formed this committee from which they chose a [sub] committee of twelve. [Any] suspected man was put to death. Witness was of this committee.⁵³

Newell's evidence instilled a heightened sense of alarm within Browne as to the real state of disturbance in his county. This dismay was further compounded by the evidence given by William Bird. Bird described his meetings with senior United men, Henry Joy McCracken, Luke Teeling and William Putnam McCabe, their plans to import arms and the belief that the French would return by the end of the summer of 1797. However, Bird

⁵²For William Bird and Edward Newell, who both eventually 'turned' against their government handlers, see Thomas Bartlett, 'Informers, informants and information: The secret history of the 1790s reconsidered' in Bartlett et al, *1798 A Bicentenary Perspective*, pp 415-7, Marianne Elliot, 'The Defenders In Ulster' in Dickson et al, *The United Irishmen*, p. 231, R.B. McDowell, *Ireland In the Age of Imperialism and Revolution, 1760-1800* (Oxford, 1979), pp 531-533.

also reported a statement from a United Irishman, which was of particular interest to Browne:

He [informer] stated that missionaries had been sent to Connaught and that their success had exceeded their most sanguine expectations. The purpose of the missionaries was to further the connection between the United Irishmen and Defenders. The signal was 'up and up' for those who were of both parties. That McDonel was the person who negotiated the treaty with France.⁵⁴

The 'McDonel' named in the report was James Joseph MacDonnell and it was enough for Browne to finally identify him as the most serious threat to the county. He had also no doubt that many of the 'missionaries' that had been sent to Connacht had come with the recent flood of refugees from the north. After the revelations of the Secret Committee, Browne was determined to weed out any 'purveyors of mischief' by improving his intelligence sources and military preparation.

These measures appeared to have had limited effect and in May 1797, Denis exhibited a sense of frustration. He shared his anxiety with Thomas Pelham, reminding of the 'frequent imitations' that he had sent to the government regarding the Ulster Catholics in Mayo. Browne was convinced that the lack of an official plan to deal with the problem would 'lead to depredation' amongst the northerners 'and almost justify it'. He also warned Pelham that if a violent reaction occurred it would be extremely difficult to eradicate it in the mountainous country surrounding Westport and Murrisk.⁵⁵ However, Browne suggested that future disturbances could be avoided if official action was taken immediately. Reflecting the assertiveness of post-Bantry loyalism, Browne's proposals also contained hints of the future hard-line policies – he now believed that 'fear of consequence' would be the best psychological weapon to use against any wavering loyalties. Indeed, Browne's proposals were very similar to Lord Carhampton's campaign in 1795, which had used the threat of banishment and forced service as a successful weapon. He outlined his proposition to Pelham:

⁵³ Note book of Denis Browne containing minutes of evidence given before the Secret Committee, 2 May 1797, (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/30/6).

⁵⁴ Second note book of Denis Browne containing minutes of evidence given before the Secret Committee, 2 May 1797, (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/54/7).

The mode I propose [is] fortunately of little charge to government. I take on a troop of cavalry at Westport where there is a barracks for their accommodation. Wherever disturbance is in the province, I will be there with them and I think I could promise a great deal of service from them, not only in Mayo, but in the parts of the adjoining counties that border it. The other measure is a press gang stationed on the revenue barge of Westport of six men and an officer. I know the inhabitants of Connaught would fly from an oath if they thought the consequences would be banishment, which is a greater object of fear to them than death.⁵⁶

Ten days later Browne again wrote to Pelham requesting an urgent reply to his proposals. He had returned to Mayo from Dublin and had been shocked by the deterioration of the situation and the threat to his own safety, which represented a radical shift in his perception of the northern migrants:

I now know that the northern immigrants here are united Irishmen and that they are poisoning the minds of the inhabitants of this place, though I know and you probably know that they have doomed me to death, yet they shall not have me and I am proud of the distinction that implies they think me an enemy of some consequence. I will remain at my post and do my duty if you enable me to do it.⁵⁷

If a strong military force was not installed, Browne hoped that Pelham would ‘not think the worse’ of him if he removed his family and himself from the area of danger.⁵⁸ Pelham replied two days later stating that he had discussed the security proposals with Lord Carhampton. Carhampton had told Pelham that there had been an objection to having the 7th Dragoon Guards stationed in the county due to Denis’s misgivings about the ‘disposition’ of the regiment, which Browne believed had been infiltrated by Orange extremists.⁵⁹ However, Denis was delighted with Pelham’s prompt reply (and Lord Carhampton’s involvement) and stated that his suspicion about the cavalry regiment was drawn from ‘misinformation’ and called for the troop to be stationed at Westport ‘immediately’.⁶⁰ Browne was further worried about a fresh wave of northern migrants

⁵⁵ Denis Browne to Thomas Pelham, 31 May 1797 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/30/271).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Denis Browne to Thomas Pelham, 31 May 1797 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/30/271).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Thomas Pelham to Denis Browne, 12 June 1797 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/31/70).

⁶⁰ Denis Browne to Thomas Pelham, 17 June 1797 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/31/112).

making their way to the county as a result of General Lake's martial law in Ulster. These new arrivals were former United Irishmen who had accepted the terms of Lake's proclamation to disarm and consequently were in fear of their 'former associates'. However, he stated that 'we have taken some leading patriots in this part of the country. They have done some mischief among the native inhabitants but not much'. He further informed Pelham that he had set up a registry of newcomers from which inquiries would be sent to the different counties of origin in order to verify their loyalty. In any case, Browne stated that he was 'making them all take the oath of allegiance'.⁶¹

Late in August 1797, Lord Altamont wrote that the uncertainty of June had been contained by the 7th Dragoon Guards, which had been directed to Westport by Pelham after Denis's successful lobbying. Another major coup in the counter-insurgency plan had been the capture of a leading 'disturber' Henry McMullin. Originally from County Antrim, he had been arrested by Denis earlier that summer for distributing Paine's *Rights of Man* to the inhabitants of Westport. While McMullin was in Castlebar Jail, Altamont reported that he had been the 'leader of the disturbance that had well nigh run through this county' and noting that he was 'a northern', he remarked that 'his object was to fraternise with the northern counties in the first instance'.⁶² Altamont stated that he had never come across such a politicised 'villain' before, whose 'extensive abilities' could have been employed 'most usefully employed with a better disposition'.⁶³ He added that when McMullin had been committed to Castlebar, it was not long before the prisoner had 'sworn every prisoner in the jail and seduced them to his own doctrines'. When the prisoner was moved to a different part of the prison, he 'employed his leisure in designing new improvements for a guillotine'.⁶⁴

Altamont and Denis Browne correctly perceived that the most important weapon would be reliable intelligence garnered from protected and rewarded sources. To date, the intelligence that they had received from various informers had been unreliable and

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Lord Altamont to Edward Cooke, August 9 1797 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/32/31a).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

vague. While Altamont was relieved that McMullin had been committed to prison, stating that ‘the storm hanging over us has been most fortunately averted, which [had been] upon the eve of destroying us’, he was aware that the intelligence war had to intensify.⁶⁵ Dean Thomas Thompson of Killala soon wrote to Browne with the news that he had recruited Bartholomew Warren, a prisoner awaiting transportation in Castlebar. Altamont appealed to Edward Cooke to grant Warren a full pardon because his information had led to the ‘most useful discoveries’. Indeed, he claimed that Warren had ‘been ... the chief means of saving this county’⁶⁶ Altamont was so indebted to Warren that he did not wait for Cooke’s full pardon and had the prisoner released after several weeks, and later told the Under-Secretary:

I took it upon me to order Warren out of the prison without waiting for the completion of his pardon. If the next judge of Assize should commit me to Newgate for it, I hope you will get me out of it, or come there and keep me company.⁶⁷

When Dean Thompson replied to Lord Altamont to thank him for Warren’s release, he also reassured him that the informer had been ‘perfectly reclaimed from the poison and villainy of the United Irishmen’, and was being sent to Dublin for further testimony. Thompson also stated that Warren had told him further secrets. These additional claims suggest that Warren was a recent arrival to Mayo:

Warren further says that he intimately knows every nest of treason in Scotland and England – that if he had been employed some months earlier, he would have given up to the hand of the law, the principal members of the committee of rebels in Glasgow, Sheffield, etc., but that it may not yet be too late.⁶⁸

It is unknown whether Warren’s information was as crucial as Thompson and Altamont asserted, but the fact that he was sent to Dublin suggests that he was more important, and reliable, than the locally recruited informers in Mayo. However, the albeit imperfect, information network that the Brownes built up within the county during the 1790s

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Lord Altamont to Edward Cooke, December 21 1797 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/33/168).

⁶⁸ Dean Thomas Thompson to Lord Altamont, no date, 1797 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/33/168).

produced reasonable dividends for the government by the end of 1797, the ‘year of lost opportunity’ for the United Irishmen.⁶⁹ Fresh reports led to the northern migrants being viewed with heightened suspicion. The opinion of Lord Altamont was that if they could not be immediately used as an industrial and economic tool then they would definitely slide into radical dissent. Denis Browne was even more sceptical, seeing them as a ‘fifth column’ of sedition within an otherwise loyal and peaceable populace. He had come to the conclusion that they were, indeed, ‘poisoned in their principles’. 1797 was not only a watershed in the Brownes’ commitment to the security of county Mayo; it was also a turning point in their importance to government in Dublin Castle. Mayo was perceived, correctly as it would turn out, as a potential staging post for any future attempt on Ireland by the French. Very quickly, the Brownes were seen by government as both a national asset for securing the western flank of the Irish Kingdom and as the foremost presence in Mayo to counter any local revolutionary intent.

(ii.) Revolution and Retribution, October 1797-November 1798.

The winter months of 1797-1798 were marked by suspicion and fear amongst the loyalist population of County Mayo. Based on recent experience, strangers were automatically perceived as United Irish missionaries and any economic or social gathering in town or village was deemed to be a ‘front’ hiding a seditious undertone. The Brownes were foremost in spreading this paranoia, both to government and to other loyalists. While the threat of 1797 had passed, the brothers assumed that the system of revolutionary committees was still active within the county. Indeed, Lord Altamont was convinced that ‘they were moving heaven and earth to organise Mayo’ in order to take part in an expected national insurrection. He believed that in Mayo it would only take a local demagogue or news of a rebel victory elsewhere to unleash a local uprising.⁷⁰ The Brownes were perceived to be shrill alarmists by many observers in Mayo but their reliable antennae for danger vindicated their collective concerns. Early in 1798, the

⁶⁹ Marianne Elliot, *Partners in Revolution, The United Irishmen And France* (London, 1989) p. 124.

⁷⁰ Lord Altamont to Edward Cooke, 19 June 1798 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/38/184).

Brownes also assessed the potential threat of weapons smuggling by the United Irishmen along the well-established trade routes of the west. Indeed, their anxieties were confirmed by the presence of John Murphy, a notorious smuggler, off the Mayo coast. Altamont lost no time and sent Denis to Dublin to press for action.

Murphy was a likely individual to assist any potential arms shipment to the county. A native of Drogheda, he was a United Irishman and had once owned an armed smuggling vessel of fourteen guns which had outfought and outrun many attempts to commandeer it. Murphy was resident in Killala and used the whole coastline of Mayo to ply a lucrative smuggling trade.⁷¹ Altamont pointed out to the exposed nature of the western coast and its possible exploitation by the United Irishmen. Informers had recently located Murphy in Erris, and Browne urged Cooke for the authority to have him committed to prison:

He is now in Erris and that he can be secured without a doubt at any time that you require it. Though I have no doubt of his being concerned in treasonable practises, I cannot obtain sufficient information to apprehend him upon. If securing any of these people or their papers is of consequence, it can be done – Say the word and you will find me as zealous as I ought to be in every measure necessary for the public safety – If there is any idea of introducing ammunition or arms into Mayo, Galway or Sligo, it can only be done on the coasts of Erris or Connemara.⁷²

Murphy escaped imprisonment as no order came back from Dublin with Denis to have him or his vessel seized. It was another blunder by government as he eventually offered his services to General Humbert when his small army landed on 22 August 1798. After being apprised of Murphy's seamanship and political allegiance, Humbert dispatched him to France to inform the Directory of the successful landing.⁷³

⁷¹ Hayes, *Last Invasion of Ireland*, pp 258-59.

⁷² Lord Altamont to Edward Cooke, 21 Jan. 1798 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/32/177a). Only a few months earlier, Altamont had urged the government to attend quickly to Erris and Connemara: 'Erris is at present inaccessible from the mountain floods and the wretched roads [are] scarcely fit to be called footpaths. It would be a material object to the peace and security of these parts [if] Erris and Connemara were opened. They are at present asylums for all the deserters, outlaws, robbers and murderers of the kingdom.' Altamont to Cooke, October 18 1797 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/32/172).

⁷³ After the rebellion collapsed, the smuggler was placed on the list of officers of the French Navy and Murphy was an emissary between France and the United Irishman in Ireland for several years.

Several months before the outbreak of rebellion, in November 1797, Denis Browne marshalled the magistrates of the region, including Dean Thompson of Killala and Thomas Ellison, Rector of Castlebar. The three men completed a short list of the most dangerous and the most useful men that were committed to Castlebar Jail. Sending off their opinions to government as 'Representations of the High Sheriff and Magistrates' all three suggested which of the prisoners should be either released, used in evidence or committed to a more secure institution. Henry McMullin, who had already served six months without trial, was still considered by Browne to be one of the county's most dangerous 'villains'. He recommended that McMullin be removed from prison and 'directly transported', before adding that he should not be pressed into service with the crown forces 'as he would corrupt a regiment'.⁷⁴

Another prisoner, William Mallin, was imprisoned at Castlebar for attempting to swear a member of the 7th Dragoon Guards into the United Irishmen. This rather reckless tactic was used by the organisation as a means of recruiting men with military experience. But it was largely ineffective and the total number of crown forces won over by the United Irishmen was minimal. The ultimate test was their behaviour in battle and during the rebellion, even the predominantly Catholic Militia showed that subversion had only been superficial and that distrust of the various regiments had been misplaced.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, Browne, Thompson and Ellison considered Mallin to be as dangerous as McMullin and recommended a similar punishment.⁷⁶ After the magistrates had forwarded their recommendations to government, Browne added several days later that nothing but 'information from the gentry will prevent mischief in Ireland'. He also intended to move swiftly against any radical emissaries working to 'poison the minds of the people' in Mayo. He promised Edward Cooke; 'so often as I hear of them, they shall hear of me.'⁷⁷ Of the three magistrates who sent the recommendations to government only Denis Browne escaped being captured by the French the following summer. Thomas Ellison

Hayes *Last Invasion of Ireland*, pp 258-259.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ivan Nelson, *The Irish Militia, 1793-1802* (Dublin, 2007), pp 150-1

⁷⁶ Ibid.

was visiting Dean Thompson in Killala when the French landed and took part in the defence of the town and was injured in the brief skirmish.⁷⁸ Thompson was held together with his wife and children for the duration of the Mayo rebellion at Bishop Stock's castle in Killala.

By March 1798, the Brownes had uncovered more details of the tactics used by the United Irishmen in Dublin to politicise Mayo businessmen travelling to the capital, part of a strategy to radicalise the more bourgeois class of the county. As part of this broader strategy, it also seemed that the United men targeted certain members of the Connacht gentry in an optimistic effort to win them over to the cause. One figure, Sir Thomas Bourke of Marble Hall in Galway, concealed his true opinions whilst in the United Irishmen's company, but wrote to Denis Browne outlining an account of his meeting he just had with leading radicals, William James MacNeven and Father James Coigly. While Bourke feigned interest in their politics, he was stunned when his hosts told him of the grievances of the country and the 'remedy' that was about to be applied to it. According to Browne's information, the three United men stated that the country was 'in progress of being established a Republic connected with France' and that 'a revolution was certain'.⁷⁹ Worryingly for Browne, Father Coigly was already well known to government for his role in absorbing the Defenders into a broader revolutionary movement with the United Irishmen. A native of Armagh, Coigly had also tried to preserve Catholic/Presbyterian unity in Armagh during the pogroms of 1795 and 1796.⁸⁰ A similar attempt to create a Defender army in Mayo officered by United Irishmen was seen as a real threat amongst the leading gentry. Browne wrote to Edward Cooke with the details of the Dublin *illuminati* (United Irishmen) and their ongoing attempts to organise the west:

I think I have discovered the means by which it is intended to organise Connaught. The moment a gentleman from this country goes to Dublin, he is invited by some of the Dublin illuminati to dinner there. He meets with

⁷⁷ Denis Browne to Edward Cooke, 20 Nov. 1797 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/33/75).

⁷⁸ Richard Musgrave, *Memoirs*, p. 538.

⁷⁹ Denis Browne to Edward Cooke, 24 March 1798 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/36/71).

⁸⁰ Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty*, pp 127-128.

illuminators who [use] their eloquence to work on his mind by proving to them that the country is ill-governed, that the Catholics are persecuted. That a revolution is certain [and] that property will only be endangered by resisting it. If a shopkeeper goes to town he is illuminated by the man with whom he does business. Down they come, poisoned in their principles with papers and every means of corrupting their neighbours.⁸¹

Browne was informed that a key figure in the organisation of the county and of parts of Roscommon was Henry Taaffe. He asserted that Taaffe had been politicised in the above manner and was attempting to win over the support of many Catholic gentlemen, and that he was succeeding. Browne called for his immediate internment. He also stated that by this stage, the majority in Mayo had been won over to the United cause:

Henry Taaffe is the organiser for Mayo and part of Roscommon. All the young Catholic gentlemen of this county have been seduced by this plan of dinners with clever democrats. This gentleman should be checked...He is engaged, I hear, as deeply in this business as any. He ought not for the present come down here. I will watch his brother. Mayo generally, the middling gentry excepted, [has] been democratised by the Dublin illuminati.⁸²

Taaffe was confined in Dublin during the Mayo rising but his brother Patrick (Thomas) was adjutant to a French officer and captured after the battle of Ballinamuck. He eventually turned prosecution witness in the court martial of a former comrade, William Brady, on 12 September 1798.⁸³

Browne, of course, was a realist and whatever about his contempt for radicalism, he was also fiercely opposed to any provocative displays from loyalists, believing that such behaviour would cause a violent reaction. He expressed a worry to Cooke about the behaviour of Lord Downshire's Militia Regiment, which was stationed in Galway. Browne knew the precarious nature of holding power within a Catholic county and to hear that certain loyalists were involved in crass provocation irked him as much as the 'illuminators' of democracy:

⁸¹ Denis Browne to Edward Cooke, 24 March 1798 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/36/71).

⁸² Ibid.

The Downshire Militia have [sic] done a great deal of mischief about Galway. In a town and neighbourhood of Catholics, they irritated the people with Orange songs, Orange toasts and colours. The object of insulting people who are doing no harm, I cannot understand.⁸⁴

Sectarian indiscipline tended to heighten fear among the local peasantry and confirm the dire reports in the cheap pamphlets circulating in Ireland, warning of an ‘Orange extermination oath’ against all Catholics. The United Irish organ, *The Press*, also warned of ‘Orange nests among the gentry’ in all parts of Ireland.⁸⁵ Such propaganda was not unfounded, however, and the Downshires lived up to its fearsome reputation when it took a prominent role in the vengeful slaughter of rebels and civilians in Killala on 23 September 1798.⁸⁶

In the face of rising tempers in the region, Altamont drew little confidence from the response of the Castle, believing government inaction to be a recurrent problem towards Mayo in particular. He was further incensed when his request for twelve military muskets was rejected. He stated to Cooke that he had been tempted to make the personal slight public through the press or parliament but had changed his mind at the last moment ‘from a very selfish motive and not from any consideration for a weak [and] ill-judging government.’⁸⁷ Cooke was rather surprised by the accusation and had the Under-Secretary for War, William Elliot, reply to Altamont in a short and curt manner. Elliot stated clearly that Cooke had passed on the request to the Lord Lieutenant, but that ‘his Excellency has universally declined issuing arms from the King’s stores except for military purposes’.⁸⁸

⁸³ Called Patrick Taaffe in Cavan Court Martials, (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/2/12/3) and referred to as Thomas Taaffe in Liam Kelly, *A Flame Now Quenched: Rebels and Frenchmen In Leitrim: 1793-1798* (Dublin, 1998), p. 128.

⁸⁴ Denis Browne to Edward Cooke, 24 March 1798 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/36/71).

⁸⁵ Smyth, *The Men of No Property*, p. 172.

⁸⁶ Musgrave, *Memoirs*, p. 581.

⁸⁷ Lord Altamont to Edward Cooke, 26 March 1798 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/36/71).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

With the outbreak of widespread rebellion during May 1798, the attentions of government were diverted away from the threat of a French landing on the western seaboard and towards the pressing need to crush the rebels in the east. The level of communication between the Brownes and the government dropped significantly as the crisis worsened and United Irish rebels threatened to break out of Wexford at Arklow and New Ross in early June. The Brownes remained vigilant and monitored their own region carefully in order, not only to stem popular rebellion, but also to observe the reaction of potential leaders. Although the county was quiet, they were sure that James Joseph MacDonnell was merely waiting for the signal to rise from the rebel leadership in Dublin. When the tide of war eventually turned in the east, Altamont thought it wise to remind Dublin Castle about the potential threat from MacDonnell and his potential subordinates. On 19 June 1798, he wrote to Edward Cooke from his residence in Sackville Street, Dublin:

My brother informs me that James Joseph MacDonnell is now actually organising Mayo and that he has taken his station in the town of Westport, where his name and family connections will enable him to do the greatest mischief, possibly so far as to enlist Connaught in the cause. It may save a million of money and as many lives to have that demagogue forthwith arrested, taken away from Connaught and brought up here, for all his fellow labourers are in the county jail (Castlebar) which is as open as the street and his intrigues will be carried on there with zeal and facility. Mr. MacDonnell had two Aide de Camp school masters. One of the name of Duffy, the other Costello. They were moving heaven and earth to organise Mayo.⁸⁹

Literature on the United Irish structure in Mayo is scarce but it is believed that MacDonnell relocated his United Irish circle to Westport before the French landed in Killala. Pike manufacture for the county also shifted there under the command of the Gibbonses of Mill Street.⁹⁰ The Brownes still did not realise that their own estate agent, John Gibbons Snr, was also actively helping MacDonnell spread the United Irish creed amongst their tenants. Lord Altamont even sought permission to confiscate the grain stocks of the MacDonnell family that lived in Westport:

⁸⁹ Lord Altamont to Edward Cooke, 19 June 1798 (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/38/184).

⁹⁰ Hayes, *Last Invasion*, p. 61.

200 tonnes of grain is collected in the stores of Charles MacDonnell at Westport, who is uncle to James Joseph MacDonnell and himself a decided rebel. In my judgement it should be taken from him...and given to the King's troops and that no time should be lost in applying it.⁹¹

The Brownes proposed a three-fold approach to the county. The stationing of a significant military force in Castlebar or Westport, which could be swiftly dispatched to any outbreak in Mayo; a move against the known leaders of sedition; and a need for strong leadership amongst the Protestant gentry of the county. Denis Browne was worried by the absence of leading gentry figures in a Catholic county that was historically prone to agitation:

Nothing will conduce so much to its [Connacht] peace as the immediate return of the leading gentlemen to it who are now attending parliament. [Catholic] submission to their superiors is certainly both a principle of their religion and also a consequence of imperfect civilisation.⁹²

Altamont gave a more personal reason for having Mayo properly defended, believing that his 'brother's life [was] in danger solely from his exertion to preserve the public peace and also for his zeal at all times in service of the King's government.⁹³

Browne was at Claremount House, his large residence in Claremorris, when word of the French invasion filtered through the county. Although there is no surviving correspondence from the Brownes during the three weeks of rebellion, it is clear that both were absent from Westport during the critical stages of the revolt. Lord Altamont was still on parliamentary business in Dublin and had his family moved to Sackville Street for the duration of the fighting. Tradition asserts that Denis Browne wrote to Lord Cornwallis on the 26 August to inform him that the French were approaching Castlebar in considerable strength and had been joined by 5,000 native Irish.⁹⁴ An alternative account asserts that Denis was in Castlebar as the Franco-Irish Army approached comes from the correspondence of Lady Anne Mahon of Castlegar, County Galway, as she

⁹¹ Lord Altamont to Edward Cooke, [no date], (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/51/178).

⁹² Denis Browne to _____, [no date], (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/53/128).

⁹³ Lord Altamont to Edward Cooke [no date], (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/52/23).

⁹⁴ Thomas J. Dowds, *The French Invasion of Ireland in 1798* (Dublin, 2000), p. 34.

wrote to her daughter, Anne Mahon (Denis Browne's wife), in early September 1798. She asserted that when the French captured Castlebar, Browne was identified and 'pursued' and that the rebels erected 'a gallows to hang him on'. Browne escaped to Galway but was extremely shaken by the ordeal. He eventually arrived in Athlone with the Mahons on the 4 September 1798.⁹⁵

Browne was only seen at the head of his Yeomanry Corps when the course of the rebellion had turned in favour of the crown forces. Lord Altamont did not return until the courts martial of late September had already started. Indeed, the Brownes' absence from active military service when the threat was most serious vindicated the government's refusal to supply the brothers with military supplies before the invasion. Although active and efficient in policing the county in times of peace, the Brownes displayed little appetite for personal risk during times of war. The decision to flee the county during the French invasion produced a popular perception that militarily, they were mere bluff and pretence.

After Castlebar had been taken by the French on 27 August, rebels in both Westport and Newport marched towards the town to join the rebellion, leaving several guards to maintain law and order. Both Westport House and Denis's mansion Mount Browne House were occupied by these guards during the short-lived 'Republic of Connaught'. Many men from the parish of Aughagower, where Mount Browne House was located, joined the rebellion and, not surprisingly, one of their first acts was to attack and loot Denis's grand house.⁹⁶ Discipline, however, was soon installed and whether under the influence of the French officers or the orders of MacDonnell, neither of the Brownes' houses were completely destroyed by fire or wanton destruction. Firearms, food and wine were the most popular items of acquisition. Indeed, the Brownes made large claims on the government fund for 'suffering loyalists' in the aftermath of the rebellion. Lord Altamont received a modest £749 to compensate for the loss of wine, corn, cattle, provisions and firearms. However, Denis Browne received £2925 for the damage to his

⁹⁵ Lady Anne Mahon to Mrs Anne Browne, 11 Sept. 1798 (N.L.I., Westport Papers, Mss.40,883/33).

⁹⁶ J. Keville, 'Aughagower' in *Cathair na Mart* Vol.4 No.1 (1984) pp 26-27.

house, offices, furniture, cattle, corn and wine.⁹⁷ This was the third highest claim in the county, after James Cuffe of Ballina (joint governor of Mayo with Lord Altamont) and Sir John Browne (no relation) of Palmerstown.⁹⁸

After the French and Irish had left Castlebar on their way eastwards, efforts were made by the government to recapture the county town and this was realised on the 5 September 1798. Sir Neal O'Donel, the Newport aristocrat and rival of Denis Browne, led a force of Yeomanry in the recapture of the town. The first mention of Denis Browne returning to the region is made by James Gordon in his contemporary account of the rebellion. He stated that Browne returned to Westport area around the week of 5-12 September and that 'most of the towns were about this time recovered, as Newport and Westport, by the fencibles and yeomen under the Honourable Denis Browne'.⁹⁹ Strangely, given their circumstances, the Westport rebels counter-attacked on the 12 September and re-took the town for a short time. Patrick Agan (Egan) was tried by court-martial for commanding this action and was sentenced to seven years transportation.¹⁰⁰ Yet while Denis was absent from the region during the height of the rebellion, he was determined to exact revenge on the rebels on his return. Indeed, the fact that he was High Sheriff, Privy Councillor, Magistrate and brother to the most powerful figure in Mayo gave him the means to realise this determination. The most serious problem, however, was that the leading rebels of the area, the Gibbonses and MacDonnell, had escaped the carnage at Ballinamuck and taken refuge in the wilds of Erris and Connemara.

In their absence, lesser figures were subjected to exemplary punishment. Individual priests were identified as having been 'active in bringing in men from their parishes'.¹⁰¹ Two of them, Father James Conroy and Father Manus Sweeney, who had been trained on the continent, were of particular value to the rebels because of their proficiency in the

⁹⁷ *Official List of Claims for Loss And Damage in the County of Mayo in the year 1798* (Joly Collection, NLI). The Official list was not published. Some claims are reproduced in the *Journal of North Mayo Historical and Archaeological Society*, vol.ii, no. 2 (1988-89), p. 41.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ James Gordon, *History of The Rebellion in Ireland in 1798*, (Dublin, 1803), p. 299.

¹⁰⁰ Mayo Court-martials, (N.A.I., Rebellion papers, 620/2/9/33), also Mulloy, *Father Manus Sweeney*, p. 100.

¹⁰¹ Hayes, *Last Invasion*, p. 22.

French language. Both men were used as translators by the officers holding Newport, Westport and Castlebar, and both were hanged after the rebellion, Father Conroy on the direct order of Denis Browne after a court martial in Castlebar in November. Father Sweeney was hanged in Newport in June 1799. Two other priests, Father James Jennings and Father Michael Conway, were listed in the Secret Service Records as having received rewards of £50 each from Lord Altamont for passing on information about Sweeney and Conroy.¹⁰² The drumhead court-martials continued through September and October until Lord Cornwallis eventually took steps to formalise the arrangement, reinstate *habeas corpus* and to bring some semblance of structured justice to the chaos, much to the chagrin of Denis Browne in particular. A report in November 1798 from James Carmichael, a landlord based in Edinburgh, to the Lord Advocate in Britain stated that some of the Mayo gentry were beginning to take matters into their own hands as a result of ‘Cropwallis’ and his leanings towards due process:

Last night a packet came from Ireland with the Honourable Denis Browne, member of Parliament for the County of Mayo, [and] one of the Privy Council of Ireland. He reports that Ireland is in a very precarious state, the late proclamation of Lord Cornwallis not having had any effect, that the justices and other gentlemen in Mayo had issued a proclamation of their own purporting that if any person was found there having arms about them that they would be shot. They accordingly shot one and the consequence was that 120 more rebels came in and laid down their arms. It [is] only military power that kept the people under.¹⁰³

Carmichael alleged that Browne had felt so worried by the end of martial law that he toyed with the idea of leaving Ireland altogether. He reported that Browne had gone to Edinburgh ‘in order to settle his family there’, and that he had ‘slept sounder than he had done for weeks in his own country’.¹⁰⁴

However true this claim was, Browne soon regained his nerve and threw himself back into the hunt for the disloyal and the seditious. During the ‘White Terror’ which afflicted

¹⁰² Secret Service Records, published in *The Mayo News*, 12 March 1927.

¹⁰³ James Carmichael to the Lord Advocate, Nov. 29 1798, Laing Manuscripts (Historical Manuscripts Commission, 1925), Vol. 2, pp 666-667. For loyalist dissatisfaction with Cornwallis, see W.N. Osborough ‘Legal Aspects of the 1798 rising’ in Bartlett et al, *1798 A Bicentenary Perspective* (Dublin, 2003), pp 437-468.

¹⁰⁴ James Carmichael to the Lord Advocate, Nov. 29 1798 Laing Manuscripts, Vol. 2. pp 666-667.

Mayo during the winter of 1798, it was stated locally that Denis Browne insisted on having one man hanged every day in Castlebar for several weeks. It was also alleged that by the end of the Terror in Mayo, Browne had been implicated in the executions of some two hundred men and the transportation of hundreds more.¹⁰⁵ There are no exact figures available to substantiate this claim, but there is no doubt that Denis Browne wanted to reduce Mayo by the spectacle of terror. The executions had to be public to heighten the ‘fear of consequence’, and in most cases, Browne insisted on being personally present in order to ‘make the example as impressive as possible’.¹⁰⁶

The sense of betrayal felt by the Brownes at what they perceived to be an ungrateful peasantry was heightened by the participation of several close acquaintances on the side of the insurgents. Even John Moore, the young President of the short-lived ‘Republic of Connaught’ was well known to the Brownes. Moore died in captivity in November 1799 but his younger brother George married Louisa, granddaughter of the first Lord Altamont in 1807.¹⁰⁷ Several of the northern migrants, who the Brownes felt they had given shelter and protection to, also joined the rebellion when the French arrived and many of them were accused of breaking into their ‘patrons’ houses in the search for firearms. The northern rebels stayed together as a separate unit during the fighting and numbered about 100 men at the outset of the campaign, a sizeable enough contribution to the rebel ranks.¹⁰⁸ This unit fought under the command of Bartholomew Teeling and proved to be an effective fighting force during the rising.¹⁰⁹ All these facts instilled in the Brownes a keen sense of betrayal and anger and led them to adopt a more ruthless and pitiless approach towards anyone they perceived to be ‘disaffected’ or ‘democratised’.

As a result, Denis Browne’s, and to a lesser extent, Lord Altamont’s, reputation was irrevocably changed within the folk traditions of the county. These formerly pro-

¹⁰⁵ Thomas J. Dowds, *The French Invasion*, pp 70-71 (Thomas J. Dowds is a local historian and a descendant of Baron James O’Dowda, an insurgent leader executed in 1798).

¹⁰⁶ Denis Browne to Lord Hardwicke, September 1801 (British Library, Hardwicke Papers Add. MS. 35729).

¹⁰⁷ Hayes, *Last Invasion*, p. 284.

¹⁰⁸ Tohall, ‘The Diamond fight of 1795 and the Resultant Expulsions’, p. 30.

¹⁰⁹ James G. Patterson, ‘Republicanism, agrarianism and banditry in the west of Ireland, 1798-1803’, in *Irish Historical Studies*, xxxv, no. 137 (May 2006), p. 25.

emancipation and ‘patriot’ gentlemen with a paternalistic reputation were soon regarded as representing the worst of what perpetuated ‘English injustice’ in that remote part of the empire. Indeed, the family’s reputation was not fully restored until the third marquess of Sligo contributed heavily to relief work during the Great Famine of the 1840s. Nevertheless, while the post-rebellion terror in Mayo was pitiless and brutal, it was very successful in pacifying the county for years to come. The Mayo peasantry soon retreated back to small-scale acts of retribution as a means to amend any agrarian or social injustice. A contemporary Irish poem, attributed by Douglas Hyde to Antoine Raiftearai, called *Na Buachailli Bána* (The Whiteboys), hinted at this retreat. Furthermore, it summed up the popular feeling on the ground in Mayo in the immediate aftermath of the summer revolution and the winter of retribution:

If I got your hand, it is I would take it,
 But not to shake it, O Denis Browne,
 But to hang you high with a hempen cable,
 And your feet unable to find the ground,
 For it’s many the boy who was strong and able,
 You sent in chains with your tyrant frown;
 But they’ll come again, with the French flag waving,
 And the French drums raving to strike you down.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Translation by Douglas Hyde cited in Hayes, *Last Invasion*, p. 249. Although Hyde ascribed the poem to Antoine Raiftearai, this is extremely unlikely.

Terence Mackell
 Pat. Harnil
 Pat. Herald
 John Fox
 Owen Maguire
 Pat. McAlister
 Hugh Donnelly
 Jas. Murray
 Jas. Daly
 Michl. McDermott
 John Doramy
 Jas. Flavin
 Pat. Farrell
 Pat. Hughes
 Owen McNauly
 Pat. Cuff
 John Hennessy
 Arthur Ling, Esq.
 Peter Mahon
 Abraham M. Surley
 Pat. Mulgrew
 John Quinn
 Charles Quinn
 Pat. Quinn
 Patrick Quinn

Patrick Doramy
 John Doramy
 Edward Lockway
 Chas. W. Cahoon
 Terence Deval
 Pat. O'Leary
 William Brinton
 Chas. McCarley
 Bernoy Cassidy
 Hugh Ch. Doon
 Pat. Neelas
 Francis Keelas
 Barney Diamond
 Pat. Muldoon
 Henry Muldoon
 Jas. McNamee
 Peter McNamee
 Pat. Hare
 Luke Lynch
 Bryan W. Galt
 Peter Donohy
 Daniel Swamy

Above: Signatures of northern Catholic migrants, which accompanied an appeal to Lord Camden. The appeal was forwarded by Lord Altamont on 27 June 1796.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Appeal to Lord Camden contained in Lord Altamont to Earl Camden, 27 June 1796 (N.A.I., SOC 1015/21), reproduced courtesy of National Archives of Ireland.

Chapter Three

‘Fugitives and Threshers; the Brownes bring order to post-rebellion Mayo, 1799-1816’

The decade following the 1798 Rebellion was the pinnacle of the Brownes’ political influence in the county. The recent rebellion had been comprehensively crushed and the aristocracy, although shaken by the serious threat posed, maintained its status as the agents of local government and good order on behalf of the central administration in Dublin Castle. The Brownes were the eyes and ears of Dublin Castle in the region and boasted that nothing stirred in Mayo without their knowledge. Within this context, the spectre of rebel fugitives in the wilds of Connemara was a constant source of irritation and embarrassment. The appearance of a new agrarian threat in 1805 further convinced Denis Browne that exemplary measures were required to subdue both these threats. Browne saw the ‘Threshers’ as an extension of the conspiracy of 1798 and the Special Commission of 1806 targeting the affected counties mirrored the efficiency and terrible example of the courts-martial of 1799.¹ After the counter-insurgency campaigns of the previous years, Browne believed that the revolutionary conspiracy of the 1790s had been effectively neutered and replaced by banditry and low-grade agrarian assaults. However, when the Special Commission of 1806 succeeded in reducing all instances of popular dissent, Denis Browne firmly believed that the following decade would give him the chance to bring Mayo to its most tranquil state in twenty years.

Denis Browne’s letter of congratulations to Robert Peel, on his appointment as Chief Secretary of Ireland in January 1813, was essentially a statement of his own status in County Mayo rather than an acknowledgement of Peel’s remarkable political progress.²

¹ For Threshers see Donald Jordan, *Land and popular politics: County Mayo from the plantation to the Land War* (Cambridge, 1994), pp 87-96.

² Robert Peel (1788-1850) was appointed Chief Secretary for Ireland at the age of twenty-four. He was exceptionally prudent in the distribution of patronage and succeeded in passing a Peace Preservation Bill in July 1814 in order to reform policing and magistracy in Ireland. See Sir Robert Peel, *Memoirs of the Right*

Browne's intention was quite clear. He was anxious to stress the critical influence of his family and the peaceful governance of a county that contained '140,000 Catholics and 10,000 Protestants'.³ Urging that the patronage of Mayo be kept in safe hands, Browne cast himself as the central figure of authority and influence within this local aristocracy, which was not an idle boast, as it was backed by the experience of decades. However, by this stage, Browne's ambition, and the ambition of the Irish gentry as a whole, had become anachronistic to Peel as he attempted to steer the administration of Ireland in a different direction. This initiated a fractious relationship between the two men, which continued throughout Peel's six year term and reflected a deep divergence in political philosophies. Browne's was an 'eighteenth century' sense of governance; firm paternalism combined with the judicious distribution of patronage. Peel embarked on several ambitious efforts to create a more centralised power structure, particularly in the maintenance of law and order.

(i.) Loose ends and unfinished business: The pursuit of rebel fugitives.

In the years following the rebellion, Denis Browne was acutely aware of the difficulty in securing juries that would convict individuals of political offences. He observed a tendency of jurors to be ruthless on ordinary criminals, while lenient towards captured rebels particularly those of rank and property. In March 1799, as the government considered suspending the martial law bill, Browne wrote to the Castle and voiced his conviction at the absolute necessity of courts martial. Indeed, a month earlier, Cornwallis had acknowledged to the Duke of Portland, that the continuation of martial law was evidence of a short-term failure of his policy of leniency (overall, however, this policy was considered successful).⁴ The practice of giving rebels 'of inferior note' protections after the rebellion had led to an uneasy peace in the disturbed districts, but had not

Honourable Sir Robert Peel (2 vols, London, 1857), i., pp 3-39 Norman Gash, *Mr. Secretary Peel: the life of Sir Robert Peel to 1830* (London, 1985), pp. 90-119.

³ Denis Browne to Sir Robert Peel, 4 Jan. 1813 (B.L., Peel Papers, Add. MS 40,217 (2)).

⁴ Bartlett, 'Clemency and compensation', p. 107.

quelled the simmering discontent.⁵ It seemed that only the power to establish courts martial in any part of the country, could break the back of the rebellious spirit in Ireland. Denis Browne strongly urged the government to keep martial law intact in Mayo, as experiments with juries had been a hopeless failure. The jurors, even when threatened with heavy fines, were silent. The central problem, according to Browne, was that they 'could not be persuaded that assisting the French is any crime'. In that situation, he continued, 'where every loyal man is in danger, his house a garrison and his neighbours his enemies, the free course of justice cannot run'. The continuation of the courts martial in Mayo, therefore, was deemed 'absolutely necessary'.⁶ Ultimately, government policy mirrored Browne's and martial law continued in various districts until the end of 1799, leaving Cornwallis dispirited by the continuation of 'hanging, transporting etc., attended with all the dismal scenes of wives, sisters, fathers, kneeling and crying'.⁷

Denis Browne did not share Cornwallis's regret. He cherished his reputation as 'Denis the Rope' and sought to scourge the rebellious spirit from the people, to tie up the loose ends and capture the fugitives before another violent revolt could be attempted. The fugitives of the Rebellion were not only a threat to the Brownes and to the peace of the county. They also represented a potential rallying point for any future dissent. The longer they were at large, the greater the legend surrounding them would become. The Brownes were always at pains to portray post-Union Mayo as tranquil, loyal and industrious but the existence of a sizeable group of outlaws pointed to other stark realities. However, while the fugitives in general preoccupied the marquess and Denis Browne, they were particularly concerned at the activities of the Gibbons family, Father Myles Prendergast and Edmund Garvey, who they believed were at the heart of another rebellious conspiracy. With the Gibbons family, their pursuit became a personalised crusade. The fact that they had escaped into the wilderness of Connemara after the collapse of the rebellion caused immense resentment amongst the Brownes. If their reputations were to be maintained then the arrest and punishment of this rebellious family was imperative.

⁵ Michael Durey, 'Marquis Cornwallis and the fate of Irish rebel prisoners in the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion' in Smyth (ed.), *Revolution, counter-revolution and Union*, p. 142.

⁶ Denis Browne to Dublin Castle, 27 Mar. 1799 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/7/73).

⁷ Cornwallis to Castlereagh, 26 Sept. 1799, cited in Durey, 'Marquis Cornwallis and the fate of Irish rebel prisoners', p. 142.

The initial strategy was to encourage the betrayal of the fugitives with promises of money and favours but this had little immediate effect. By October 1799, however, hunger and the wretchedness of an already severe winter gave Denis Browne his first positive result. Thomas Gibbons surrendered in the hope of availing of Cornwallis's recent proclamation of clemency, which Owen Killeen, an Augustinian friar from Ballyovey in County Galway, had availed of.⁸ Killeen had helped to organise the United Irishmen in Sligo before moving to Mayo, where, Browne alleged, he had 'sworn half the county'.⁹ Browne was convinced that the two rebels were exempt from Cornwallis's pardon but that they had 'surrendered under the proclamation as having been privates in the late rebellion'. He was adamant that they were 'not that description of rebel', and accused Thomas Gibbons of carrying the rebel colours into Castlebar at the head of a great body'.¹⁰ Both men were transported overseas by the end of October 1799. Browne's intervention mirrored loyalist concerns at the perceived leniency of the Cornwallis regime and the consequent fear that rebel leaders would escape detection and punishment. Browne's fear sometimes bordered on paranoia and his zeal was often heightened by the opportunities created in the aftermath of the rebellion, when chances to settle outstanding scores and personal vendettas were commonplace. As a result, in the pursuit of the rebels, particularly the Gibbons family, who they believed had cruelly betrayed them, the Viceroy's conciliatory edicts were often ignored.

This frustration and vindictiveness was also evident in their treatment of Edmund Garvey of Rossmindle House near Westport. This rebel leader, who came from a propertied family, was arrested several weeks after French surrendered. Although the evidence against him was dubious (a letter signed 'E.G' found in a coat after the Battle of Ballinamuck), Denis Browne's circle of informants implicated Garvey within the rebel command structure. Browne wrote to government from Sackville Street, stating that a sheriff from Leitrim had found a pocket book of letters on the battlefield in Ballinamuck.

⁸ Sheila Mulloy, 'The clergy and the Connacht rebellion' in Liam Swords (ed.), *Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter: the clergy and 1798* (Dublin, 1997), pp 253-73; Keogh, 'Postscript to 1798', p. 245.

⁹ Denis Browne to _____, 19 Oct. 1799 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/56/48).

¹⁰ Denis Browne to Alexander Marsden, 19 Oct. 1799 (ibid.).

Browne was convinced that one of the letters was in the handwriting of Garvey and ‘took him before a court-martial for the fact.’¹¹ Browne was adamant that Garvey face a military trial as he knew that the evidence was clearly insufficient to convict him by jury. The government agreed and Garvey was sentenced to transportation. However, a successful writ of *habeas corpus* meant that the prisoner was released. This began an eight-year battle on the part of Browne, spanning several different government administrations to have Garvey either committed to the gallows or transported for life.¹² His impatience with the limitations of due process was palpable in his correspondence with Dublin Castle on the Garvey case:

[Garvey] was convicted to the satisfaction of every person, but the mercy of the court chiming with the feeling of Lord Cornwallis, sentenced Mr. Garvey to transportation for life instead of death which his crime well merited. He was accordingly sent to Cork to be transported but just then the case of Tone had led to the claim of *habeas corpus* ... and a writ took Mr Garvey from the gaol of Cork.¹³

Browne learned about Garvey’s release and had him detained in Cork by means of a Secretary’s warrant. The prisoner was placed on a prison ship awaiting transportation, but he was moved to Kilmainham and eventually released in March 1799.¹⁴ However it was not long before Browne secured another government order to have him lodged in Galway Jail. Browne made an urgent plea for a Crown indictment of Garvey, and significantly, he concluded his letter to the Castle with a hope that the whole affair would not be dismissed as a personal grudge. After all, Browne was a pragmatist and conscience that his hard line stance might attract criticism in government circles. He admitted that his ‘conduct’ had had the ‘appearance of persecution rather than of precaution’ but that he felt vindicated in his actions and was unwilling ‘to say all I think and feel on this business.’¹⁵ Browne’s constant harassment eventually took its toll on Garvey and in the spring of 1801 an order of the Lord Lieutenant authorised the King’s Bench to accept bail from the inmate on

¹¹ Denis Browne to _____, 18 May 1800 (ibid., 620/57/16).

¹² Terence Garvey, ‘Traitor or patriot? The case of Edmund Garvey of Rosmindle’ in *Cathair na Mart*, 6, no. 1 (1986), p. 68.

¹³ Denis Browne to _____, 18 May 1800 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers 620/57/16).

¹⁴ The courts martial continued but not as a part of martial law enforcement. See P. C. Power, *The courts martial of 1798-99* (Kilkenny, 1997); Osborough, ‘Legal aspects of the 1798 rising’, pp 437-69.

¹⁵ Denis Browne to Dublin Castle, 18 May 1800 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/57/16).

condition that he left the Kingdom under the Banishment Act.¹⁶ Taking a chance to return to Ireland in 1806 when reactionary violence had lessened, the hapless Garvey fell foul of Browne once more. Deposited in Castlebar Jail for several weeks, he was eventually released due to the lack of emergency legislation in effect.

The Brownes' campaign against the rebel fugitives was essentially part of a broader effort to extinguish the embers of rebellion in the region and lingering revolutionary conspiracies and intrigues in the minds of the 'lower orders'. By the summer of 1800, the policy seemed to have reaped fruit and the security situation looked more favourable. John Gibbons Snr had been captured the previous winter and his son 'Johnny the Outlaw' Gibbons had fallen into Denis's hands in July thanks to a paid informer.¹⁷ Lord Altamont even adopted a conciliatory tone towards what he perceived to be a minimal threat from rebel stragglers, stating to Alexander Marsden that, 'these parts are now in perfect quiet and a very little management will keep them so'. In view of recent successes, Altamont advised that 'the rebellion and all connected with it should be let sink into oblivion as soon as possible'.¹⁸ However, the problem of prisoners returning from overseas had to be addressed. But even on this issue, and one that concerned his personal safety, Altamont was open to a more reasonable approach:

Persons sent from the kingdom from suspicion of their political opinions have been in many parts allowed to return to it. Either we should be kept safe from them by continuing their banishment or by receiving them back and conciliating them back to ourselves and to the government. I really believe that in many cases they may be penitent and in all have found themselves mistaken. Personally I have less right to hope for cordiality from those in question than any one, as I had the greatest hand in of any person in bringing them to shame and punishment.¹⁹

This confidence, however, was short-lived and by October 1800 the security situation had altered with reports of seditious meetings taking place within the county. To make matters worse, Johnny Gibbons had escaped from Galway Jail in September 1800 while

¹⁶ Garvey, 'Traitor or Patriot?', p. 64.

¹⁷ Some local historians refer to John Gibbons Jnr. as 'Johnny the Rebel', see Joe McNally, *Westport: the Tear and The Smile* (Westport, 1998), p. 33.

¹⁸ Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, 18 Aug. 1800 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/9/104/3 (4)).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

at the same time a suspected French emissary had slipped away from Castlebar Jail.²⁰ However, the Brownes did not panic at this turn in events. On the contrary, they were confident that good intelligence on the ground followed by swift military action would return the region to passivity. Indeed, Lord Altamont added confidently that, 'here, nothing can stir without my knowledge.'²¹

For the most part, this assertion was correct. The escape of Johnny Gibbons irked the brothers but the fact that he escaped from Galway prison deflected the blame somewhat: '[It] was a very unfortunate circumstance. He is now robbing in the mountains and has been joined by one man from Dublin. The rest of those who escaped from jail have fled in different directions'.²² The Brownes were determined, too, to attribute the resumption of violence, to a neglect of duty on the part of many of their peers, the gentry of Connacht. Indeed, the Galway gentry were perceived by the Brownes to be hopelessly negligent and inefficient in their pursuit of the outlaws. Richard 'Humanity Dick' Martin, MP (1754-1834) was often the target of their accusations. It was rumoured that Martin had saved several people from death or deportation by using his talents as a lawyer and had turned a blind eye to the use of caves by fugitives on his mountainous estate.²³ This behaviour inspired the Lord Sligo to write to Alexander Marsden, in June 1802, lamenting the state of Connemara and the conduct of Martin. Browne believed that Connemara would always be rebellious, 'till there is some force stationed there to support the peaceable and well affected (If there be any such inhabitants in those parts) and 'till Dick Martin's place is filled by a better member of society than is likely to be formed from his precept or example'.²⁴

The Brownes were also alarmed by the level of public support for the outlaws and the availability of shelter and arms. This support, both tacit and open was mirrored in other counties but the abundance of French arms squirreled away after the collapse of the Mayo

²⁰ Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, 5 Sept. 1800 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/9/104/3 (9)).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Shevawn Lynam, *Humanity Dick: a biography of Richard Martin, M.P., 1754-1834* (London, 1975), p. 116.

²⁴ Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, 14 June 1802 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/10/125/3).

rising added an extra threat. William O'Donel, the brother of Neal O'Donel, noted this peculiarity following the arrest of Daniel Sweeney in Newport in July 1801. O'Donel was particularly shocked that local Protestants had assisted the outlaws. Writing to government on the 14 July, he noted that Sweeney had been supplied with ammunition by a Protestant named John Cunningham, but that since he belonged 'to a certain sect he must of course be loyal'. O'Donel wanted Cunningham put on trial but expressed a wish that 'mercy being extended to him'.²⁵ While O'Donel asked for leniency in the case of a wayward Protestant, he also hinted at a more brutal way to discover the whereabouts of the many French weapons still at large; 'I am convinced there are many French arms in this part of the country and Sweeney may be made a fit person for discovering in whose possession they are. If you shall desire me [to interrogate Sweeney] I shall with pleasure'.²⁶

The support of the local Protestant minority was not widespread but it was enough to worry the Brownes into believing that United Irish structures and ideals were still intact within the county. To add to their disquiet, Thomas Gibbons, the uncle of 'Johnny the Outlaw' had secretly returned to Mayo from banishment. Although Denis Browne had him immediately re-arrested and lodged in Castlebar prison, he feared that Gibbons's return was evidence of a broader plan to rouse Mayo into open rebellion again. He wrote to Hardwicke, the Lord Lieutenant, in early 1802 and stated flatly that, in Connacht, there was 'a radical grounded disposition to shake off the connection with England', and that 'the most active steps' were being taken 'to prepare the mind of the country to do this by rebellion in connection with France when the opportunity offers'.²⁷ Browne feared that any breakdown in the uneasy peace agreement with France would spark the signal for a fresh revolt and that only a strong counter-revolutionary presence could help minimise the threat. Or as Denis Browne put it, 'the fear of consequence is the first step towards counteracting'.²⁸ Although Denis Browne was at times an alarmist, his correspondence with Hardwicke displayed a deep concern about the situation and the dreadful

²⁵ William O'Donel to Dublin Castle, 14 July 1801 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 1020/32).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Denis Browne to Third Earl Hardwicke, 28 Mar. 1802 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/61/26).

²⁸ Ibid.

consequences of a successful rebellion. He reassured the Lord Lieutenant that his information was ‘not from a bigot in either politics or religion but in addition to my love for the Empire and the English connection’, and that his property, family and everything dear to him was ‘engaged in one common cause with the state.’²⁹

This fear was shared by Lord Sligo whose conciliatory tone gave way to a determination to confront sedition. Given the tense mood of the county, the Brownes were particularly determined to deal with any prisoners who had illegally returned from banishment abroad. Thomas Gibbons was the best known of these, but informants in the county had sighted several others. Through intercepted letters, the Marquess monitored the whereabouts of many the banished Mayo rebels; ‘Most of the rebel chiefs transported hence’ he informed Alexander Marsden, ‘are in France and all will be in Ireland if examples are not made, that is my apprehension.’³⁰ Determined efforts were necessary to prevent the illegal return of former rebels, whose presence would serve to reignite sedition in the region; ‘The spirit is put down’, he informed Marsden, ‘and without foreign aid, I don’t imagine there is much danger of a rebellion, but the seeds remain and a very trifling mistake might raise animosities that years of wisdom would not put down.’³¹ However, unlike Denis, the marquess was not in favour of hanging these men or confining them to jail indefinitely. Instead, he advocated that Thomas Gibbons and several others should be sent to Botany Bay as a salutary lesson to others contemplating an illegal return to Ireland. In July 1802 he expressed this preference to Alexander Marsden: ‘I think if Tom Gibbons and his associates will subscribe their consent to go to Botany Bay, it would be advisable to make this bargain with them.’³²

The return of Thomas Gibbons to exile relieved the pressure on the Brownes, but a year later several hundred rebels still remained at large in Connemara. Sligo alerted Alexander Marsden to the continued threat, and stated alarmingly that ‘the future peace of these parts and perhaps of the Kingdom requires some steps to be taken in this business’,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, 2 Aug. 1802 (ibid., 620/18a/7/7).

³¹ Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, 5 July 1802 (ibid., 620/18a/4/2).

³² Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, 6 July 1802 (ibid., 620/18a/7/3).

before giving a gloomy assessment of the security situation in Ireland for the foreseeable future. Sligo was convinced that Ireland would ‘for half a century require a degree of vigilant attention that none can so well understand as those who are intimately acquainted with it under all its circumstances and bearings.’³³ Of the principal rebels at large, Browne gave a mixed report: ‘Gibbons is mad, [Valentine] Jordan sick and penitent and the Friar [Prendergast] is the only one that could again do harm being a most daring villain of desperate courage and some influence arising from his sacred function’. What worried him further, however, was an awareness that the exiled United Irish in France were in correspondence with the rebels and that they wished ‘to create a disturbance’ in Connacht at some stage.³⁴

The presence of Prendergast among the fugitives also brought unwanted attention to the Catholic clergy in the area, and they were keen to display their loyalty and contempt for seditious behaviour. Lord Sligo, however, was given mixed information; he was told by a Westport priest that the ‘public mind’ had changed but if the French arrived with superior numbers then they would again receive some degree of support.³⁵ Sligo, however, was confident that no support would come from the Catholic bourgeois, stating that ‘the minds of middleclass, that were worst affected’ during 1798 were now ‘changed more than they avow, from a desire to conceal former ideas’.³⁶ While Sligo was comforted by the broad change in public mood, he remained vigilant and sought to consolidate the perceived association of prosperity and peace. Towards this end he devised a plan for a weekly government newspaper in Ireland which would celebrate the benefits of loyalty and Union. Such a publication would, he informed Alexander Marsden, ‘enlist the hearts and hands of the Irish people in the great cause which the Empire is contending.’³⁷ Alluding to the clarity of the United Irish publications of the previous decade, he outlined the appropriate style of his proposed paper which would carry select news and describe, ‘in the simplest manner, accompanied with remarks, essays and exhortations in

³³ Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, 23 June 1802 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 1021/21).

³⁴ Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, 11 June 1803 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/18a/7/21).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, 10 July 1803 (ibid., 620/18a/7/24).

³⁷ Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, Apr. 1803 (ibid., 620/18a/7/21).

opposition to the enemy and in devotion to our country'.³⁸ The Castle was unconvinced but Robert Emmet's attempted coup the following month gave particular weight to the wariness of the marquess.

Early in 1803, Lord Sligo ordered all local revenue shipping to return to the nearest port at the sight of any large number of ships in the area. The revenue officer would then dispatch an emergency signal straight to Dublin. The Mayo gentry were determined not to be taken by surprise again. Lord Lucan was equally resolute and offered his own sailing smack to government for the purpose of patrolling Blacksod bay.³⁹ Although inimical to Lucan's stance on Catholic relief, the Brownes were willing to overlook political disagreements when the security of the kingdom depended on mutual co-operation. However, Sligo remarked that the Bingham's loyalty was only a reaction to their innate sectarianism. Hinting that the Bingham's believed that all Catholics were inveterately disloyal, he added that 'he [Bingham] hates the Romans [Catholics], and I really believe that half his services are done because he thinks the papists are of a contrary way of thinking'. Nonetheless, he welcomed Lucan's active loyalism and added that 'good sometimes results from evil'.⁴⁰

However, even during periods of high alert, Sligo had little tolerance for unfounded rumours, as past experience had illustrated their disruptive effects. In July 1803 he declared that he would have no patience for story tellers, promising to 'make it a rule to see the seer and to examine him and no man dare bring a fabricated tale to my town when either Denis or I am here'.⁴¹ Referring to Westport as 'his town' was commonplace in Sligo's correspondence and it frequently reflected his sense of ownership when discussing the problems of the region. Regardless of heightened security measures, the brothers along with all members of the Irish establishment were totally surprised by Robert Emmet's revolt on 23 July 1803. Denis Browne travelled through the country on

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, 1 July 1803 (ibid., 620/18a/7/23).

⁴⁰ Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, 10 July 1803 (ibid., 620/18a/24).

⁴¹ Ibid.

his way to Mayo on the 27 July 1803 and noted that plot had completely failed to spark a response. However, as the old master of counter-insurgency he was quick to warn the government in the Castle not to become complacent in victory. Browne made it his business to travel through the previously rebellious counties in the midlands to check for seditious activity there. But areas of Meath, Leitrim, Roscommon and Mayo were so quiet that even an alarmist like Denis Browne dismissed the Emmet revolt as ‘a paltry rebellion’, that had occurred without any support from outside Dublin.⁴² However, he warned the Castle to ‘take care of the public mind now. Keep a watch in every county. It will save a deal of trouble here after. Let no compassion be made injurious to your watchfulness.’⁴³

Browne knew that if effective steps were taken following the success in Dublin, it would effectively put an end to any lingering United Irish threat. And despite the presence of at least a hundred rebels in arms throughout the mountains of Mayo, Browne drew comfort from the fact that the 1803 rebellion produced absolutely no reaction there. The hard line taken by the Brownes and other gentry families like the O’Donel’s had effectively corralled the fugitives into an open prison. Their living conditions were extremely harsh and there was little chance of ever returning to normal life as long as magistrates like Denis Browne were still alive. Nevertheless, the pursuit of the outlaws continued for many years. Denis Browne eventually captured and attended the execution of his Godson, John Gibbons Jnr, in Westport in 1811, after almost thirteen years of trailing him. The other members of the Gibbons family escaped the gallows but never returned to their homes or businesses in Mayo. John Gibbons snr. and his son Edmund were sentenced to transportation for life but the prison ship bringing them to Botany Bay was attacked and boarded by a French raider and the two men escaped to France to join Napoleon’s Irish Legion. Affy Gibbons escaped to Inisbofin, off the coast of Connemara, and settled there as a teacher before being murdered in a quarrel in the 1820s.⁴⁴

⁴² Denis Browne to Alexander Marsden, 27 July 1803 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 1025/71).

⁴³ Denis Browne to _____, 27 July 1803 (ibid., 1025/71).

⁴⁴ Rory Lavelle, ‘The Mayo rebels of ’98 in Connemara’, in *Connemara*, the Journal of the Clifden and Connemara Heritage Group, vol.i, no.1 (1993), pp 71-2.

The more affluent rebel leaders such as Valentine Jordan and James Joseph McDonnell also evaded capture. Jordan suffered from the harsh conditions and died after several years on the run, while McDonnell made his way to France in a smuggling boat. The most enigmatic of the fugitives, Fr. Myles Prendergast, also remained at large until thirty years later. In 1805 Prendergast entered into negotiations with Brigadier-Major Richard Marshall for a pardon and was committed to Galway Jail. The pardon was not forthcoming and Prendergast managed to escape once again into the Connemara wilderness.⁴⁵ There was a lot of sympathy and support for Prendergast among the local people and many of them provided him with shelter, food and information over the years. In a move that justified the Brownes' distrust of him, 'Humanity' Dick Martin attempted to seek a pardon for him even though Martin considered him guilty of murder. But Father Prendergast would not accept the pardon unless it was extended to Johnny Gibbons, a condition which Martin refused.⁴⁶ Prendergast continued the life of an outlaw and spent the latter years of his life in the Clifden area. Further attempts were made to secure a pardon in 1826 when the Knight of Kerry and Lord Lansdowne made an unsuccessful appeal on his behalf.⁴⁷ The friar lived out his days as a fugitive and died near Clifden in 1842.⁴⁸

(ii.) *'A new system of rebellion': Confronting the Thresher outbreak.*

With the demise of the United Irish movement, there was no longer any realistic expectation of a successful revolution in the social or political order of the country. While the peasantry and artisans of Mayo had once looked to the leadership of the United Irishmen for revolutionary redress, a more localised approach was soon adopted to deal with more immediate problems facing the lower orders. The rhetoric of a republican democracy was now in the past but the burdens of tithes, dues, vestry cesses and rents remained an irritant, which disturbed and antagonised the impoverished peasantry. With

⁴⁵ Keogh, 'A postscript of 1798', p. 249.

⁴⁶ Lavelle, *Mayo rebels*, pp 72-74.

⁴⁷ Keogh, 'A postscript of 1798', p. 248. Local tradition in Clifden maintains that Fr. Prendergast eventually received an unofficial pardon and protection from John Bourke, fourth earl of Mayo.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

the mass based revolutionary approach defeated, it was unsurprising that the peasantry reverted back to smaller oath-bound societies as a means to vent outrage and fury. By 1805 agrarian and social dissent in Mayo had morphed into the emergence a newly created society, the self-styled Threshers, which was the first of its kind in the nineteenth century.

The Threshers revived the traditions and tactics of the Whiteboys of the previous century but brought with them a certain politicisation drawn from the more recent Defender and United Irish movements. Although exclusively Catholic, they seemed indifferent to creed and, as with the Rightboy agitations, the overcharging priest would be as likely to attract its ire as the rapacious tithing proctor or landlord.⁴⁹ The Thresher oath often referred to these central aims:

To keep secret; to attend when called upon; to observe the Threshers laws;
not to pay tithes but to the rector, and to pay only certain fees to the clergy.⁵⁰

Unlike the later Rockite movement of the 1820s, which drew support and membership from a broader section of the Catholic population, the Threshers drew recruits from the poorest members of society; the landless and the land-poor (labourers and conacre farmers) and originated in the northern counties of Connacht, particularly Leitrim and Sligo.⁵¹ The group derived their name from constant threats to ‘thresh’ or ‘card’ any violators of their strict civil and agrarian code. This involved using an iron toothed implement, usually used to separate and straighten wool fibres, to tear at the flesh of a potential victim. In reality, the same tactics used by earlier groups were preferred, such as the ubiquitous houghing of livestock and the burning of grain stacks.⁵² The group also practised a more refined type of nocturnal intimidation. Mobilisation in crude uniform and under arms in front of a victim’s house showed more confidence than the Whiteboy era and anticipated the mass gatherings of the Ribbonmen fifteen years later. By the

⁴⁹ For Rightboy tactics in the 1780s see Smyth, *The men of no property*, p. 36.

⁵⁰ Michael Beames, *Peasants and power: the Whiteboy movements and their control in pre-Famine Ireland* (London, 1983), p. 64.

⁵¹ James S. Donnelly, *Captain Rock: the Irish agrarian rebellion of 1821-24* (Madison, Wisconsin, 2009), p. 341.

⁵² Jordan, *Land and popular politics*, p. 87.

winter of 1805-06, the Threshers were posting threatening notices in public areas and punishing those who defied their edicts.

Initially, the disturbances were confined to the northern areas of the county. The Brownes took this as a subtle compliment towards the policies they had adopted in the south after the 1798 rebellion. As the disturbances grew in intensity, Lord Sligo was urged by Francis Goodwin, a captain of the Loyal Ballinglen Yeomanry in Ballina, to 'enlighten' the Castle about this irritant and to put forward a possible remedy. Sligo displayed an unusual lack of concern at this emerging threat but his confidence was understandable given the apparent success of his security measures after the rebellion. Indeed, he believed the reputation of the Brownes, and particularly that of Denis, was enough to make any rebel cower and desist from disloyalty. Sligo eventually wrote to Dublin Castle and assured the government that 'if it was only reported that Denis had taken a lodging in the town of Killala, you would never hear more of them'.⁵³ He was equally confident as to the nature of this new outbreak of lawlessness. At this stage, the Brownes perceived the Threshers as an economic rather than a political phenomenon. As such, they opposed the use of military force to quell the disturbances. Such a force, he believed, would provide a perception of weakness and the implication that the leading families of the county were unable to provide for its security. With increased Thresher activity at the end of July 1806, he declared that, 'the gentlemen of the country can put them down if they choose, by a very small exertion'. He added that it would not 'serve us either at home or abroad to have it supposed that the military is necessary to keep the country from insurrections.'⁵⁴

Unlike the events of 1798, Sligo believed that these activities were completely void of any political motivations and stated that 'there is neither party, politics nor religion at all concerned in it and nothing is so easy as to put it down'.⁵⁵ He saw the renewed outbreak as a consequence of the injustice, which he had highlighted throughout his political career. Nevertheless, while the causes were clear, he was concerned by the effectiveness

⁵³ Lord Sligo to _____, 17 July 1806 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 1091/52).

⁵⁴ Lord Sligo to _____, 30 July 1806 (ibid., 1091/53).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

of the Thresher violence. He noticed that ‘tithes, the very alleged object of the outrage are collected with moderation, if demanded at all, where menaces against them are held out’, an acknowledgement that when intimidation and violence was threatened against tithe proctors, the tax was not successfully collected. But when disturbances ceased the proctors returned to the affected areas with an ‘increased vengeance’.⁵⁶

Mindful, perhaps, of excesses committed by regular troops in 1798, Sligo preferred a local response to the outbreak, stating that ‘the outrages [can] only be put down by those men acquainted with the sentiments of the county and with the private views and wishes of every class of the inhabitants’.⁵⁷ He believed that this local coalition should again include the Catholic hierarchy and local priests, which eventually led to increased Thresher resentment towards their dues and collections. Possibly comparing them to the secular United Irishmen, Sligo noted that religious divisions did not seem to affect or interest them and wrote that ‘the spirit seems to have been through the whole of the lower orders without any distinction as to religious persuasion and it is a natural object that the priests are against them to a man’.⁵⁸ As the Threshers grew more anti-clerical as a result, and resembling the Rightboy tactics of the 1780s, they posted chapel doors with threatening notices and set ‘acceptable’ rates for priests’ dues. Lord Sligo noted a sizeable rift stating that he ‘could not find out any general principles among the disturbers but that of resentment and total separation from the Catholic priests’.⁵⁹

Denis Browne, by this stage had already made a successful foray against the disturbers. He apprehended six men in October 1806 and charged them with intimidating a Catholic priest. The men were accused of going to a local chapel and telling the priest to reduce his dues and that no person should in future pay tithes of more than 3d per acre. Browne, pressed for the death sentence but conceded that the evidence against them was not strong enough to try them under a contemporary law, that provided the means to punish anyone

⁵⁶ Lord Sligo to _____, 18 Sept. 1806 (ibid., 1091/55).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Lord Sligo to _____, 21 Oct. 1806 (ibid., 1091/56).

⁵⁹ Lord Sligo to _____, 10 Dec. 1806 (ibid., 1091/57).

who obstructed a clergyman in the celebration of divine service with a capital sentence.⁶⁰ Five other men, Francis and James McDonnell, Jason and Michael Bodkin and Richard Maitland, were also taken by Denis Browne in late August 1806. The charge before them was typical of the nocturnal activities practised by the Threshers during that year.

They were accused of having been a part of a group of 200 men who mobilised at day break on 25 August. The men all wore white shirts and marched in ranks like soldiers through the village of Minola, situated about five miles from Castlebar, where they then intimidated a local man, John Jennings. Jennings, however, could not identify the accused men and they were eventually released on bail.⁶¹ In this instance, Browne was also frustrated by the perceived weaknesses of due process. George Moore of Moore Hall, whose younger brother had been appointed President of the ill-fated Republic of Connacht in 1798, wrote to Lord Sligo and described the worsening situation on his estate, and added that to delay an immediate military response would be foolish:

[There is] an inflamed and daring spirit in the lower classes of the people. The parish priest tells me [that] a most inflammatory advertisement was read without the walls of his chapel last Sunday. The priest behaved very well and with much spirit – But unless there are troops dispersed up and down the county, he and all persons who act like him will tremble for their lives.⁶²

The killing of several informers in November 1806 eventually compelled the British Government to appoint a commission with the aim of rooting out the ringleaders. The Special Commission, part of the civil courts but empowered with emergency legislation, sat in December and was charged with finding the key participants, not only in Mayo but also in other counties in Connacht and southern Ulster where other outrages had occurred.

Barrister and member of the Connacht circuit, Oliver Joseph Burke, wrote an account of the special commission almost eighty years later and stated that the government dispatched Lord Chief Justices Downes and Baron George to the counties ‘with a view of

⁶⁰ ‘State of the County of Mayo’. Draft report of Sergeant Arthur Moore, October 1806 (ibid., 1092/5).

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² George Moore to Lord Sligo, 19 Oct. 1806 (ibid., 1091/56).

striking terror into a body of people styling themselves Threshers'.⁶³ The Attorney General, William Ridgeway, stated the case for the Crown and accused the Threshers of being a 'branch of a vast conspiracy got up to overturn the church, seize upon her property and starve her clergy'.⁶⁴ The commission was welcomed by Denis Browne and he gladly testified against the Mayo suspects when it sat in Castlebar in December 1806. As head of the Grand Jury, Browne swore against several men charged with a variety of offences from administering oaths to murder. When taking the stand he outlined, not only the anti-clerical origins of the Threshers but also its subsequent development:

The first object of the association was the reduction of tithes and priests dues. When it travelled into this part it assumed that, and also another shape, that of attacking the wages of weavers and latterly farmers. In different stages of its progression it professed different objects. Assemblies of people collected in disguise and wearing badges and armed, appeared in different parts of the county. It showed itself in posting up written notices exciting people to rebellion under various different pretences.⁶⁵

Browne had, by this time, evidently reversed his initial belief that the Threshers were merely a symptom of economic injustice and now maintained that there was an imminent threat of a second large-scale rebellion in the kingdom. It suited his own needs to assert that the accused were seditious rebels bent on subverting the constitution, and not poverty stricken farmers in search of restitution. Indeed, the 'sacrifice' and efficiency of the Mayo Grand Jury, headed by Browne, in the arrest of the accused was noted by the Chief Justices. They believed that the fact that they had not resorted to summary justice was to be applauded and that the magistrates were, in fact, saving the accused from themselves:

It is of great importance that the people should know the obligations to which they are subject and that the magistrates should know their legal powers. The magistrate who boldly steps forward and gives them good advice, and if they will not listen to it, puts the law early in force against them, is their friend, he saves them from death and their families from misery. If the people knew the value of such a magistrate they would esteem him.⁶⁶

⁶³ Burke, *Anecdotes*, pp 187-8.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

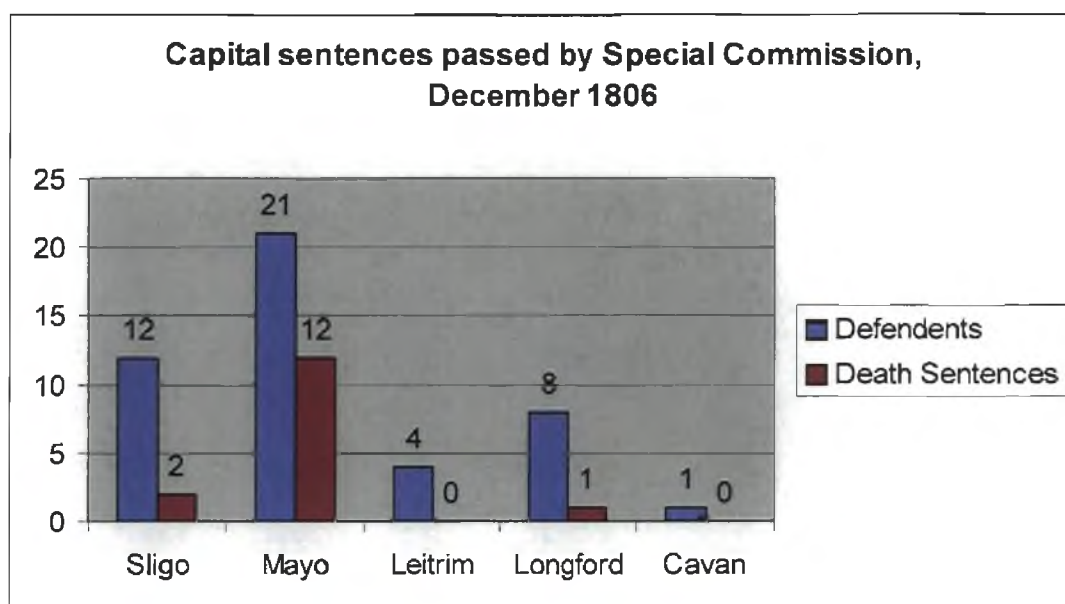
The most high profile case in the Mayo sitting was the murder of Thady Lavin who had been killed by the Threshers in November 1806 for swearing information against them the previous summer. The court heard that five 'ruffians' dressed in white shirts and straw masks rushed into the house of Lavin. The leader was alleged to have been Edward Durneen who was armed with a hatchet. Durneen was one of the men whom Lavin had earlier informed on. Four other Threshers followed who were armed with mixture of pikes and clubs. Denis Browne purposely underlined the fact that pikes were a favourite weapon of the disturbers, in an attempt to revive memories of 1798 and to link the men to that earlier rebellion.

Although, the evidence against the men was tenuous, the Grand Jury succeeded in securing a death sentence for each of them. Along with these convictions, several other men received capital sentences for administering oaths and enforcing Thresher law. Of the twenty-one defendants at the Mayo sitting, twelve were sentenced to death and executed. This figure dwarfed the capital sentences of the other counties affected and pointed to ruthlessness already seen in the immediate aftermath of 1798. It was no coincidence that Denis Browne had led the Grand Jury of magistrates on both occasions. Writing nearly eighty years after the commission, Oliver J Burke hinted at a reason for the high level of death sentences in Mayo. Speaking about a case in Sligo where several prisoners were accused of intimidating clergymen of both Churches he stated that the accused had 'proved to demonstrate an alibi [and] were acquitted', but in Mayo where Browne had significant experience in counter-insurgency operations 'the Right Honourable attained a different result and about a dozen persons were found guilty and executed.'⁶⁷ Chief Justice Downes finished the proceedings of the commission with a speech that lamented the anti-religious feeling of the movement stated that it mirrored the spectre of the French Revolution, adding that it was 'no wonder that those who searched after democratical authority should be the foes of religion'.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 188.

⁶⁸ Beames, *Peasants and power*, p. 120.

The maintenance of law and order by setting a terrible example was still an integral part of Denis Browne's political doctrine. On each verdict where the death sentence might apply, he lobbied for it ceaselessly. The disparity between the affected counties can easily be demonstrated in a tabular representation of the regional situation. While Mayo had a higher rate of incidents, the death sentence was passed on over fifty per cent of the defendants, while only three capital sentences were passed in the other combined counties:



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Initially, the Commission and the high rate of executions had the desired effect on Mayo. The Solicitor General, Charles Burke, wrote encouragingly to government in March 1807 that; 'all accounts concur in stating that no outrage has been committed in this county (Mayo) since the special commission.'⁵² Burke also noticed that in counties where the death penalty had been spared, assassinations of alleged informers had continued soon after the commission had dissolved. In March 1807 nine Threshers were sentenced to hang for the murder of three informers in Sligo.⁷⁰ The corresponding downturn of

⁶⁹ Statistics from William Ridgeway, *A Report of the Proceedings under a Special Commission, of Oyer and Terminer, for the Counties of Sligo, Mayo, Leitrim, Longford and Cavan, in the month of December 1806* (Dublin, 1807).

⁵² Charles Burke to Dublin Castle, 30 Mar. 1807 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 1120/74).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

violence in Mayo indicated that the Brownes had improved their intelligence gathering capabilities since the mid 1790s. They had successfully arrested the ringleaders of the group and weeded out the wasteful rumour mongers and score settlers that had threatened successful prosecutions in the past. The majority of the suspects had been betrayed to and arrested by the Brownes, and believing that they had sufficient evidence, they were determined to press for the ultimate punishment.

However, Browne and the government failed in its long-term strategy, that of totally crushing secret societies. By the end of summer 1807, the nocturnal activities of the Threshers resumed again, although primarily at a lower intensity. Francis Goodwin, a respected landowner from the town of Killala, wrote to Lord Sligo on 22 August 1807 to inform him of some illegal activities in the Thresher stronghold of north Mayo. Threatening notices had again been posted, which promised to ‘destroy’ any person who collected tithes.⁷¹ By September 1807, the Threshers were still active in this area. This caused local landowner, William Brabazon, to write to the military commander of Ballina. He informed Major General Vansittart that the secret society was ‘again commencing their outrages in opposition to tithes [and] church fees in my neighbourhood’, and were concentrated in the more remote areas of Sligo and Mayo, areas that were ‘destitute of either a civil or military force to suppress it’.⁷²

Interestingly, one of the sworn affidavits enclosed with the letter told of the Threshers being dressed in white and demanding money off a Felim Gallagher. When he protested, the disguised men angrily stated that the money was not for their own needs but for the ‘public good’, which hinted at a political strain in their activities; that of a self-appointed assistance society, which deemed itself to be a help to the locality instead of an encumbrance. Exactly a year after the establishment of the special commission, a large-scale arms raid was executed by the Threshers in the heart of Lord Sligo’s estate, near the town of Ballinrobe. The description of the raiders suggested that they had become even

⁷¹ Francis Goodwin to Lord Sligo, 22 Aug. 1807 (ibid., 1120/48).

⁷² William Brabazon to Major General Vansittart, 25 Sept. 1807 (ibid., 1121/53).

more organised. A local landowner, Patrick McDonnell wrote to J. D'Arcy, a prominent barrister in Mayo, and informed him of the event and the need to alert the Brownes:

This county is in a desperate situation from the Threshers who are assembling in large bodies taking away all the arms they can get. All this within one mile of me on the Ballinrobe road. Another great party of them have threshed a great quantity of corn and fired some shots within the town of Kilmaine. They assemble to the number of 100, their faces blackened with some white covering over their clothes, swearing the farmers not to pay more than £5 per acre for soil. I think you ought to consult with Lord Sligo what plan should be adapted to prevent such outrages as there will be no living in the county if they are let to proceed.⁷³

Within the context of counter-insurgency, this dispatch reflected the high opinion of the Brownes within the county and the fact that they were a primary source of advice in the aftermath of an outrage. As Lord Lieutenant of the county, Lord Sligo was a reliable conduit to government, particularly for the more remote (and unknown) members of Mayo's ruling class. Indeed, Sligo had already noticed an upturn in Thresher activity and by the autumn of 1807, he was increasingly frustrated, not only by the rise of the violence, but by the Castle's failure to respond to Denis's recommendations. He also attributed some blame to the behaviour of the Church of Ireland Dean of Ardagh, Richard Bourke. Sligo accused Bourke of inflaming the situation when he revived an ancient claim, with the aid of an obsolete hereditary clause, to 'half the tithes of the county'.⁷⁴ He then wished to sell these tithes 'for anything or nothing' to the local proctors to the dismay of the local peasantry. Browne accused Richard Bourke of consciously threatening the security of the county for selfish reasons and personal gain. He wrote to government stating that 'in looking to these parts now enjoying the most perfect tranquillity, you will surprised to hear that we have been on the eve of another Threshing business, and not less dangerous than that of last year, and all occasioned by the ill-advised conduct of the Dean of Ardagh'.⁷⁵

⁷³ Patrick McDonnell to J. D'Arcy, 24 Dec. 1807 (ibid., 1120/52).

⁷⁴ Lord Sligo to _____, 4 Sept. 1807 (ibid., 1120/29).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Lord Sligo attempted to convince Bourke that 'rebellion would be the immediate consequence' of his claims and intentions. This intercession had little effect, much to the chagrin of Browne, and Bourke attempted to advertise the coming 'auction' of tithes in the county. However, Browne eventually convinced him to seek clarification in the law courts and managed to delay the potential fall-out. A counter claim to the tithes also ensured a lengthy legal entanglement. The 'sale' of tithes was averted but Browne was furious. He hinted in his damning report to government that he would move forcefully against Bourke if he threatened the peace of the county again: 'the escape we have had has been a miracle. Should any new steps be taken by him [Bourke] in this pursuit, I cannot answer for the consequences'.⁷⁶ This reaffirmed the Brownes' long held view (evident earlier in the case of George FitzGerald) that social rank was no protection if used to pose a threat to the peace. But while the main cause of this fresh outbreak was identified as the speculative greed of Bourke, the recourse to violence by outraged peasants was also identified as rebellion against the very structures of society. A stronger and more permanent solution to these outbreaks would be needed.

The Brownes put forward several proposals to improve the security of the county and a number of them were considered by senior government figures in Dublin. In his report to the Castle concerning the fresh Thresher outbreaks, Sligo could not hide his satisfaction that the Lord Lieutenant, Charles Lennox, the fourth Duke of Richmond, was seriously considering Denis's ideas for the county. His ideas centred on the priority of securing the rebel bolthole of Connemara. One particular idea stood out. Obviously looking toward the example of Wicklow, the Brownes lobbied for a 'military road' through the troublesome territory stating that 'a good road made through those parts from the Killaries to Galway would be the most effectual and permanent remedy'.⁷⁷ Browne believed that if this road was patrolled by a permanent military presence then the pacification of the area would be assured. The building of an adequate centre of detention was also a key requirement. Castlebar jail was disease ridden and easily penetrated, and 'if committed to Galway jail, they would be at liberty again when they choose to seek

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

it'.⁷⁸ The brothers believed that if a suitable jail could not be built, then the rebel fugitives should be sent to a secure location such as Duncannon fort in County Wexford.

Always willing to promote the loyal demeanour of the county, Lord Sligo complimented the Yeomanry of Mayo, which was about 1,200 in number, stating that: 'they are for their purpose excellent men , loyal, active, zealous and not to be corrupted'.⁷⁹ Yet stating 'for their purpose', the marquess hinted that the Yeomen were excellent policemen but that regular and permanent soldiers were needed to guard the 'frontier' between Galway and Mayo. Arthur Wellesley was also becoming cautious about the suitability of the Mayo Yeomanry to hunt down rebels and maintain law and order, especially if there happened to be another French invasion: 'let those who think the loyal inhabitants and the yeomanry [of Mayo] could keep down the rebels think what would happen if the [regular] troops were withdrawn'.⁸⁰ Probably fearing such a possibility, Sligo proposed a permanent military presence at Louisburg, the town situated on the borders of Connemara and named after his wife Louisa, stating that 'if there were ten soldiers sent to Louisburg, which is the pass to and from Connemara, it would give great confidence' to the 'active loyalists there' and deter any outlaws from assembling in the vicinity. Sligo believed that within these plans lay the permanent solution to Mayo's security problems. And although never one to minimise his role in the policing of Mayo, he admitted that this blueprint for security was really the work of Denis: 'I have seen all my brother's plans for meeting the difficulties of Connemara and I know of no better measures than he proposes for meeting the existing dangers'.⁸¹

The fact that the road was never built, the troops never posted, and the jails never strengthened pointed to a harsh reality for the Brownes. Repeated warnings of sedition and simmering revolt were increasingly overlooked by senior officials in Dublin. While the government believed that the fugitives and Threshers in Connemara were a potential threat, they politely rejected the Brownes' plans for any further security measures. It is

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Wellesley to Hawkesbury, 7 May 1807, cited in Allan Blackstock, *An Ascendancy Army: the Irish Yeomanry, 1796-1834* (Dublin, 1998), p. 246.

⁸¹ Lord Sligo to Dublin Castle, 4 Sept. 1807 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 1120/29).

unclear whether this inaction came from an inability on the government's part to appreciate the danger in the west or because they did not have the resources to act upon them. Or, that the Brownes' anxieties had become too consistent and too familiar. The Castle administration even stood down the yeomanry of Sligo and Connemara in June 1807, replacing them with smaller companies of regular troops.⁸² These regular troops were never used in a campaign to flush out the rebels and Threshers from Connemara, although the permanent post at Louisburg was established before the Ribbon threat of 1819-20. In the meantime, the government believed that time and harsh winters, not further military expenditure would eventually break any remnants of politicised sedition in the area.

The decade following the 1798 uprising was one of mixed fortunes for Denis and John Denis Browne. It saw both brothers gain immense prestige and influence for the role they played in pursuing and punishing the disloyal after the revolt had broken down. Both were members of the Imperial parliament, privy councillors and important figures of opinion and power in London, Dublin and Westport. They had enjoyed the absolute attention and trust of Tory and coalition governments for most of the decade. Yet, as the 1810s began there were signs that the reputation of the Brownes had begun to wane and that their most important years were now behind them.

(iii.) A Decade of Dominance? 1810-1816.

The 1810s should have been a peak in Denis Browne's dominance within Mayo's civil and judicial affairs. As an MP, he had been in parliament for over twenty five years and through careful patronage and popular calls for Catholic relief had won the loyalty of many Catholic freeholders. The number of freeholders that registered to vote in Mayo between 1795 and 1803 came to a total of 13,174.⁸³ However, this apparently solid foundation was undermined by the death of Lord Sligo in 1809 and the inability of his

⁸² Blackstock, *Ascendancy Army*, p. 246.

⁸³ *Return of Number of Registered Freeholders in Counties of Ireland, 1795-1803*, H.C. 1802-3 (86), vii, 3.

heir to assume his father's role of Lord Lieutenant of Mayo. The second marquess of Sligo, Howe Peter Browne, was barely out of his teens and spent more time in London and Ascot than attending to matters of local importance in Westport. During this decade, Howe Peter perfectly conformed to the classic image of a Regency 'Buck', spending extravagantly on horse racing and gambling. In 1812, while Denis was preoccupied with the Spring Assizes in Castlebar, his nephew drove his own coach from London to Holyhead in thirty-five hours for a wager of a thousand guineas.⁸⁴ During an archaeological expedition to Greece, Howe Peter plundered two great columns of the doorway to the Treasury of Atreus in Mycenae. Doubting the seamanship of the crew that had brought him to Greece from England, the marquess bribed two naval seamen from a passing ship of the line to take the columns home.

Britain was at war at the time and so to procure military personnel for a private excursion was a serious crime, even for a friend of the Prince Regent and Lord Byron. After being tried in the Old Bailey in December 1812, Howe Peter Browne was sentenced to four months in prison and fined £5,000. He served the full four months in London's Newgate prison before returning to Ireland in April 1813.⁸⁵ However, the young aristocrat did not stay long in Mayo, returning instead to London to indulge his passion for racing, where his horses managed to win a total of seven Gold Cups. In 1815, he even attempted to rescue his friend, Joachim Murat, Napoleon's Cavalry General and 'King of Naples' from court-martial and execution during the White Terror following Waterloo. With Howe Peter engaged in these various adventures and showing no interest in parliamentary politics, his uncle sought to fill any power vacuum that resulted from his absence. Browne was present at all county assizes during this decade and was foreman of the Grand Jury for most of them. In addition, he kept his command of the Murrisk Cavalry and travelled regularly between his large houses in Westport and Claremorris.

During the Spring Assizes of 1811, Browne was concerned at the difficulty of securing convictions because of the large numbers of Catholics in the jury, but had gone ahead

⁸⁴ Browne, *Westport House*, p. 33.

⁸⁵ *The Times*, 8 Apr. 1813, p. 3.

with the trial of two Threshers as he believed the Catholic men would 'do their duty'. He could hardly contain his rage when the jury acquitted both men. Browne also noted with dismay that the local peasantry had welcomed the news of the acquittal. Writing to the Chief Secretary, William Wellesley Pole, he remembered that a priest had recently informed him that 'the lower people say that mere threshing, as they call it, is no crime for which they will suffer'.⁸⁶ Similar to the hung juries in the aftermath of 1798, Denis concluded that while these opinions were prevalent among the Catholics of Mayo, it was 'impossible [for] the country to be governed by the mild and equal principles of the British constitution'.⁸⁷ It seemed ironic that a man, who had spent his political life recommending Catholic inclusion, now called for a restrictive measure on the issue. In March 1811, he called for a temporary law to keep Catholic jurors away from 'political' or subversive trials while war with France continued:

Extraordinary powers, as much as the constitution will warrant, are wanting among us, and will be necessary while we are at war with France particularly, or in default of this, a conduct that must show our distrust of Roman Catholics [by] putting Protestants alone on those juries.⁸⁸

Browne was anxious about the mood and disposition of the county and desired a successful conviction of 'rebels' to reassert order within the region. He was irritated that after all the years of promoting Catholic claims, there was still a sullen disposition amongst large numbers of the 'lower orders', a disposition that condoned and protected agrarian rebels. While his correspondence never contained any regrets about his support for Catholic emancipation, Browne seemed convinced (and disappointed) that, even in 1811, Catholics were still not trustworthy enough to assume statutory roles. However, these personal beliefs were often contradicted by his public pronouncements in parliament and a possible explanation for this particular outburst was the increased work load and heightened personal pressure that he undertook in the immediate aftermath of his brother's death.

⁸⁶ Denis Browne to William Wellesley-Pole, 23 Mar. 1811 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 1388/23).

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Nevertheless, the next trial concerning agrarian disturbers was not left to chance and an all-Protestant jury was prepared to try four men who were accused of ‘threshing’ and murder. This jury dutifully found all four men guilty and recommended the death sentence for each of them. Characteristically, Browne stayed in Castlebar to witness the sentences being carried out. Displaying a macabre interest in the process (which resembled his behaviour after 1798), he noted that the prisoners feared the dismemberment of their bodies after death more than the actual execution itself. Browne, however, was not prepared to forgo the salutary example of such a spectacle and ordered the prompt execution and dissection of all four.⁸⁹ The executions had the desired effect and Thresher activity was significantly reduced for the remainder of 1811. Browne was an energetic parliamentarian during this period but he spent the rest of this year largely in Mayo, tending to official business, investigating suspicious rumours and berating local absentee landlords for their dereliction of duty. However, Browne’s confidence, in the apparent tranquillity of the county, was shaken by the rumour that several suspected United Irishmen were living in Castlebar, and that they had been involved in organising agrarian outrages.⁹⁰

Two gaolers working in the town’s prison swore an affidavit in the presence a Justice of the Peace, which stated that they had both met United Irish fugitives in the town in July 1811. One of the suspects, John Kelly, from Swinford in Mayo, was allegedly accompanied by a former Dublin ‘police officer’ named Gibson. One of the gaolers, Michael Furrick, alleged that he had stopped Kelly from entering Castlebar gaol because he had a bottle of whiskey concealed on his person. When challenged, Kelly supposedly threatened the gaoler and said ‘that he would soon have all the people in the gaol freed out’. Of greater significance was the intelligence secured from the other ‘turnkey’, John Moran. Moran stated that he had met Kelly and Gibson in a house on Castle Street and that Kelly had ‘boasted’ at being part of Robert Emmet’s rebellion in 1803, and to have

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ ‘Affidavit of John Moran and Michael Furrick, sworn before Ninian Crawford Esq.’, sent to Denis Browne, 11 Feb. 1812 (ibid., 1408/19)

personally dragged Lord Kilwarden from his carriage on Thomas Street.⁹¹ Gibson also had a conversation with Moran in which he revealed detailed knowledge on the lanes and streets that had been used to mobilise and retreat from during and after the rebellion. Another witness, John Langston, a former member of the Castlebar Yeomanry, also alleged that he had overheard Kelly in the house of a shoemaker in Castlebar. Kelly stated to the cobbler that he had taken two redcoats prisoner during the rebellion in Swinford in 1798. Unknown to the indiscreet rebel, Langston had been one of the redcoats that had been taken along with his brother, Davis Langston.⁹² A detail that gave credence to the allegations was that Gibson had come to Mayo with Johnny Gibbons before the celebrated fugitive was arrested and executed.⁹³

All the witnesses swore to testify in any future trial but the information had been given too late and the United men had already fled Castlebar. A further letter concerning a possible resurgence in United Irish activity in the town was sent to Browne, by his friend Sir Samuel O'Malley, early in 1812. O'Malley stated that a shoemaker in Castlebar had approached one of his tenants, Patrick Joyce, in order to 'swear him in as a United Irishman'. Joyce agreed to be sworn in, in order to gather further information for the authorities. He explained to O'Malley that the shoemaker, John Flannery, swore him 'to overturn the laws and constitution of this country and support the French laws and to be ready when called on'. He alleged that Flannery had told him that 'great numbers of people' in Castlebar were sworn to the oath and that a house belonging to a lawyer named Kilroy was being used for the task.⁹⁴ Browne dutifully sent this information to the Lord Lieutenant, the duke of Richmond, but he replied that the informant had already broken the law by swearing an oath, and ordered no further action, much to the chagrin of O'Malley and Browne.

⁹¹ Arthur Wolfe (Lord Kilwarden) was Irish Attorney General and the only establishment figure to be killed during Emmet's rebellion in July 1803. He was dragged from his carriage along with his nephew and piked to death on Thomas Street.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Samuel O'Malley to Denis Browne, Feb. 1812 (ibid., 1408/20).

Browne was alarmed by this resurgence of radicalism in the county town of Mayo and it reinforced his feeling that the Catholics of Mayo had not been ‘appreciative’ enough of the gains they had made over the past twenty years. In January 1812, he moved to quash any potential threat and arrested a music teacher named Thomas Mullany, who he believed to be a ringleader, asserting that, ‘this conspiracy at Castlebar is composed of the lowest of the people of that town, is of no consequence and will not give any trouble’.⁹⁵ At the same time, Edward Pakenham, the Lieutenant Colonel of the Donegal Militia, claimed that ‘some placards (too contemptible to excite the smallest apprehension) were posted at Westport and Newport Pratt’.⁹⁶ George Clendenning, land agent to Howe Peter Browne, interviewed the tenants of the marquess, and reported that the notices were an illegal attempt to regulate the price of potatoes in local town markets. Clendenning, who passed a copy of his correspondence to Denis Browne, assured Pakenham that the area was safe:

The military post established at Louisburg near the confines of Connemara has secured us effectively from all probable risk of disturbance – The numerous outlaws and deserters who find shelter in that lawless quarter never venture to pass Killary [Harbour] which divides Galway and Mayo, since the rebel Gibbons was taken.⁹⁷

Browne, still bitter that his ‘military road’ into Connemara had never been built, wrote to Richmond’s government to complain further and even lamented the departure of Arthur Wellesley in 1809, a tactic that could not have increased his popularity with officials in Dublin. He wrote intemperately that, ‘on the subject of Connemara, I have written volumes to Government. It is dangerous to the peace of Ireland generally. It is full of outlaws, the worst of all descriptions and from all places – Lord Wellington was convinced of the necessity of dispersing the mischief and would have done it if he had remained.’⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 28 Jan. 1812 (*ibid.*, 1408/17).

⁹⁶ Edward M. Pakenham to George Clendenning, 31 May 1812 (*ibid.*, 1408/25).

⁹⁷ George Clendenning to Edward Pakenham, 1 June 1812 (*ibid.*, 1408/25).

⁹⁸ Denis Browne to Dublin Castle, 9 Jan. 1812 (*ibid.*, 1408/16).

Browne's increasing frustration was compounded in 1813 by intelligence from Ninian Crawford, a fellow magistrate, which claimed that Myles Prendergast, the fugitive priest, had successfully landed French arms there during the year.⁹⁹ Crawford's information, which was forwarded to Browne, was supported by a report to government from Browne's rival, Sir Neal O'Donel of Newport House. O'Donel spoke of an increasingly disturbed county and of modern weapons being captured. He also reported a large gathering of armed men, the first in Mayo since the peak of Thresher activity in 1806. O'Donel stated that on the 16 December 1813, he had captured some French muskets but that they had been too modern to have dated from 1798. He believed that they had 'been landed on the coast very lately'.¹⁰⁰

Various reports soon came to Browne concerning similar illegal gatherings. He was told that up to 150 men wearing white cockades had administered illegal oaths near the town of Ballinrobe. There was also an alarming indication of heightened sectarian tension in the greater Castlebar region. The excise collector for Mayo district, Charles O'Malley, reported that threatening broadsheets had been posted on chapel doors in numerous parishes around the town. O'Malley also noted that 'many persons, I understand, took pleasure in reading them aloud for the population. If you were out of the country, I would have felt it my duty to send it to Mr. Peel'.¹⁰¹ The notice that O'Malley enclosed to Browne was not only more sectarian in nature than previous Thresher notices, it also called for a type of economic mutual assistance, which was common in later Ribbon broadsheets.¹⁰² Previously, nocturnal notices had threatened either priest or tithe proctor according to the distinctive character of the local grievance. This particular notice, instead, called for a type of boycott on the economic activity of Protestants in the county and reflected a degree of sophistication in its organisational structures:

At a special meeting of delegates from several parts of the county of Mayo, on the 25th day of August 1813, the following resolutions were unanimously agreed:

⁹⁹ Ninian Crawford to Edward Littlehales, 29 Nov. 1813 (*ibid.*, 1538).

¹⁰⁰ Sir Neal O'Donel to Robert Peel, 19 Dec. 1813 (*ibid.*, 1538/13).

¹⁰¹ Charles O'Malley to Denis Browne, 30 Aug. 1813 (B.L., Peel Papers Add. MS, MSS 40,217 (9)).

¹⁰² Kelly, *The downfall of Hagan*, p. 11.

Resolved – that no person professing the Catholic faith shall buy any goods or value[s] of any kind in town or country, fair or market, from any person except from such as are members of the Catholic Church.

Resolved – that all journeymen, servants and labourers professing the Catholic faith shall work for no other person but such as are of their own communions.

Resolved – that no Catholic shall buy any wares from tradesmen not professing the Catholic faith.¹⁰³

While the notice could have reflected the fertile imagination of only a handful of people, the fact that it contained no political or even agrarian grievances was extremely worrying for Browne. The entire thrust of the notice was sectarian, which Browne blamed on the corrosive influence of Dublin based publications, such as the *Dublin Chronicle*, which, he believed, had ‘corrupted’ the minds of the Mayo peasantry with its ‘radicalism’ for many years. Mirroring the warnings he made to government in 1793 concerning the distribution of Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man* in Mayo, he even asked Peel to consider a Special Commission in reaction to the notice, adding that he hoped, ‘hoped to find some of the persons concerned in this seditious publication in which case it will be for your consideration whether a special commission [is necessary] for the immediate trial of such persons’. Browne decided to call a general meeting of all the Mayo magistrates and chided Peel that, ‘if you cannot stop the seditious meetings, speeches and publications that come to this province from Dublin, you should prepare for civil war, which will be the inevitable consequence of them.’¹⁰⁴

Peel was unimpressed by the tone of Browne’s warning and declined to act upon it. This indifference infuriated Browne, whose patience was further stretched by the ongoing refusal to grant a financial reward to his most prized informer, the Reverend James Jennings of the Neale in Mayo. Browne depended on the loyalty of the ageing priest in order to be fully apprised of any re-organised threat in the county. The fact that fifteen years after the 1798 rebellion, no pension had been awarded to Jennings annoyed and alarmed Browne. He believed strongly that Jennings’ clerical career had suffered

¹⁰³ Copy of threatening notice sent by Charles O’Malley to Denis Browne, 30 Aug. 1813 (B.L., Peel Papers Add. MS, 40,217 (9)).

¹⁰⁴ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 31 Aug. 1813 (ibid., MS. 40,217 (10)).

unofficial sanction from the Catholic hierarchy as a result of his loyal exertions. Indeed, Jennings had been remarkable in his active loyalism during the short-lived rebellion in Mayo. Browne attested that as soon as the French arrived, the priest donned the redcoat uniform of the local Yeomanry corps, and ‘with arms in his hand, led an army through that country’. He then ‘arrested those who had misled his parishioners and openly prosecuted them to conviction’.¹⁰⁵

Since the rebellion, Jennings had often informed Browne of any suspicious characters in the Neale area. An Englishman who had recently deserted from the fleet and whose object ‘had been to raise the people again into rebellion’, was turned over by Jennings and eventually transported for life. Browne lamented the treatment of the parish priest by his own hierarchy, particularly Bishop Dillon of Tuam. Browne was told that ‘it was [he] alone that prevented Mr. Jennings his gown for having put on the clothes of a soldier and for having taken up arms’, and that it was meant to remind Jennings of his true loyalty, which was ‘alone to their church’.¹⁰⁶ Mindful of the hardships that had fallen upon the priest for his loyalty, Browne urged Peel to award Jennings a pension of £100 per annum, citing Judge Daly as a further referee of the priest. Peel did not sanction the payment, leaving an exasperated Browne to plead again for the then blind and infamous priest two years later in 1815.

The debate in parliament concerning Peel’s Peace Preservation Act in June 1814 illustrated the problems that Browne had in being taken seriously on security issues. It was essentially a problem of consistency, and one that Browne often brought upon himself. Ironically, for a bill that would eventually dilute the policing powers of the local gentry, Denis spoke positively about the proposed legislation and lamented the fact that it was needed in ‘certain districts’ of Ireland, an obvious assertion that Mayo was not one of them. Browne was always keen to stress the loyalty of Mayo when speaking publicly in Westminster. However, the reports that he submitted privately to Dublin, for the most part, contradicted this version of events. These mixed signals to government often

¹⁰⁵ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, [no date] 1813 (ibid., MS. 40,217 [unnumbered]).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

devalued his (largely accurate) reports and caused several delays in the release of military stores and manpower during the Ribbon crisis of 1819-20.

The Peace Preservation Act allowed the Lord Lieutenant to proclaim any county, barony or half barony following a request from local magistrates.¹⁰⁷ It followed Peel's decision to review the forces of law and order in Ireland in 1813. He was particularly alarmed at the indiscipline of the Yeomanry, as a detachment of which had just killed thirteen Catholics at Shercock, County Cavan in May 1814. Dublin Castle went even as far as discussing the replacement of the Yeomanry with a new force, a 'local militia', but for political reasons the idea was abandoned.¹⁰⁸ By 1814, peacekeeping had been devolved upon the regular army, but the Peninsular War was a constant drain on Irish resources. To compound matters in Mayo, 'Caravat' and 'Shanavest' societies were clashing with each other in Munster. Brought about by wartime inflation in land prices, the 'proletarian' Caravats mirrored the Threshers in their attempts to regulate rents and raise wages. In response, the larger farmers, many of them with United Irish backgrounds, formed the defensive 'Shanavest' societies. Several hundred people were killed in serious clashes over a five year period.¹⁰⁹ This drawn out feud convinced Peel that some local authorities had lost the ability to contain violent outbursts. This loss of control, he believed led to increased alarmism on the part of magistrates like Browne. The Peace Preservation Act was framed with the express hope of bringing these disturbed areas of Ireland under an increasingly centralised aegis.

However, the credibility issue that dogged Browne's relationship with various Castle administrations (even when he was backed by other magistrates) was the central reason why many of his calls to proclaim Mayo were mostly ignored, ironically during periods of legitimate concern and immediate danger. Peel once complained that the most tiresome part of his duties was finding out whether these reports were in any way

¹⁰⁷ Terence Dooley, *The murders at Wildgoose Lodge: agrarian crime and punishment in pre-Famine Ireland* (Dublin, 2007), p. 102.

¹⁰⁸ Stanley Palmer, *Police and protest in England and Ireland, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 196.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

representative of what was actually happening on the ground.¹¹⁰ While Browne offered the Peace Preservation Act a guarded welcome, there were features within it that concerned him as they reflected Peel's fresh approach to law enforcement.

His plan was to create a new kind of magistrate, a professional salaried official who would have no legal connection to the district to which he was sent; the embodiment of a full time police unit that would be under his direct control and the imposition of financial penalties on the districts where these measures were enforced.¹¹¹ Peel was also determined to preserve his new force from local patronage and influence. He hoped to secure some brigade-majors from the Irish militia as magistrates and recruit constables from discharged non-commissioned officers and privates from the regular army and militia. Above all else was Peel's insistence that these new positions were to be kept away from 'the servants of our parliamentary friends'.¹¹² Essentially, Peel's radical proposal intended to produce a salaried and Castle controlled police force that could be sent to disturbed districts when needed. However, Peel's proposals also drew criticism from elements of the British governing class, who viewed centralised law enforcement as aping the very worst of continental despotism. Lord Liverpool went so far as to say that Peel's ideas were 'not English'.¹¹³ However, as the European wars came to an end, it was vital that a new policing organisation was established to deal with the 'horrors of peace', the demobilisation of the military and the projected fall in demand for Irish produce.

Before the end of the European conflict could impact on Ireland, the return of Napoleon Bonaparte to France in March 1815 and the subsequent 'Hundred Days' created an heightened security risk for the country and Browne's initial support for Peel's reform bill was quickly replaced by his reversion to the tried and tested methods of local policing – a well armed gentry leading the loyal and crushing the disaffected. Adding to the anxiety of Browne was the fact that he had just left Mayo and was en route to London when news of Napoleon's landing at Cannes reached him. As he had suspected, there was

¹¹⁰ Palmer, *Police and protest*, p. 198.

¹¹¹ Gash, *Mr. Secretary Peel*, p. 181.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹¹³ Galen Broeker, *Rural disorder and police reform in Ireland, 1812-36* (London, 1970), p. 60.

a resurgence of 'rebellious' activity in Mayo as soon as the news of Bonaparte's coup had reached the west coast of Ireland. An immediate increase in arms raids, oath swearing and nocturnal mobilisation in Mayo, Sligo and Longford, pointed to a residue of radicalism and political awareness within the secret societies and mirrored the revolutionary preparations in advance of French assistance that had happened during the years 1796-1803. One of the first people to recognise this resurgence was the Protestant clergyman, Jason Moffet, from Ballymahon, county Longford. Moffet wrote to government in March 1815, and offered an explanation for the increase in activity. He alleged that 'since the news of Bonaparte's arrival in France was made known here, the activity of the Threshers has increased very much'. Arms raids were on the increase and a priest who had taken in surrendered arms earlier that month had the stockpile taken from him again before he could transfer them to the local magistrate. He asserted that Napoleon's success had such an impact on the Threshers 'that they at once violated the solemn promises of loyalty they had made before'.¹¹⁴

However basic the political message might have been, the revival of Thresher activity during the 'Hundred Days' challenged the contemporary (and Browne's) earlier assertion that secret societies in Mayo were primitive agrarian protest movements, which were solely concerned with local issues.¹¹⁵ Regardless of the character of this renewed activity, it was clear from several gentry figures that it was a serious outbreak, and that Denis Browne was needed back in the county. Robert Ruttledge, a Mayo landowner, wrote to Under-Secretary, William Gregory, lamenting the fact that 'refractory tenants refused to either pay rent or give up the land'. Contradicting the increasing wariness in Dublin towards Browne's warnings, Ruttledge cited him as remaining the foremost man of influence in the county: 'the absence of Denis Browne from this county and an idea that it would be imprudent to let this matter lie over any longer obliged me to intrude on you, for if he [Browne] had been at home, he would have given you this information himself'.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Revd. Jason Moffet to Robert Peel, 31 Mar. 1815 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 1718/15).

¹¹⁵ For Ribbonism as a purely local, sectarian and agrarian phenomenon, see Joe Lee, 'The Ribbonmen' in T. D. Williams (ed.), *Secret societies in Ireland* (Dublin, 1973), pp 26-8.

¹¹⁶ Robert Ruttledge to William Gregory, 28 May 1815 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 1713/16).

The news of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in June 1815 did not filter through to Mayo for several weeks, and even then, when reports of the battle spread to the peasantry of Mayo, the activities of the Threshers or 'Carders' continued. This was either from a hope that it was merely a setback for the French general, or perhaps an attempt to exploit the withdrawal of many militia units to barracks after the immediate threat had subsided. Reverend Moffet wrote once more to Peel, asking for immediate assistance from any available military force:

The activity and wickedness of the Carders and Threshers appear to have increased in all directions since the Armagh regiment [left]...They still continue to take arms and many people seriously apprehend an immediate rising. I am not inclined to think that they will attempt anything in that way for the present, particularly if Bonaparte should be cut off with all his marshals and adherents. That would be a most happy event for this country.¹¹⁷

Thomas D'Arcy, a member of the Longford gentry, also noted that the Threshers in that county seemed indifferent to the news from Europe, 'the accounts from the continent do not appear to have any effect in stopping those disgraceful proceedings but on the contrary, it would seem that the disaffected, who are very numerous in this county still have hopes that Bonaparte will be able to afford them assistance'.¹¹⁸ This overly optimistic hope of French help was eventually replaced by a realisation that any foreign assistance 'to return to a previous, more just order' was just a chimera.

Possibly because he was aware that the destruction of Bonaparte's armies signalled the end of any external threat to the Irish establishment, Browne chose to become more vocal about the grievances of the lower orders, which, he believed, were the cause of all internal sedition and outrage. The end of the Napoleonic wars also caused a slump in the local economy, which contributed to and periods dire poverty and of near famine in parts of Mayo.¹¹⁹ Any radical or revolutionary aspirations that lingered within Mayo's secret societies were eventually abandoned. The 'French' prophesies, which promised the

¹¹⁷ Revd. Jason Moffet to Robert Peel, 5 July 1815 (ibid., 1718/27).

¹¹⁸ Thomas D'Arcy to Robert Peel, 2 July 1815 (ibid., 1718/26).

¹¹⁹ Jordan, *Land and popular politics*, pp 90-91.

arrival of an army of liberation, were eventually replaced by a stronger sectarian and millenarian message that focused on economic issues such as rents, the price of provisions and the export of grain out of the country. The post-war downturn in the economy was also exacerbated by a wet summer and a particularly bad potato harvest. By November 1816, Browne was fearful of a harsh winter ahead, not only for the peasantry, but also for larger farmers and the gentry. As he posted an update to Peel, the incoming post mail coach from Dublin was attacked and robbed between Castlebar and Ballina by ‘armed banditti’.

The gang then proceeded to Foxford, where they plundered the house of a Protestant minister. These two events coupled with the deteriorating economy, were enough for the magistrates of Mayo to convene a special meeting to plan for the coming winter. Denis Browne, Charles O’Malley and the High Sheriff, William Mulloy, met in Castlebar and drafted a petition to Viscount Whitworth, the Lord Lieutenant, concerning the need to pre-empt any illegal activity brought on by the harsh economic conditions. The consensus among the magistrates was that an official show of strength was needed from government if order was to be maintained. Displaying a certain lack of proportionality, the magistrates urged Peel and the Lord Lieutenant to send a pre-emptive Special Commission to the county with similar powers to the reactive Commission of 1806. Browne wrote on the cover letter to Peel:

I have the honour of enclosing to you a petition of the High Sheriff and magistrates of Mayo to his Excellency, the Lord Lieutenant. The altered state of the county required our meeting here this day. I most fully agree with the opinion that the measure they recommend of – a special commission being speedily sent down here, is called for to prevent mischief in this province. Generally it is better to prevent than to cure. This principle applies to the state of this county. The cure would be most expensive and troublesome.¹²⁰

The next day, Browne wrote a second letter to Peel in order to underline the importance of a special commission and to inform him that a ‘seditious newspaper’ was to blame for inflaming the passions of the hard-pressed peasantry. Browne alleged that the *Dublin*

¹²⁰ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 11 Nov. 1816 (B.L., Peel Papers, Add. MS. 40,217 [unnumbered]). For magistrates’ petition see N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 1767/32.

Chronicle, a pro-emancipation paper, was being used to stir up local trouble, and that its editor, Eneas McDonnell, had sent ‘emissaries’ down to Mayo in order to distribute the paper and sow disaffection. Browne’s suspicions were heightened by the fact that McDonnell and Archbishop Kelly of Tuam were personal friends.¹²¹

The *Dublin Chronicle*, which reflected an increasingly assertive Catholic middle-class, was deemed by many loyalist as an engine of sedition. Articles published by the paper in 1816 included a reproduction of Henry Grattan’s famous speech condemning tithes in 1788, an editorial condemning the proposed veto on Catholic episcopal appointments and an account of the Prince Regent’s lavish lifestyle. The paper also condemned the Landlord and Tenant Act of 1816, which gave landlords the power to evict tenants without compensation (during slump periods) even if they had hitherto improved the productivity of the holding before the downturn. This was central to the established order in Mayo, and the paper greatly angered Browne when it declared that the act was ‘calculated to obtain for the aristocracy of this country, an influence which may be exercised most prejudicially to the public good’. It went on to describe the act as being, ‘calculated to produce more mischief than any act of the legislature, which has passed within our memory’.¹²²

While the paper reflected the temper of a large section of Catholic opinion, Browne alleged that the disaffection aroused by the *Dublin Chronicle* was central to the need of having a special commission dispatched to Castlebar. He explained to Peel that although the recent robberies were not politically motivated, it would not be long before the Dublin paper succeeded in generating popular outrage:

McDonnell, the editor of that vile paper, *The Dublin Chronicle*, has sent men and women about this country distributing seditious publications ... I found them in Clare[morris], took them from a woman who was hawking them about and tore them but I did not think it advisable to commit her. However, she went to

¹²¹See ‘Two letters from Eneas McDonnell to Archbishop Kelly’ in *Archivium Hibernicum*, xxxi (1973), p. 95.

¹²²*The Dublin Chronicle*, 7 Aug. 1816.

Westport and my friend, [George] Clendenning took her up and committed her on good grounds, fraud on stamp duty, which did not occur to me.¹²³

Compared to the radical literature of the 1790s, the *Dublin Chronicle* was not particularly inflammatory and in many ways it echoed some of Browne's more liberal speeches in parliament. However, he had seen the effect that populist bourgeois publications had previously had on the lower orders and the Catholic 'underground gentry', prior to the French invasion. In his eyes, the *Chronicle* was as mischievous as the *Northern Star* or *Press*, which had made their way down to Mayo in the past, by means of the same 'hawkers' and 'stirrers'.

Browne accused its editor of re-starting sectarian animosity in the way his paper addressed the Catholic question. As he put it, 'I have reason to know that this McDonnell is playing otherwise on this cursed question and feeling of religious distinction. It is to hit this excitement that I advise the sending down [of a] commission to try robbers and murderers'. In an ominous postscript to the letter, Browne underlined the already decided outcome of any commission – 'You will get convictions here'.¹²⁴ Even if Browne was aware of local grievances, he was determined that reform should come from the bounty of government rather than be the result of popular agitation. With the onset of post-war depression in the autumn of 1813, the prospects of such a popular outburst intensified. Nearly all sectors of Irish agriculture were hit by the collapse of demand and prices. Between 1812 and 1816, the average prices of wheat, oats and barley at a Dublin market slumped by 39, 51 and 53 per cent respectively.¹²⁵ Beef and pork production also collapsed and prices halved between 1813 and 1816. Another important factor that exacerbated these economic conditions was an expanding population, which squeezed resources even tighter.¹²⁶ The fall in demand for textiles also had grave implications for Mayo and between 1816 and 1824; there were scenes of devastation on many Mayo estates. This misery coincided with a fresh attempt to organise the county into a broader

¹²³ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 12 Nov. 1816 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 1767/33).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ James S. Donnelly, 'The social composition of agrarian rebels in early nineteenth-century Ireland: the case of the Carders and Caravats, 1813-16' in Patrick Corish (ed.), *Radicals, rebels and establishments* (Belfast, 1985), p. 157.

¹²⁶ Beames, *Peasants and Power*, p. 120.

Ribbon conspiracy that was concentrated in Galway and Roscommon. In this context, Browne believed a display of terror was needed as a counterweight to any populist propaganda emanating from these 'infected' counties. Even if the victims were not themselves Threshers or Ribbonmen, Denis maintained a philosophy that the 'lower people will not distinguish and they will fear to stir for any purpose when they see speedy punishment follow these offenders'.¹²⁷ It was clear that while Browne was delivering liberal speeches in parliament, concerning the causes of disaffection in Ireland, his willingness to deter the disaffected 'by example' remained exactly the same as it had been over twenty years before.

¹²⁷ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 12 Nov. 1816 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 1767/33).

Chapter Four

'The influence of my family has preserved this county': Defeating the Ribbon threat in pre-emancipation Mayo, 1816-1828.

Gradually, the localised remnants of the Thresher movement either petered out or became absorbed by the more organised structures of Ribbonism, which were concentrated on the borders of Mayo in Roscommon and Galway. Although a veteran in counter-insurgency, Denis Browne complained bitterly during this period of a perceived indifference from government, particularly when arms and reinforcements were needed by local magistrates. Various governments in the past had prevaricated or rejected his warnings, but during the Ribbon threat of 1819-20 efforts were made to curb a local style of policing; that of the armed loyal subject under the command of the magistrate or landlord, with that of police constables dispatched from outside the county. Browne's bitterness at these reforms was often heightened by the increasing need to invoke the name of his young nephew, Howe Peter, the second marquess of Sligo, in order to secure sufficient supplies to defend the various crossings into Mayo from Roscommon and Galway. Moreover, the natural soldiering abilities of the once wayward and undependable Howe Peter and his ability to co-ordinate various military formations in southern Mayo at this time heightened the reputed jealousy that Denis Browne had felt towards his nephew since his succession in 1809.¹

The continued deterioration of the Mayo economy after the Napoleonic Wars created many grievances that were ripe for exploitation.² However, the raids by hundreds of armed Ribbonmen into Mayo in 1819 and 1820 failed to spark a widescale disturbance in the county, though it was quite clear that the government's newly created constabulary had done little to neutralise this potential threat. The mobilisation, by the Brownes of the

¹ Browne, *Westport House*, p. 32.

² Jordan, *Land and popular politics*, pp 90-91.

local magistrates, landlords and loyal tenantry, was a crucial reason for the failure of the Ribbonmen to raise Mayo. Crucially, however, this mobilisation was coupled with the collective memory of revolutionary failure and its consequences, which was still a very potent factor in the entire county. Indeed, the very presence of Denis Browne, and the fact that he still enjoyed considerable influence and power twenty years after the 1798 rebellion, was enough to deter all but the most committed from making the same mistakes again.

(i.) *'If strong measures are not soon taken, history will have to record the Rebellion of 1820.'* *The Ribbon threat in Mayo, 1816-28.*

Predictably, the special commission that had been demanded by the Mayo magistrates in 1816 failed to materialise. Furthermore, the magistrates lamented the fact that no action was taken by government against the *Dublin Chronicle*. Browne noted impatiently, that 'mischief had gone far in Mayo' principally because the newspaper, which was 'indefatigable in sedition', was still in circulation and that its editor had 'lately been in this county'.³ Indeed, the security situation of the county had become worse as the remnants of the Threshers and Carders had rallied under the broader banner of Ribbonism, and this generic association soon asserted itself as the focal point for popular protest in Mayo. While Browne was uneasy about this organisation, he was still unclear about its intentions, claiming 'I know not the principle of this class of disturbers under [the] name of Ribbonmen, but their followers here are the worst of our community'.⁴ More worrying, was the report that the Ribbonmen had infiltrated some of the local military regiments, again a tactic reminiscent of United Irish activity several years previously. When Browne discovered information concerning a plot involving the Ribbonmen and disaffected elements of the military, he was alarmed to hear that his own assassination would be the signal for a future rebellion:

³ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 14 Dec. 1816 (B.L., Peel Papers, Add. MS. 40,217 [unnumbered]).

⁴ *Ibid.*

A soldier of [the] 12th Regiment of Infantry quartered here was a principle in this [Ribbon] association. It is necessary to tell you that this is a very bad regiment and should be sent out of the country or called under the immediate view of government. I am told this moment that a part of this plan was to give up the arms of the detachment here [Claremorris] by this villain soldier of the 12th on what is called '12th Day' and to begin a rising in the county by the murder of your humble servant, but I have no sworn information. You shall have information, of course, on all future moves in this business, and may depend on me being watchful.⁵

Peel wrote back to Browne, not to reassure him of his safety, but to appraise him of what he perceived to be the core principles of Ribbonism. Indeed, from Peel's description, it seemed that government intelligence was rather dated, as he simplistically concluded that, 'the ribbon societies originated in the north of Ireland' and that 'their principle objects there is hostility towards and protection from Orangemen'.⁶ Moreover, Peel's report betrayed the limitation of government intelligence regarding the society, which, by 1816, had penetrated large areas of Leinster and Ulster and was looking to spread membership westward.⁷ Ribbon societies were active throughout much of the early nineteenth century in Ireland and in the Irish migrant centres in Britain. Similar to the Threshers, the Ribbonmen had their roots in the Defenders of the 1790s and was confined to the northern half of Ireland and had little or no contact with the agrarian combinations that were ubiquitous in the south of the country (Rockites, Caravats etc).⁸ The structures of the Ribbonmen were strictly hierarchical and stretched from the level of an ordinary lodge member to that of a county delegate, which was the most powerful position within the society.⁹

Denis Browne was not impressed with Peel's intelligence regarding the organisation and he replied to him with a more accurate assessment of the reasons why Ribbon societies

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Robert Peel to Denis Browne, 17 Dec. 1816 (ibid., MS. 40,217 [unnumbered]).

⁷ Kelly, *The downfall of Hagan*, p. 11.

⁸ Jennifer Kelly, 'An outward looking community?: Ribbonism and popular mobilisation in County Leitrim, 1836-1846' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, 2005), p. 2.

⁹ For the Ribbon threat in Roscommon see Michael Huggins, *Social conflict in pre-Famine Ireland: the case of County Roscommon* (Dublin, 2007). For the national organisation of the Ribbonmen, see Tom Garvin, 'Defenders, Ribbonmen and others' and Beames, 'The Ribbon Societies', pp 219-64.

were growing more popular within the county. Displaying a sarcastic tone, Browne wrote:

Much as I thought I was acquainted with the different shapes that associations of insurrection and rebellion take in Ireland, I knew not 'till I had the honour of you information what was the principle of Ribbonmen. We have no Orangemen in Mayo. Hunger is the thing that makes people seriously angry. All the oats of this country (and the crop is not bad) will go to England. The potato crop will afford food 'till May or perhaps June. We have no wheat [and] very little barley.¹⁰

The deteriorating local economy combined with the outward shipment of provisions to the British market led to instances of near famine in parts of Mayo during 1817. While the potato crop was exempt from tithes, the burden of supporting the local Protestant clergy fell on the sale of grain and flax, which had hitherto been used as cash crops to pay the yearly rent.¹¹ Increased resentment soon led to increased levels of violence and outrage. Indeed, Mayo was disturbed or at the very least it was 'not tranquil', as Neal O'Donel had reported from Newport that February.¹² There were food riots in Ballina, when up to five hundred people tried to stop several cartloads of meal being sent to a marketplace in Sligo. A detachment of the 68th Regiment of Foot opened fire on the rioters and killed several of them. The stores in Ballina were then reinforced with sixteen mounted dragoon guards. The Lieutenant Colonel of the North Mayo Militia and former Mayo MP, George Jackson, wrote to Denis Browne to inform him that he cornered and received the surrender of 'Captain Gallagher', a local Ribbon leader, who had orchestrated the riot in Ballina. Under the 'terms' of surrender, Jackson agreed that Gallagher could be transported and not face execution. Browne forwarded the note to Peel, noting that he 'agreed with Col. Jackson's opinion', but that the sentence needed to be carried out immediately.¹³ The characteristics of the Mayo and Roscommon Ribbonmen seemed to be contradictory on many occasions. When Matthew Higgins, a servant from Mayo, was sworn into the conspiracy, the aims and ideals mirrored those of the earlier Thresher and Whiteboy organisations. He described that several Ribbonmen

¹⁰ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 20 Dec. 1816 (B.L., Peel Papers, Add. MS. 40,217[unnumbered]).

¹¹ Jordan, *Land and popular politics*, p. 93.

¹² Neal O'Donel to William Gregory, 5 Feb. 1817 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 1833/6).

¹³ Lt. Col. George Jackson to Denis Browne, 3 Sept. 1817 (*ibid.*, 1833/25).

(and one woman) surrounded him while he swore the oath. After swearing, Higgins was told of the aims and objectives of the society – ‘to lower prices of all kinds, to cut off all payments to the Protestant clergy and to lessen the payments to the Roman Catholic priests’ - objectives that had changed little from the earlier secret societies.¹⁴ While this report suggested the limited ambitions of the Mayo and Roscommon societies, another oath found on a suspect committed to Roscommon jail pointed to a mixture of proto-nationalism, sectarianism and limited politicisation. It promised, ‘to help the French or anyone else endeavouring to liberate the downtrodden, to be ready to collect money or arms to further the cause, only admit Catholics and worthy Protestants to membership and to wade knee-deep in the blood of [Orange] Protestants’, even though there were no Orange lodges in Mayo.¹⁵

An outbreak of typhus added to the increasingly disturbed state of the county. To make sure that the virus did not interfere with local justice, Browne urged Peel to immediately transport eighteen prisoners, who awaiting transportation in Castlebar. This request was marked ‘completed’ by Peel several days later.¹⁶ However, the worsening economic and social climate made popular outbursts of anger and disaffection both inevitable and understandable. The many appeals made by Denis Browne to the local peasantry that they should put trust in the clergy and their ‘natural leaders’ to bring about an end to injustice, began to be viewed with increased cynicism. Indeed, Catholic Emancipation was as far away as ever and the power of the Ribbonmen to address, and indeed avenge social injustice began to look more effective. The incursions made into county Mayo by neighbouring Ribbonmen during the winter of 1819-20 were part of a serious attempt to broaden the provincial network of the secret society and imbibe it with an added sense of urgency and expectation. This attempt to include Mayo in a broader conspiracy could be relegated to that of a tawdry and disjointed affair, i.e. a set of raids from Galway and Roscommon that had little or no effect on the security of the largest county in Connacht. However, if one examines the sheer volume and hysterical nature of the correspondence from the Mayo ruling elite to government, the reality of the threat is apparent. Indeed, the

¹⁴ *Affidavit of Matthew Higgins*, sworn before Denis Browne, 8 Dec. 1819 (ibid., 2073/8).

¹⁵ Huggins, *Social conflict*, pp 77-8.

¹⁶ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 8 Nov. 1817 (B.L., Peel Papers, Add. MS. 40,217 [unnumbered]).

dire warnings of imminent destruction made by the Brownes during the winter of 1819-20 are only matched by the panic and paranoia displayed by them after Bantry Bay and the 1798 rebellion. The whole affair caused Denis Browne to contract a serious illness, a mixture of pneumonia and nervous exhaustion.

However, the Ribbon threat also gave the second marquess of Sligo, Howe Peter Browne, an opportunity to make amends for his previous indiscretions and replace his uncle as the foremost figure of influence in the long struggle to pacify the county. The threat emanating from Galway and Roscommon also meant that Denis Browne's house in Claremorris was an effective headquarters for most of the counter-insurgency measures adopted during the winter. The familiar problems of government intransigence and perceived indifference to the gentlemen of Mayo were again evident, as both Brownes pleaded for an increase in military personnel and material. However, Ribbonism also posed a new problem for the ruling elite of Mayo; whether to support the newly established Royal Irish Constabulary in this fight against sedition, or maintain the trusted formula of local magistrates directing troops and armed loyalists. The determination of Denis Browne to 'root out rebellion' by using his 'proven' methods led to scepticism on his part about the usefulness of the 'Peelers' and of the need to adopt a local solution to this local problem.

Denis Browne wrote to Charles Grant in early December 1819 and informed him of the disturbed state of neighbouring Roscommon. He also used the opportunity to acquaint himself with a new Chief Secretary and to impress on him his loyalty with local standing.¹⁷ Browne informed Grant that the Ribbonmen were mobilising in Ballinlough, a town on the borders of Mayo and that 'their great object [is] to introduce the rebellion into Mayo'. The description of Ribbon activities as 'rebellion' was a common trait of Browne's, but this dramatic description was helped by a report from Castlerea, in Roscommon, that up to 300 Ribbonmen had recently moved through the town in the direction of Mayo. In case Charles Grant was not aware of the efforts that had been made

¹⁷ Charles Grant, Baron Glenig (1778-1866). Grant's succession to Peel was unique as he was the first Tory supporter of Catholic emancipation to hold the office.

by the Brownes over the years, Denis left the Chief Secretary in no doubt as to his future plans to deal with any sedition. It was a declaration to meet fire with fire, combined with a promise that the government would not be liable for actions in the field:

We know that [having] observed the world for the last twenty years, that power, force and energy will carry all before it, whether on the part of loyalty or against it. I am ready, if necessary, to give up my life to do this. I want very little assistance from government. You shall not even be responsible for any act of mine.¹⁸

Browne had already blamed the laziness and lethargy of the Roscommon gentry and magistrates for the immediate danger but he also pointed to the politicisation of the country by Daniel O'Connell and his constitutional movement, ('people who wanted to 'shackle us with our own laws and constitution'), as the real reason for the newest disturbances. Displaying a private intolerance that he contradicted in public many times, Browne described the sinister implications of O'Connellism – 'Whatever words or jargon they use, we know their meaning, to rob us, and when they go to war with us for this purpose, we will do more than go to war with them without troubling or involving the government'.¹⁹

Characteristically, Browne did not wait for Dublin to act and set about dispatching military forces to strategic locations. On the 8 December 1819, he positioned thirty-nine soldiers in a large slated house just outside Claremorris and prepared to lead fifty yeomen into Ballyhaunis the next day. He urged Grant to send him £70 to pay the men's wages until the grand jury could reimburse government and stated that 'a month, will I hope do the business'. Additionally, Browne wanted twenty cavalymen and twenty additional muskets to defend Ballyhaunis. Displaying an urgency that would characterise his letters to government over several months, he urged that there should be 'no delay in furnishing my requisites', adding that he did not want to be referred to 'this officer or that officer'. He concluded bluntly, 'send me what I want and have herein asked for and send them by evening passage boat to Shannon harbour with an artillery man in charge with orders to

¹⁸ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 8 Dec. 1819 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2073/8).

¹⁹ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 21 Oct. 1819 (ibid., 2073/7).

come here without delay.²⁰ The importunate tone of the letter did not produce an immediate response from government and led to a cold relationship between the correspondents that lasted into the New Year. Denis Browne later pointed to this period (early December 1819) as a lost opportunity in delivering a decisive blow against the conspirators, a strategic opportunity, he believed, that the government had shamefully ignored.

The traits of Ribbonism that worried Denis Browne most were those which echoed the earlier violence and leadership of the (United Irish led) Defenders during 1798. The numbers of Ribbon 'divisions' greatly worried him, with reports of anything from 300 to 1000 men on horseback swearing in large districts of the counties. Reports of pike production and the felling of 500 trees to provide handles for the weapons also revived terrible memories of '98. However, Browne believed there was a critical difference between this threat and that which had engulfed the county twenty years earlier. Although he was convinced that O'Connell and the liberal Dublin press had engaged in rabble rousing, Browne was relieved when he noted that the social structure of the conspiracy was firmly that of the rural proletariat, noting that in his opinion 'the best of this bad business in Galway and Roscommon is that the middle classes are all against the rebels – It is a war of the peasantry headed by the outcasts of the middle class, drunken, idle men'.²¹ Michael Beames' study of the social character of the Ribbonmen observes that it was, indeed, devoid of any bourgeois leadership and recruited from the 'lower urban trading and carrying classes, with the public house operating as the focal point of their activities'.²²

However much the Ribbonmen differed from, or were similar to, the United Irishmen or the Defenders, Browne's remedy for their destruction was exactly the same. He believed that any deviation would be a base dereliction of duty. Referring to the heavy handedness of the crown forces in the aftermath of the '98 rebellion, Browne essentially urged for more of the same in 1820, adding coldly that 'the excesses of the army in the 1798

²⁰ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 8 Dec. 1819 (ibid., 2073/8).

²¹ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 25 Feb. 1820 (ibid., 2175/39).

²² Beames, 'The Ribbon Societies', p. 248.

rebellion, I do privately assure you, saved this country from the mysterious sort of rebellion that now prevails'.²³ However, the fact that government immediately rejected Browne's request for twenty cavalymen and twenty new stands of arms for the defence of Ballyhaunis did not augur well for a fresh campaign of terror. In Dublin, a government official wrote under the request, 'I think it very desirable that these disquiets should be put down, but whether it would be right to supply arms in the manner suggested in this letter is not a question for counsel'.²⁴ It was not now government policy to unleash heavily armed and zealous magistrates in order to clear large swathes of countryside. If a barony or district was sufficiently disturbed, the Peace Preservation Act, and if necessary, the Insurrection Act could be imposed by the Dublin government and overseen by its appointees. To the chagrin of Browne, it was clear that the authority to act in this crisis was being taken from the hands of local worthies and grandees and placed more firmly in the hands of Dublin based officials.

While deeply irritated by the actions of government, Browne was, nevertheless, pleased with the response from Mayo Catholics, who seemed keen to distance themselves from the current crisis and protect themselves from any punitive measures. The apparent loyalty of the peasantry and lower class artisans surprised Browne himself and he gratefully used this disposition to arm several of his Catholic tenants as a 'reserve' boon against any 'invaders'. On one occasion, he swore in six Catholic men as special constables with the help of a local priest. Browne even had the swearing-in ceremony at the altar of a local Catholic chapel:

I came here [Castlebar] this evening having completed the defence of Mayo bordering on Roscommon. The defence principally is a degree of loyalty that God knows; I did not look to from any population of any county in Ireland. You may depend on it, I have ascertained [that] this county is bona fide loyal. Yesterday, at a place called Drymills, on the borders of Roscommon, I met by appointment, at least 1000 able bodied men with their priest. I swore in six men they recommended [as] special constables. This I did at the altar of their chapel. I gave the men arms and ammunition...and left them sincere and good friends. My

²³ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 18 Jan. 1820 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2175/1).

²⁴ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 9 Dec. 1819 (*ibid.*, 2073/9). Postscript written on Browne's request by J. Townsend, 14 Dec. 1819.

Clare[morris] people offered to form a body of cavalry at their own expense. All are against the rebels and rebellion.²⁵

Although this report was probably exaggerated, it reflected the paternalism that persisted in Browne during the final years of his life. Indeed, this instance of Catholic loyalty managed to make national headlines and Browne's recruitment of Catholic constables 'at the altar' was reported in Dublin and London.²⁶ Priests in Athenry, county Galway, also added their names to resolutions drawn up by the local magistrates calling for a detachment of soldiers to be sent to the area. While the parish priest in Kilmoremoy, county Mayo, arranged an assembly in the local chapel where he encouraged his parishioners to take the oath of allegiance on the understanding that, although many had taken the Ribbon oath earlier, it would not be held against them.²⁷ All these instances reflected a heightened concern within the ranks of the Catholic clergy that any renewed campaign of popular protest, could delay further constitutional reform indefinitely. At this time, Henry Grattan was in the process of submitting a Catholic relief bill into parliament and the news reports from the west did not increase the likelihood of a successful campaign in Westminster. The Catholic hierarchy appeared to ignore the security bulletins in the hope that the storm would blow itself out. At a meeting of Catholic leaders of Ireland on the 25 February 1820, for instance, Archbishop Troy did not mention the outrages in the west, but read out an address on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland to 'sadly mourn' the death of King George III, who had died earlier that month.²⁸

The display of loyalty in Drymills appeared to justify Browne's long held view, that if it was not for outside agitators and democrats, then the Mayo peasant would be content and tranquil, happy for their 'superiors' to pursue an end to their grievances. However, this outlook was soon overtaken by violent and intemperate outbursts as the crisis deepened during the winter and as he became increasingly frustrated by centralised governance and the limitations of the Irish peasant's loyalty. Indeed, Browne believed that the rigidity of the government deeply affected the character of the 'loyal' Mayo peasant, and warned the

²⁵ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 13 Dec. 1819 (ibid., 2073/11).

²⁶ *Dublin Evening Post*, 18 Dec. 1819; *The Times*, 22 Dec. 1819.

²⁷ S. J. Connolly, *Priests and people in pre-famine Ireland, 1780-1845* (Dublin, 1982), p. 234.

²⁸ *Dublin Evening Post*, 28 Feb. 1820.

military commander in Athlone, Major General Terence O’Loughlin, that ‘our people are well disposed against those Ribbonmen. If they are encouraged, they will continue so. If not, they will ultimately join them’.²⁹ However, at this stage the exertions of Browne and the Catholic clergy were proving successful in deterring any sympathetic outbreak, as the inspector of Castlebar jail cautiously informed government:

The Right Hon. Denis Browne has used every effort to keep the population of the county in allegiance and I feel myself called upon to say that the Catholic clergy are using every effort, and great is their influence, to make their flocks amenable to the law and true to their allegiance – but I am of the opinion that the people of this county will be the last to rebel. Every peasant feels himself oppressed because he abhors taxes and feels his rent oppressive – but be assured, every peasant would prefer the liberality of his landlord to the profuseness of a stranger.³⁰

By January 1820, however, the situation deteriorated when up to 400 Ribbonmen took control of Ballyhaunis (on the Roscommon border) for several hours and allegedly swore all of the men in the town to the secret oath. James Strickland, a magistrate from the area, held out for clemency, as he ‘could not imagine that the whole of the town is to be accused of willingly taking the oath’. Citing examples of occasions in Roscommon when intimidation had been so severe that ‘gentlemen and even magistrates had obeyed the summons of these miscreants’, Strickland asked the townspeople to declare to him the sort of oath they had taken.³¹ As it happened, Strickland’s optimistic belief that the town had been sworn against its will was misplaced. When the townsmen told him that they had sworn the oath but refused to give him any other information, Strickland immediately wrote to Denis Browne in order to brief him about this ‘assault’ on Ballyhaunis. He described several recent outrages to Browne, which included Ribbonmen ‘patrolling the country, breaking open houses, seizing arms, levying contributions and committing horrible outrages with perfect impunity’.³² However, what worried him most was the seemingly impenetrable code of silence amongst the ‘lower orders’ when they were

²⁹ Denis Browne to Major General O’Loughlin, 11 Dec. 1819 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2073/13).

³⁰ Revd. Henry Paisley to Alexander Mangen, 16 Dec. 1819 (ibid., 2073/15).

³¹ J. C. Strickland to Denis Browne, 16 Jan. 1820 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2175/1).

³² Ibid.

pressed for hard information. The lower orders, Strickland believed, had been ‘bound to each other by an oath which they observe inviolably’. The men of Ballyhaunis admitted being sworn under duress but on no account would they ‘inform against those that swore them’.³³

To Browne, the similarities to 1798 were alarming. During the roundups that followed the rebellion, the Mayo peasantry often remained silent when they were confronted about fugitive rebels. At the time, Browne was incredulous that the people ‘could not be convinced that assisting the French was a crime’.³⁴ Strickland was incensed that the townspeople ‘found more terror in the name of Ribbonman than that of the law’ and he urged Browne to petition government to re-introduce the ‘Insurrection Act’ in order ‘to save the country from open rebellion’. He also attacked the inactivity of the Connacht gentry, while pointing out Browne as the obvious exception. He felt ‘indignant at the supine-ness and inactivity of the gentlemen of the country’, and was at a loss to explain ‘their motives’. Denis Browne, on the other hand, had been vigorously attending to duty ‘as [he had] done through life to preserve the peace and promote the welfare of the country’. Indeed, Strickland was amazed at the activism of elderly Browne and stated that there was no other gentleman figure in Mayo and Roscommon that could ‘second his exertions’.³⁵ Strickland concluded the letter to Browne with a correct perception that Ribbon associations were ‘spread very generally over Ireland’ and were attempting to tie Connacht into the wider conspiracy that existed in Ulster and Leinster.³⁶ However, he also predicted an exaggerated outcome if the Ribbonmen were not defeated – ‘If strong measures are not soon taken, history will have to record the Rebellion of 1820’.³⁷

Denis Browne wholeheartedly agreed with Strickland’s analysis and recommended that government initiate a similar campaign to that of Lord Carhampton’s during the mid 1790s. Although Carhampton had insisted on more decisiveness on the part of the local magistracy, Browne felt that his punishments had not been severe enough. He cited

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Denis Browne to Viscount Castlereagh, 27 Mar. 1799 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers, 620/7/73).

³⁵ J. C. Strickland to Denis Browne, 16 Jan. 1820 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2175/1).

³⁶ Garvin, ‘Defenders, Ribbonmen and others’, pp 219-45.

³⁷ J. C. Strickland to Denis Browne, 16 Jan. 1820 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2175/1).

Carhampton as being an ‘authority not much respected by me’, a view that totally contradicted his stance in 1795, when he congratulated the general on his repressive campaign against the Defenders.³⁸ However, he quoted Carhampton when he wrote to Charles Grant and warned him that ‘if you go to law with them and they go to war with you, the consequences are obvious’.³⁹ Denis was calling for a radical response, even the departure from civil law and the proclamation of the county. The government needed to meet the Ribbonmen with force and that it was not ‘the conferences of the Attorney General and Mr. Gregory that will do now, it is energy and the sword that must do, if anything can’.⁴⁰

Fearing inaction, Browne planned to travel to Dublin to present the case in person to the Lord Lieutenant and Chief Secretary before the end of January. While he was preparing to travel, he passed on what he considered to be ‘his command’ of the county to his young nephew, the marquess of Sligo, who had been recently made a joint governor of Mayo and Colonel of the South Mayo Militia.⁴¹ Browne did not write to tell Howe Peter of his ‘promotion’, but he did recommend him to Grant as being a ‘brave and active young man’.⁴² Indeed, contrary to the popular image of the young nobleman being an idle spendthrift and hopeless gambler, Howe Peter Browne emerged from the Ribbon crisis with an enhanced reputation. Displaying prowess in military tactics and awareness in supply and logistics, the marquess maintained a cooler head under pressure than his uncle. It is quite possible that the young Browne was more attuned to modern government and adapted a less sensational and more systematic approach to the situation. He had spent most of his youth in the company of the regency court and took command of the Ribbon crisis in Mayo just as his friend, George IV, inherited the British throne in February 1820.

³⁸ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 18 Jan. 1820 (ibid., 2175/1).

³⁹ Quotation of Lord Carhampton, cited in Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 18 Jan. 1820 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2175/1).

⁴⁰ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 18 Jan. 1820 (ibid., 2175/1).

⁴¹ Howe Peter Browne shared the joint governance of Mayo in 1820 with Lord Tyrwley, Lord Kilmaine, Dominick Browne and Henry Browne [Denis Browne’s son].

⁴² Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 18 Jan. 1820 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2175/1).

The marquess wasted little time in making a report to government from Westport House, in which he asserted his belief that the South Mayo Militia alone was sufficient to put down any sympathetic Ribbon outbreaks in the county. Similar to Denis's scepticism of any police force, Lord Sligo was keen to be given more arms to equip his sergeants and drummers, a move that would 'save the government the expense of a police establishment'.⁴³ Sligo also dispatched his cousin and fellow governor, Colonel Henry Browne, to Ballyhaunis to deal with the recent mass swearing of its population. He added that the extra arms needed to be sent 'with as little delay as possible', a request that had often been fruitlessly pursued by Denis. However, in the case of Sligo, and which displayed an influence that was now absent with Denis, the arms were promised to him by the government the very next day. He then dispatched a party of twenty men to escort them to Westport. Sligo also took command of large bodies of men from the North Mayo Militia and stationed them 'on the frontiers' of Sligo and Roscommon, while 'his own' South Militia would man the 'southern frontiers' between south Roscommon and northern Galway. He also called for the arms of any inactive Yeomen to be deposited in the principal towns of Mayo in order to stop them 'falling into the hands of the disaffected'.⁴⁴

Like Denis, Howe Peter believed that the main causes of the Ribbon crisis lay outside the boundaries of county Mayo. Writing only days apart, the two men contacted government to inform it of the roots of this 'rebellion', and in doing so, displayed considerable understanding of the injustices felt by the Roscommon and Galway peasantry. Denis Browne and Lord Sligo were forceful in their condemnations of clerical avarice (both Catholic and Protestant) and the appetite for short-term profit that was displayed by many landlords. Sligo was pointed in his criticism of the Roscommon gentry:

The whole thing, as far as I can judge, arises from the vile extortion's of some of the gentry in the county of Roscommon, whose system of letting land in Con-acre at exorbitant rents, drives the people to despair, famine and misery of the highest degree. In addition to this, they feel the tithes as very oppressive to them and are

⁴³ Lord Sligo to Charles Grant, 19 Jan. 1820 (ibid., 2175/4).

⁴⁴ Lord Sligo to Charles Grant, 20 Jan. 1820 (ibid., 2175/7).

collected out of their money after rents and other taxes have been extorted from them, probably in not the most lenient way.⁴⁵

Like his father and uncle, Howe Peter was quite perceptive in identifying the underlying causes of agrarian outrage. He also preferred a 'summary mode of proceeding' against those who took the law into their own hands.⁴⁶

Unable to travel to Dublin due to a heavy snowfall, Denis Browne used this time to write several letters to the Castle, which dismissed both the effectiveness and reliability of 'the Peelers' that had been dispatched to the west. While Lord Sligo approached civil and military matters in a cooler and more methodical way than Denis, he concurred with his uncle on the policing issue and berated the constables for their unreliability and lack of effectiveness. Browne believed firmly in conserving local policing methods and any departure from the tested formula was bound to alienate conservatives like him. Charles Grant had followed the guidelines laid down by Robert Peel and he repeatedly refused requests for troops and the Insurrection Act even when magistrates like Browne promised that 'fifty men at one shilling a day will save you sending down 1,000 men to quell a formidable rebellion'.⁴⁷ Having stated this preference for local justice, Browne went on to ridicule the men sent by the government, saying:

The Peelers have done nothing in Roscommon, not one man have they in custody but will be acquitted for want of evidence. For a fortnight after they came, the people were quiet because they were afraid of the wonders they would do, but they have found them very harmless, good natured people and they play around them like little birds after a hawk.⁴⁸

It was also suggested that the police actually perpetuated lawlessness because it was not in their interest to stop it. In his plea to government to re-introduce the Insurrection Act, Denis Browne admitted his concerns, 'it is not in the interest of the peelers that this evil should discontinue, it continues them a livelihood'.⁴⁹ Lord Sligo shared this criticism. His

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 20 Jan. 1820 (ibid., 2175/8).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

letter to government while Denis was in Dublin perfectly illustrated the resistance of the leading figures in Mayo to welcome an outside police presence:

I am sorry to tell you perfectly in confidence that there appears to be a sort of wilful sluggishness about the Roscommon police which wants to be removed. I trust that my name may not be used but as far as my information goes, there is great and culpable negligence in the affairs of that imported police.⁵⁰

Their appeals to keep opinions secret were probably feigned concern. The Brownes wanted the Castle to know of their displeasure but asking for privacy ensured no outward reaction from government.

Indeed, the government seemed unaware of the deteriorating situation in Galway. Magistrates from four baronies on the border of Roscommon had requested policemen in mid December 1819. However, due to a lack of reserves, it was a full month before Chief Magistrate Pendleton and sixty constables were sent down from Dublin. Before they arrived, a local magistrate, Edward Browne (no relation to the Brownes) was murdered. This time the government was not caught off guard. They dispatched 140 constables along with military units. The military forces in Connacht soon rose from 2,500 in December 1819 to 5,900 by April 1820.⁵¹ The Brownes' uneasy relationship with the official police force gradually worsened as the crisis on the borders of Mayo deteriorated during February. While Denis was tending to business in Dublin, his son, Henry Browne, contacted him and reported an attack on his land near Claremorris. Seventy armed and masked men had crossed into Mayo over a bridge at Ballylough and had sworn several of 'his people' into the conspiracy (Henry Browne reminded his father that he had wished to place a guard on that particular bridge but Denis had refused, claiming that it was covered by Claremorris). Henry described the locals as being 'well inclined, though a cowardly set' and called for a public meeting to be held in the barony to warn the farmers that future passivity would not be tolerated. However, his strongest admonition was for the local gentry in Mayo, who hitherto had escaped censure from the Brownes.

⁵⁰ Lord Sligo to Dublin Castle, 29 Jan. 1820 (ibid., 2175/12).

⁵¹ Palmer, *Police and protest*, p. 219.

While Denis castigated the Roscommon gentlemen, Henry extended his criticism to rival families in Mayo: ‘as to the gentry of this county, I am sorry to say that we [Henry Browne and Lord Sligo] never received the slightest assistance from any one of them’. He added, with a certain arrogance, ‘nor do we want their help, if they let us alone, we are satisfied’.⁵² Another of Denis’s sons, Denis junior, wrote to appraise his father that he had travelled to Roscommon town to meet with local militia units. Denis junior planned to co-ordinate an attack on a suspected arms cache near the border with Mayo. Information had been received that up to three thousand pikes were stored at the location. Lord Sligo also wrote to Browne citing bad reports from Galway. In language similar to that used in 1798 and 1806, Howe Peter recommended serious measures to curb that nascent threat in Galway, suggesting that ‘a few examples made on the spot and at the moment would ... be most beneficial’.⁵³ The reports from Galway were serious enough for Denis to divert to Tuam while returning to Mayo from Dublin. In Tuam prison, he inspected a number of suspects and examined the evidence held against them. Browne was convinced that circumstantial evidence, such as seditious catechisms and prophesies, were worthless when produced at local Assize. He wrote to under-secretary, William Gregory, from Galway urging martial law and an Insurrection Act to follow as quickly as possible. Otherwise, he could expect little else but ‘direct war’.⁵⁴

Browne recommended that possession of a Ribbon catechism should warrant immediate transportation: ‘this done in five cases would frighten the country and save many lives’.⁵⁵ Denis was also perturbed to hear of the failure of his son’s attempt to discover the cache of pikes in Roscommon. Browne blamed the local militia for disclosing the details to local magistrates before the attack was mounted. Believing the magistrates to be gossip mongers or worse, he suspected the plan had been betrayed to the Ribbonmen. He also blamed the ‘inefficiency of Major Willis’s (militia) army’. The 1798 rebellion was never far from Browne’s thoughts as he attempted to patch together a significant force from the various yeomanry corps in order to bolster Lord Sligo’s militia units, which were

⁵² Col. Henry Browne to Denis Browne, 29 Jan. 1820 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2175/16).

⁵³ Lord Sligo to Denis Browne [with enclosed letter from Denis Browne junior], 4 Feb. 1820 (ibid., 2175/18).

⁵⁴ Denis Browne to William Gregory, 5 Feb. 1820 (ibid., 2175/20).

⁵⁵ Denis Browne to William Gregory, 5 Feb. 1820 (ibid., 2175/20).

'stationed all along the frontier of Mayo and Roscommon and of Galway down as far as Shrule'.⁵⁶ Perhaps because Browne was a cavalry man, the pike terrified him much more than musketry and he called for all blacksmiths in Roscommon to be arrested until the emergency had passed,

They have no ammunition of any consequence, and what they have they waste. I am much more afraid of their manufacture of pikes, which I hear of in Roscommon. The smiths should all be taken up in that county.⁵⁷

In Galway there were reports of a new type of pike being manufactured along with home made guns and ammunition. Denis sent his son, Henry, to investigate the rumour and he successfully uncovered an arms cache near Cong. Among the arms recovered was 'a pattern pike of a new construction' which contained a collapsible handle. Denis ordered all forges to be made inoperable within seven miles of the Mayo/Galway border and recommended that the garrison nearby village of Shrule be reinforced. Again, the request was rejected by the government for being impracticable.⁵⁸ Browne's request for Commissions of the Peace to be sent to his cousin, Henry Browne, and his nephew, James Cuffe Blake, was also met with silence and delay, leading the exasperated Browne to plead with William Gregory to 'encourage us as you would a dog in your service, with a little coaxing and flattery and we will do the state some service'.⁵⁹ This approach seemed to appeal to certain government figures as four days later fifty regular soldiers were released from Athlone and went under the local command of Lord Sligo, Denis Browne and Major Willis. Browne's tone immediately changed and he wrote to Grant to thank him for the reinforcements,

Your letter, which came to me this morning, has restored to me confidence and courage. I hope, with the means you have put into my hands, to affect your wish of keeping the infection of Galway and Roscommon from us. You may rely on what all my local knowledge, influence and experience can do, contradicted only by an unwieldy body and advanced time of life. A long time before you thought of coming to Ireland, I began to respect your talents and character. The fifty

⁵⁶ Lord Sligo to Charles Grant, 4 Feb. 1820 (*ibid.*, 2175/18).

⁵⁷ Denis Browne to William Gregory, 6 Feb. 1820 (*ibid.*, 2175/21).

⁵⁸ Denis Browne to Major General O'Loughlin [government refusal written afterwards on envelope], 12 Feb. 1820 (*ibid.*, 2175/27).

⁵⁹ Denis Browne to William Gregory, 6 Feb. 1820 (*ibid.*, 2175/21).

soldiers you have given me shall be kept together for offensive operations on Galway and Roscommon. Whenever any part of those counties is pointed out to me by the magistrates, there I will be with my force when they least expect me.⁶⁰

Although pleased by the government's actions, Browne was soon venting his frustration at the 'imported police force' that had come from Dublin. According to Browne, not only were the police lazy and incompetent, they had also lied about an engagement with Ribbonmen near Castlereagh at his expense. Browne mockingly told the government to expect a cover up from the peelers, 'you will have heard of a battle between the peelers and the Ribbonmen, not a word of truth is in it. I rather fear it will turn out a very atrocious act. Those peelers I am told shot a poor wretch without cause'.⁶¹ Another criticism was the close relationship enjoyed with certain members of the gentry and the police, 'the peelers are all used as guards for gentlemen's houses, sixty at one house, thirty at another and so on. The pay they have without work is better than the same pay with work'. Browne dismissed the positive reports from county Tipperary, where police constables had had more success in rounding up disturbers. He presumed that these successes had only been possible because the Tipperary magistrates had been given permission to use the Insurrection Act in conjunction with the police.⁶² In county Mayo, he asserted, 'they do not stir, nor will they stir, without a military guard'.⁶³

Adding to Browne's frustration was the relatively tight structure of the Ribbon societies. A key feature in all of Browne's counter-insurgency measures over the previous decades was the use of informers and spies within the radical and dissenting organisations. During this emergency, however, reliable evidence was harder to come by and the placing of loyal subjects to report from within Ribbon circles was even more difficult. Denis bemoaned the fact that the Galway and Roscommon Ribbonmen never trusted outsiders or strangers who wanted to join or swear allegiance to the cause, 'It is a strange feature of this insurrection that they will not administer oaths to strangers. Several I sent among

⁶⁰ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 10 Feb. 1820 (ibid., 2175/23).

⁶¹ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 17 Feb. 1820 (ibid., 2175/29).

⁶² For Tipperary disturbances, see George Cornwall Lewis, *On local disturbances in Ireland* (London, 1836); also Beames, *Peasants and power*.

⁶³ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 17 Feb. 1820 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2175/29).

them came back from Galway and Roscommon unsworn'.⁶⁴ Other reliable sources, such as Father James Jennings of the Neale parish in Kilmaine, could not furnish Browne with the usual high-grade information on popular movements in the area. Jennings might have embarrassed Browne by assuring him he had identified the central culprit in the conspiracy in Mayo, a migrant from Armagh named Thomas Dixon. Jennings alleged that Dixon had been spreading Orange extermination stories throughout the locality and that he had been involved in the rebellion in 1798 and had even spent time as a state prisoner on Fort George in Scotland. Browne believed the priest's report as Jennings had proved invaluable in the past. He committed Dixon to Castlebar jail on several occasions but had to release him due to a complete lack of evidence. In fact, Browne's informer had got the wrong man. Thomas Dixon was a Maynooth-trained Catholic priest who had converted to Protestantism after taking up a curate's position in Killala. He even testified to the 1825 House of Lords enquiry into the Irish disturbances, when he testified about the dangers of popery.⁶⁵

The lack of good intelligence incensed Browne and he repeated his call for immediate emergency powers to be granted to Mayo's magistrates. In the meantime, he put out a proclamation himself in the Kilmaine barony which reflected, not only his frustration, but also his unswerving commitment to preserve the established ascendancy order in the county, 'We put out a proclamation that we will fall without mercy, as landlords, on anyone who shall take such oaths. We are ready to protect them if they resist [the Ribbonmen] and to punish them if they take the oaths'.⁶⁶ The refusal to release further military stores to Browne also exacerbated the situation. When several sergeants from the Claremorris yeomanry were sent to Athlone to order fresh stocks of ammunition, the ordinance storekeeper, William Weaver, stubbornly refused. When Browne wrote an angry letter to him, stating that he had put the county in danger, Weaver replied, 'I feel confident in having acted in conformity to my instructions [and] that your opinion upon the subject is a matter of the most perfect indifference to me and that I beg you may spare

⁶⁴ Denis Browne to William Gregory, 21 Feb. 1820 (*ibid.*, 2175/33).

⁶⁵ 'Evidence of Thomas Dixon', *Fortesque MSS*, vol.iii, p. 464.

⁶⁶ Denis Browne to William Gregory, 21 Feb. 1820 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2175/33).

yourself the trouble of repeating it upon any similar occasion'.⁶⁷ Enraged at the slight on his status, Browne wrote immediately to Charles Grant and demanded action be taken against Weaver,

You will observe the [enclosed] letter of the storekeeper of Athlone. We were driven to madness here by our sergeants being returned without the arms and ammunition ordered for us. Whether the answer of this gentleman was proper to me as a Privy Councillor, you are to judge it. You best know whether my exertions and success deserves insult from the inferior servants of the state. I shall wait most anxiously to hear what steps have been taken by government as to this insult offered me.⁶⁸

This frustration and impatience was further compounded by the fact that several serious clashes were reported to Browne, the most serious one at Kilnaclea on the Roscommon border when several yeomen from Claremorris were killed and injured. Browne placed the blame firmly on government and wrote that the deaths had been caused because, 'our party [had] only two rounds of ball cartridge and most of their arms [were] unserviceable'. He added that he could not 'trust himself with any further comment on this most painful subject'.⁶⁹ In the light of these deaths, Denis Browne and Lord Sligo decided to take matters further into their own hands and organised several raids into both Galway and Roscommon in order to establish a secure buttress between the counties. The raids were also prompted by reports that gunpowder was being openly sold in Tuam and the fact that six Ribbonmen had been captured or killed in a clash with militiamen near Ballyhaunis. Denis's son reported this skirmish to his father, stating that up to 400 Ribbonmen had 'invaded' Mayo and had been 'armed with guns and long pikes'.⁷⁰ 'Four hundred' seems to have been the standard count when descriptions of large-scale gatherings were sent to the Castle. The number was often used by correspondents, possibly to convey the seriousness of the situation to a sceptical government. As late as 1842, in a report describing an internecine dispute between Ulster Ribbonmen, an

⁶⁷ William Weaver to Denis Browne, 22 Feb. 1820 (ibid., 2175/34).

⁶⁸ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 22 Feb. 1820 (ibid.).

⁶⁹ Denis Browne to Major General O'Loughlin, 26 Feb. 1820 (ibid., 2175/43).

⁷⁰ Denis Browne, junior, to Denis Browne, 24 Feb. 1820 (ibid., 2175/45).

informant described two separate 'divisions' of 400 men who had fought each other as part of a local power struggle.⁷¹

When a captain of the Ribbonmen was captured captured in Roscommon, Denis Browne and Lord Sligo thought it prudent to travel 'about three and a half miles within Roscommon county' to take charge of the prisoner. The Brownes were surprised at the uninhabited state of the county as they passed through, and believed that their reputation had preceded them. Denis Browne made a comparison with Mayo,

We had the pleasure of witnessing the [Mayo] peasantry, quiet, safe and glad to see us. Immediately on [the] Roscommon side, all silence...the villages abandoned. For a space of three miles we saw not a being, but persons at a distance flying over the hills from us. The contrast struck our people and they thanked and blessed us for keeping them out of the mischief and we deposited [the] wounded man [Conway] in one of their cottages.⁷²

Denis Browne was delighted with this display of strength in Roscommon and added to Gregory that, 'we hope to give the Galway gentlemen a similar lesson'.⁷³ Before the Brownes could organise a foray into Galway, a force of up to three hundred Ribbonmen attacked Claremorris in an attempt to liberate Conway and several other prisoners from the town. The numbers involved were almost certainly an exaggeration, but for once it was not Denis Browne who was reporting inflated statistics. John D'Arcy, a Brigadier Major in the 39th Regiment of Foot, reported to Major General O'Loughlin in Athlone, that he had been called out by Denis Browne to repulse the rescue attempt at Claremorris. A party under the command of D'Arcy combined with Browne's yeomen eventually saw off the threat. Using the sober language of a soldier, D'Arcy reported:

The prisoners, seven in number, were Ribbonmen and those who attempted their rescue were of the same description. It is supposed that they amounted to 300 men and approached within two miles of this town [Claremorris]. They were armed with pitchforks, scythes, pikes, muskets and blunderbusses. These Ribbonmen were repulsed by the steady and firm conduct of the yeomanry.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Kelly, *The Downfall of Hagan*, p. 23.

⁷² Denis Browne to William Gregory, 27 Feb. 1820 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2175/44).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Brigadier Major John D'Arcy to Major General O'Loughlin, 24 Feb. 1820 (ibid., 2175/48).

The testimony of D'Arcy proved that there was indeed a serious threat in the area from a relatively numerous and well-armed force. The attempted rescue also prompted the magistrates of Mayo to make a joint appeal to Athlone for permanent reinforcements at Claremorris. The day after the raid, eight leading magistrates from the county sent a signed address to O'Loughlin. The hegemony of the Brownes in Mayo was reflected by the fact that six of the eight men were from the wider family:

This appeal and the previous letter from D'Arcy eventually moved O'Loughlin to release additional forces from Athlone to defend Claremorris and the surrounding regions. O'Loughlin wrote to the commanding officer of the garrison in Castlebar and ordered him to proceed to Claremorris with a sizeable force, 'to render such assistance as may appear necessary'.⁷⁵ Denis Browne was delighted with the response, but he irritated the government unnecessarily when he complained that no cavalry had been sent with the troops. However, the reinforcements secured the Roscommon border sufficiently enough for more attention to be shown to the threat emanating from Galway.

The reports of gunpowder sales in Tuam merely reinforced the Brownes' view that the security of Galway was worsening by the day and that its gentry had done little to reverse this trend. Denis Browne believed that the county could be pacified by, 'transporting a few disturbed spirits', which would eventually 'save many lives, great expense and stop a growing, increasing evil'.⁷⁶ A Quartermaster from the 12th Regiment of Foot, William Page, who was living in Dunmore [Galway] on half pay, wrote to Browne to inform him of a worrying report he had heard in the vicinity. Local Ribbonmen had recently raided his house and stolen his firearms. While they had been tending oaths and robbing other houses, Page warned Browne that, 'every house they go to, they exclaim "we shall soon get Denis Browne and make him pay for all" as their intention is to get into the county of Mayo'.⁷⁷ Browne's excesses in the past were as infamous in Galway as they were in Mayo and it is clear that, even in his old age, he was still a popular hate figure for the

⁷⁵ General O'Loughlin's report to Dublin Castle, 27 Feb. 1820 (ibid., 2175/49).

⁷⁶ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 25 Feb. 1820 (ibid., 2175/39).

⁷⁷ William Page to Denis Browne, 20 Feb. 1820 (ibid.).

disaffected in the area. However, he took this popular resentment as a compliment reflecting his loyal service over the decades. In the case of the Dunmore threat, he vowed to 'act on [it], disarm that place completely and humble them'.⁷⁸ Before Browne could realise this threat, he was made aware of a recent rumour that Galway landlords had actually agreed to certain Ribbon demands regarding a fixed price for hired labour. Incredulous, he sought more information and was enraged when he discovered truth in the allegations. He poured scorn on the cowardice of the gentry, which essentially had undermined his whole campaign in the region,

No man will dare come forward against the victorious Galway insurgents, more especially when the cowardice and folly of the gentry of that county have led them to establish maximum price of land and labour...Sure their neighbours must cast a longing eye at such success unchecked by punishment.⁷⁹

At length, Browne believed that local weakness and national indifference had again conspired against his plans to bring loyalty and tranquillity to the region. The fact that the Commissions for Henry Browne and James Cuffe Blake, which had been requested nearly a month before, had still not arrived, added further to Browne's disillusionment. He was tempted to leave the region for Kilkenny city in order to canvass support for the coming election, but was stoic in his decision to stay: 'I am not boasting of merits but assuring you, that even the charms of a city election cannot seduce me from my friends, the Ribbonmen'.⁸⁰

By the end of March 1820, it was obvious that the serious threat had passed, and that the Mayo peasantry had decided to shun any attempt to wage a large-scale agrarian revolt. In 1820 and 1821, Charles Grant responded to the growing crisis. While the Ribbon threat had dropped away, by the end of 1821 it had been replaced by a significant threat in the south by the so-called Rockites, a threat that was considered the most serious since the Union and which continued until the spring of 1823.⁸¹ Grant placed Peel's police force in thirteen counties, which included Roscommon, Galway, Clare, Limerick and Tipperary.

⁷⁸ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 25 Feb. 1820 (ibid.).

⁷⁹ Denis Browne to Dublin Castle, 2 Mar. 1820 (ibid., 2175/51).

⁸⁰ Denis Browne to Charles Grant, 6 Mar. 1820 (ibid., 2175/55).

⁸¹ For the Rockite movement see Donnelly, 'Pastorini and Captain Rock', pp 102-43.

Mayo was not sent a detachment. The successful deployment of troops and yeomen along the borders in 1819 (largely under the command of Denis Browne and Lord Sligo) had contained the threat and sealed the borders between the counties. Added to this deterrent were the potent folk memories of 1798 and the carnage that had followed its collapse in the west. Indeed, the very presence of Denis Browne, who had been so prominent in the post-rebellion terror, certainly added to the reticence of the Mayo peasantry to embrace any large-scale conspiracy. The contemporary belief within the Browne family itself, that they had twice delivered the county and 'saved' it from large-scale rebellion and disorder over a period of twenty-five years was not very far from the truth. In the context of defeating the revolutionary threat of the United Irishmen, the agrarian violence of the Threshers and the seditious potential of the Ribbonmen, the Brownes did more than most in the region, to establish a secure foundation for a nascent national police force to consolidate its future authority.

In 1822, a new police bill was proposed that went far beyond Peel's Peace Preservation Act of 1814. This Act envisaged a permanent police establishment, consisting of constables and sub-constables, with a chief constable for each county and an inspector general for each province. However, the criticisms of gentry figures such as the Brownes were taken on board by the government and a compromise was reached that addressed the contentious issue of diminished local control. Whereas Peel's Peace Preservation Force had been appointed solely by Dublin Castle, the new constables and sub-constables [though not the higher ranks] were appointed by the magistrates of the county and were to operate under their direction. By 1825, Ireland had a fully fledged professional police force, which consisted of approximately 4,500 men that were distributed across the whole country.⁸²

The Spring Assize in Mayo on the 15 March 1820 gave an opportunity to the Grand Jury to try eleven suspected Ribbonmen who had 'invaded' the county from Roscommon. However, the foreman of the Jury, Denis Browne, was taken ill and was obliged to miss most of the proceedings. He blamed his illness on 'walking and riding too much' during

⁸² Broeker, *Rural disorder*, pp 141-9.

the Ribbon threat, which was exacerbated by severe inflammation and of his legs. He was also anxious to dispel any rumours of nervous exhaustion: 'my mind remains such as it was, and I have sons and nephews to do the rest'.⁸³ The marquess of Sligo, however, merely stated that his uncle was confined to his bed by an 'indisposition'. At sixty-one years of age, the physical and mental exertions of the previous months had taken their toll on Denis. It was left to the High Sheriff of Mayo, William Jackson, to convey to Charles Grant the resolutions of the Grand Jury, which declared all of Mayo free from disturbance and paid tribute to the government's assistance during the crisis. The resolutions were essentially a declaration of victory against the Ribbonmen of Roscommon and Galway and a declaration of the loyalty of the peasantry of Mayo. While Denis Browne had fought against the procrastination of government during the previous three months, he made sure that his was the first signature to ratify the resolutions,

By the High Sheriff and Grand Jury of Mayo at Spring Assizes assembled – Resolved:

That it is with the most sincere satisfaction, we are enabled thus publicly to declare that in every part of this country, perfect good order and loyalty prevail.

That these dispositions are the more gratifying to us, and the more entitled to our praise, as we observe that they have been maintained by the people against the evil example of their neighbours.

That our best thanks are eminently due to the Right Honourable Charles Grant, Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant for the energy and zeal with which he assisted the efforts of the magistrates and gentry of Mayo, to keep off from their country the great mischief that threatened it.

Denis Browne, Foreman – Dominick Browne MP, Sir William Brabazon, George Ormsby, Sir Samuel O'Malley, Arthur Gildea, John Knox, Charles Atkinson, Annesley Knox, James Cuffe, Spencer Lindsay, Thomas Palmer, Maurice Blake, James Strickland, Thomas Orme, Charles O'Malley, John Taylor, Robert Orme, Bernard McManus, Arthur Knox, John Perkins.⁸⁴

⁸³ Denis Browne to William Gregory, 15 Mar. 1820 (N.A.I., *State of the Country Papers*, 2175/60).

⁸⁴ *Address of the Grand Jury of the County of Mayo to Rt. Hon. Charles Grant*, 15 March 1820 (*ibid.*, 2175/32).

William Jackson was keen to inform the government that the Brownes had been central to the satisfactory outcome of events. He wrote on the covering letter, which accompanied the Address, and described 'the devoted exertions of the marquess of Sligo and those of his family, who from the first appearance of insurrection hastened to meet the threatened danger and to avert it'.⁸⁵ The fact that Howe Peter was named and Denis Browne relegated to the ranks of 'his family' graphically reflected the eclipse of Denis Browne as foremost figure of influence and authority in Mayo. Browne was confined to his bed for the next two months and was unable to attend to his correspondence to government. While successful in his bid to win the parliamentary seat for Kilkenny City, he did not attend Westminster until the winter of 1820-21. Browne also used this time to research, write and publish his great treatise on the grave social and economic woes of Ireland, which he asserted, had goaded Irish peasants into rebellion on many occasions.⁸⁶ In the piece, he gave a warning about the future of Ireland, 'the Gordian knot which enchains the faculties of that country must be unravelled or, sooner or later, it will be cut asunder by the sword'.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ William Jackson to Charles Grant, 15 Mar. 1820 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2175/32).

⁸⁶ Denis Browne, *A Letter on the present state of Ireland*, pp 4-5.

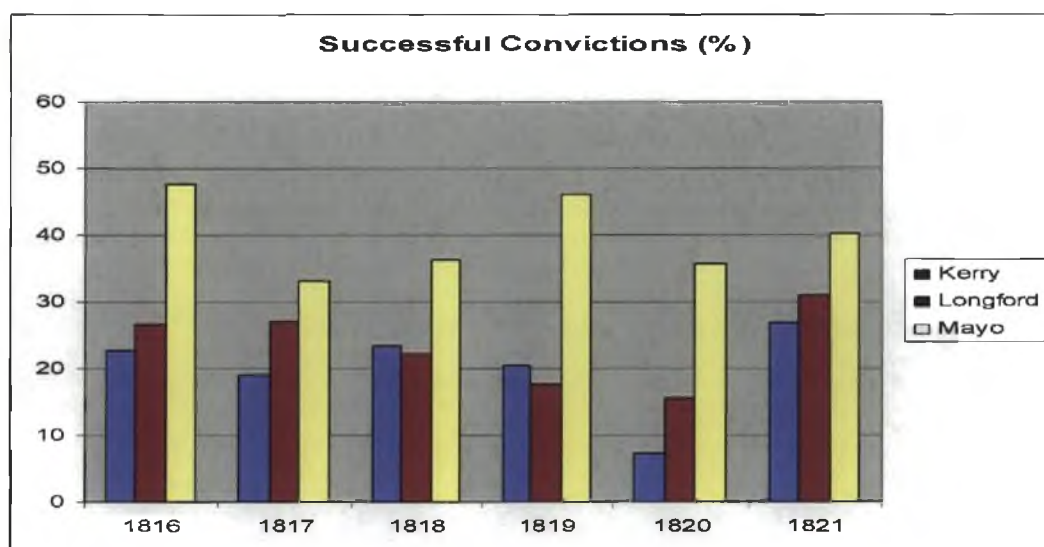
⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Prosecutions and convictions at Irish County Assizes, 1816-21

Preservation Act	County	1816		1817		1818		1819		1820		1821	
		I	II	I	II	I	II	I	II	I	II	I	II
Not proclaimed	Kerry	132	22.7	252	19.0	377	23.3	378	20.4	493	7.3	442	26.9
Not proclaimed	Longford	199	26.7	140	27.1	171	22.2	164	17.7	117	15.4	174	31.0
Not proclaimed	Mayo	149	47.7	232	33.2	226	36.3	254	46.1	227	35.7	287	40.1

Key: I Numbers of persons indicted and tried.

II Percentage conviction rate.



Above: The assertiveness of the Mayo magistrates and Grand Jury from 1816-21 can be seen on this chart, which compares the conviction rates in Mayo with two other counties that were 'un-proclaimed' during the same period.⁸⁸

Browne continued to attend to security matters in Mayo and served as foreman of the Grand Jury up to his death in 1828. He also kept a close eye on the growing constitutional movement for Catholic emancipation led by Daniel O'Connell. Even though Mayo was arguably more peaceful than at any stage over the previous thirty years, the ageing magistrate could still see rebellion being fomented if the attention of government was

⁸⁸ Palmer, *Police and protest*, p. 209.

diverted elsewhere. One of his last letters to Goulburn in 1825 reflected Browne's long held views on the fragility of loyalty and peace in the west – that if it were not for the influence of malevolent outside forces, then the county and the province would be 'in a perfect state of peace'.⁸⁹ He added later,

This county is as quiet as the Castle yard. The same all over the province. If you could keep you Dublin press from venting its mischief on us, this state of things might continue.⁹⁰

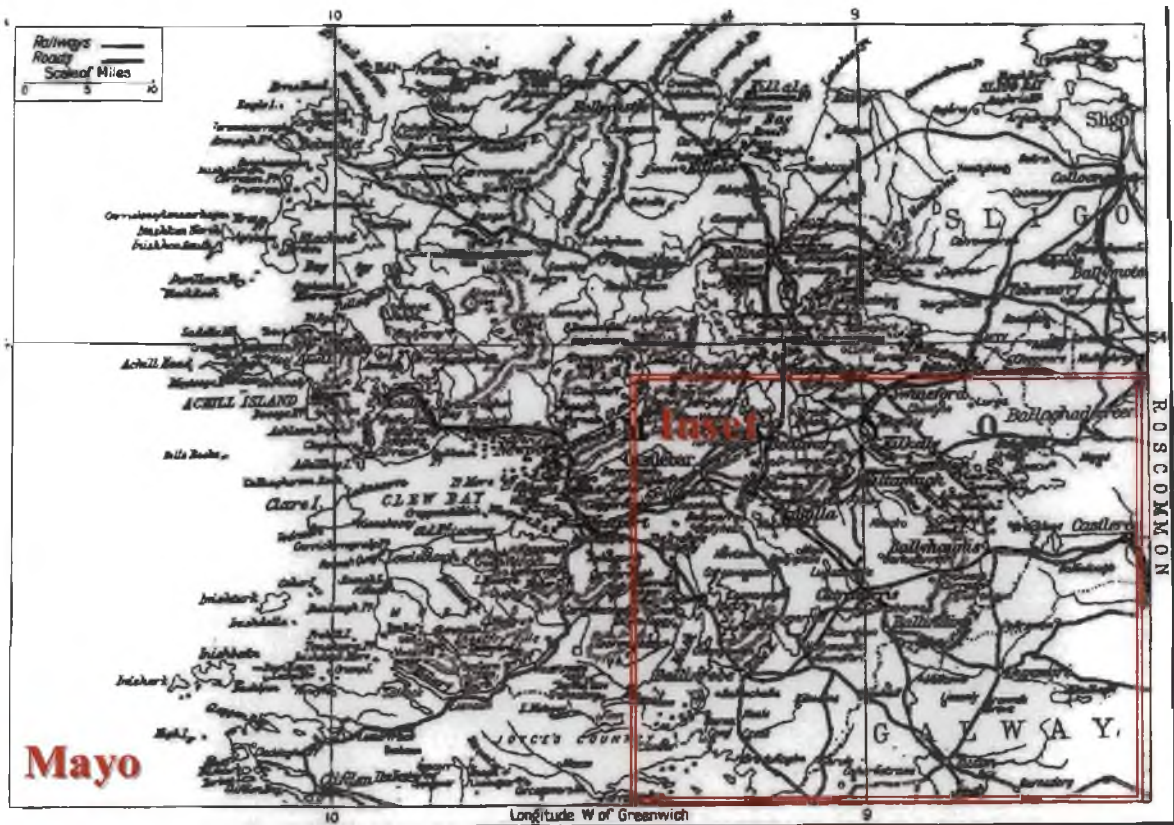
The part played by Denis Browne in establishing and promoting an effective security apparatus in Mayo throughout his adult life was profound and remarkable. At times, a shrill alarmist, he nevertheless displayed an uncanny ability to read the warning signs of dissent, correctly identify the leaders and either move against the conspiracy himself or urge immediate action from various government ministers. Both hated and respected by the local population in Mayo, he was also a source of great importance and utter exacerbation to the various governments in Dublin and London. When Denis Browne died on 14 August 1828, the ensuing obituaries reflected his unswerving dedication to the pursuance of law and order in Mayo during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a dedication that often displayed cruelty and bordered on the obsessive:

As a ruler and a magistrate, he did not bear the sword in vain – He was in times of danger and commotion, a terror to all who proved themselves inimical to public safety or to private tranquillity. An avenger to execute wrath on those who did evil, and conducted as much as any man of rank in his time, to suppress that spirit of insubordination so dangerous to the public will, and alas so prevalent in our too often distracted country.⁹¹

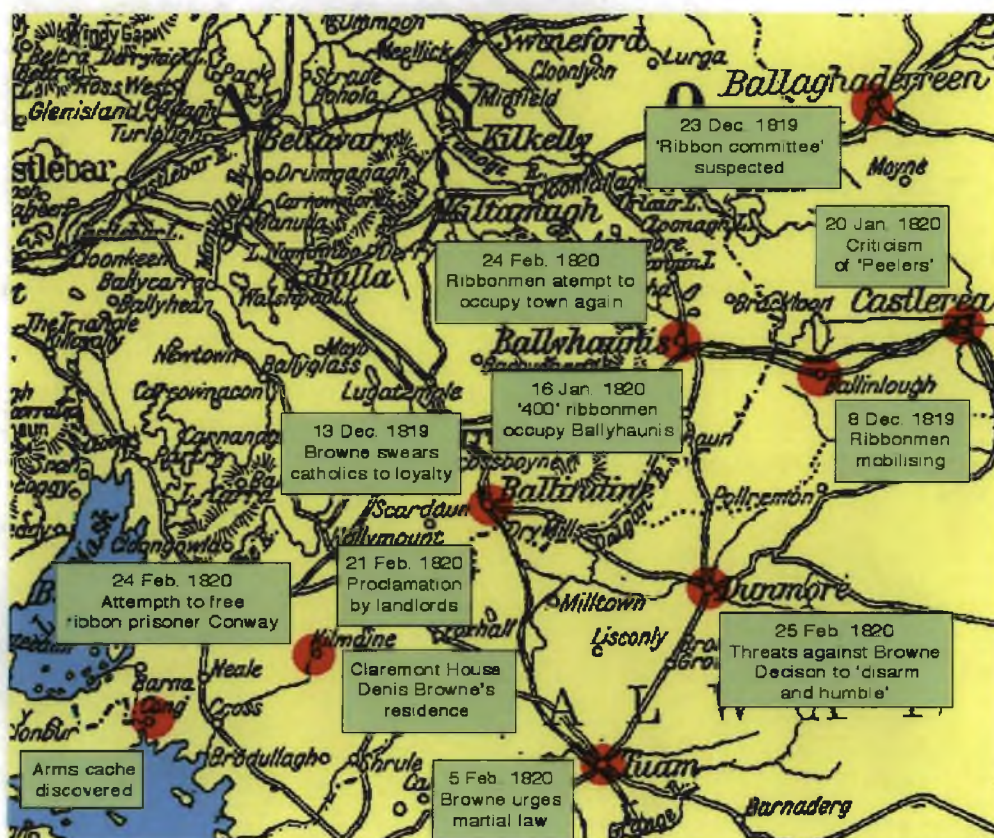
⁸⁹ Denis Browne to Henry Goulburn, 31 Dec. 1824 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2625/19).

⁹⁰ Denis Browne to Henry Goulburn, 7 Jan. 1825 (ibid., 2730/12).

⁹¹ *The Mayo Constitution*, 18 Aug. 1828.

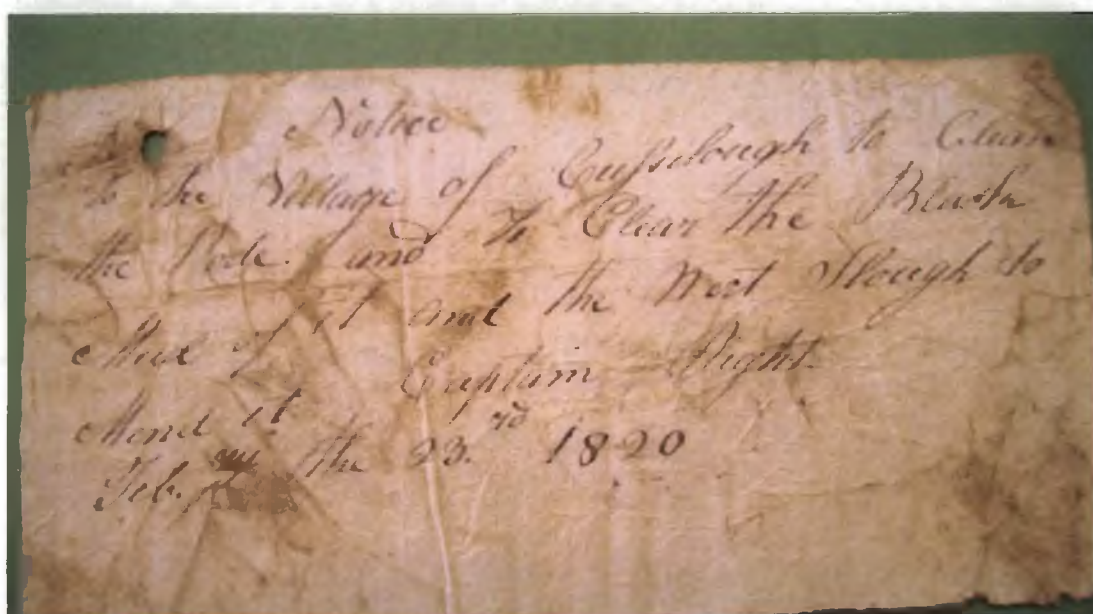


Above: The general area of Ribbon forays into Mayo.



Above: Some of the 'outrages' reported between Dec. 1819 and Jan. 1820.⁹²

⁹² Maps courtesy of Dr. Matthew Stout, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra.



Above: A Ribbon notice ordering the village of Castlelough to 'clear the road and to clear the black mud of it and [be] the most slow to mend it'. The notice was signed by 'Captain Right' and forwarded to Dublin Castle by Denis Browne.⁹³

⁹³ Ribbon notice contained in N.A.I., State of the Country Papers, 2175/40. Reproduced courtesy of National Archives.

taken such steps, as seem best
 to you, We are Sir your Obedt
 Henry Browne
 James Browne
 Joseph Lambert
 Denis Browne
 Magistrate of Mayo
 Sligo
 James Browne
 Domt Browne
 Peter Browne
 John Gerald Higgins

Above: Signed address from the magistrates of Mayo to Major General O'Loughlin, stating that, 'we have good authority for believing that an attack will be made on this place [Claremorris] imminently'. It was signed by Henry Browne, Joseph Lambert, Denis Browne, marquess of Sligo, James Browne, Dominick Browne, Peter Browne, John Gerald Higgins.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Appeal to General O'Loughlin by Mayo magistrates, 25 Feb. 1820 (ibid., 2175/49). Detail reproduced courtesy of National Archives of Ireland.



Above: Claremont House; Denis Browne's country house in Claremorris. Used as 'headquarters' against the Ribbon threat of 1819-20. In 1877 the house and about 313 acres were sold to the local Catholic priest for the purpose of establishing a Convent of Mercy nuns.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Image courtesy of The Connacht Landed Estates project, <http://www.landedestates.ie>.

Chapter Five

Politics and Economics: the Brownes' parliamentary path, 1800-28

In September 1803, five years after the United Irishmen had been defeated in county Mayo, Lord Sligo received a letter that adequately reflected the esteem that the newly created marquess enjoyed in the immediate years after the Act of Union. It was a letter of apology written by Horatio Nelson as he waited to engage the French fleet off the coast of Toulon. Browne had previously asked the admiral to promote a personal friend who had just joined the *Victory* earlier that summer, a request that Nelson had regretfully declined due to the crewmember's lack of experience. Although this request was essentially a supplication for an unqualified candidate, Nelson promised Browne that the promotion would be approved at a later date.¹ This personal petition clearly displayed the self perception of the Brownes during the early years of the nineteenth century – a family that was close to and respected by some of the most influential members of the British establishment. This rather grandiose self assessment was based on the undeniable fact that the family had achieved a remarkable degree of success and stability over the previous century. Through politics, peerage and marriage, the Brownes had risen from indebted Jacobites to the most influential and wealthy family in the county, with significant property in London, Lisbon and Jamaica. The early years of the nineteenth century promised further progress for the Brownes as their reactionary campaign in 1798 and pro-union efforts ensured a heightened degree of respect from the broader political establishment in Ireland and Britain. Hopes of a final resolution to the Catholic question and that economic development would follow the Union also added to this sense of optimism.²

The Brownes' confidence was not significantly dented by the resignation of William Pitt in 1801, brought on by the stubborn refusal of George III to grant emancipation, which

¹ Admiral Nelson to Lord Sligo, 23 Aug. 1803 (N.A.I., Official Papers, 154/22).

² S. J. Connolly, *Divided kingdom, Ireland 1630-1800* (Oxford, 2008), pp 484-93.

had been unofficially promised to Catholics and pro-Catholic MPs during the union debates. During this period of political instability, Lord Sligo veered away from the Lords and embarked on a very ambitious project of town planning, creating impressive public buildings in Westport that were surrounded by malls, boulevards and arched bridges. These improvements were funded by increased economic activity that had been stimulated by the continental wars and by direct funding that had been petitioned from government. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Westport contained several oatmills, a threshing mill and at least two bleach mills which catered for the flourishing linen market that the town owned.³ While Denis Browne was pursuing rebel fugitives in the wilds of Mayo, Lord Sligo was harnessing the labour of the very people that the Brownes had blamed for stirring up radicalism in the west – the northern migrants. The linen weavers of Armagh, most of whom had not joined the rebellion, were now an essential tool in the economic development of southern Mayo.⁴

During the first decade of the new century, Denis Browne combined his role of chief rebel hunter with that of energetic parliamentarian. He engaged in many debates in the House of Commons, a common theme of his contributions being the tranquillity of Ireland. He urged the British administrations in Dublin and London to harmonise the economic systems of both countries in order for them to engage in commerce on an equal footing. Indeed, the Brownes enjoyed steady government approval and patronage until a Whig government took office in London during 1806. This administration, with George Ponsonby as Irish Lord Chancellor, lasted just twelve months, but it marked a definite deterioration in relations between the Brownes and the ruling elite in Dublin and London. Lord Manners, who replaced Ponsonby, stayed in Ireland as Chancellor from 1807 to 1827 and worked with several chief secretaries to manage the patronage of government, much to the chagrin of the Brownes and other regional aristocrats who depended on such emoluments for local power and influence. Whether in reaction to a decline in patronage, or to the broken promise of Emancipation, Denis Browne became more vocal in parliament on issues such as the abolition of tithes, state remuneration of the Catholic

³ James McParlan, *A statistical survey of the County of Mayo* (Dublin, 1802), p. 6.

⁴ Peadar Ó Flanagan, 'Westport – a new town, 1780-1825' in *Cathair na Mart*, 2, no.1 (1982), p. 138.

clergy, and the inequality between the economic opportunities in Britain and Ireland. By 1811, he had become so disillusioned that he wrote privately that he now considered the entire Act of Union as 'an indifferent measure' for the broader economic and political reform of Ireland.⁵

The appointment of Robert Peel as Chief Secretary by Lord Liverpool in 1812 led the Brownes to hope for a more enlightened and pragmatic approach to local patronage and economic stimuli. However, Peel also proved to be extremely prudent and economical in the distribution of patronage, which led to a fractious relationship between the Castle and the 'great leviathan' of Mayo politics, Denis Browne. Combined with the tightened budget of the Dublin government, the Brownes had also to contend with increased local antipathy. The Bingham and O'Donel families became increasingly antagonistic to their political hegemony and put forward opposing candidates in elections from 1814-1830. In a strategic move, Denis Browne placed his son in the seat for Mayo County in 1818 while he took the seat for Kilkenny City, with the help of his relation, Lord Desart, in 1820. It was during this period that Browne published a lengthy treatise and manifesto concerning the social and economic ills of Ireland and of how best to eliminate them in an open letter to the Lord Lieutenant, the marquess Wellesley, brother to the Duke of Wellington. Browne's *Letter on the State of Ireland* was essentially his personal political testament and it put forward the causes and possible remedies of Ireland's apparent stagnation since the 1798 rebellion and subsequent Union. As will be seen below, some of the sentiment contained within the publication is essentially an open criticism aimed at successive administrations and the recurrent failure to face down the ultra Protestants of Ireland and introduce full Catholic relief.

In his angry denunciation of government failings during the 1820s, Browne used language that seemed at odds with a man that vigorously pursued rebels and Ribbonmen to the point of exhaustion during the same period. Browne, after all, believed those societies as diverse as the United Irishmen and the Catholic Association were manifestations of the same rebellious tendency. Yet on another level, his solution to

⁵ Denis Browne to William Wellesley Pole, 28 Feb. 1811 (N.A.I., Official Papers, 351/4).

problems remained the same, the paternal and Burkean view that the 'lower orders' would act peaceably and loyally if only the most glaring of unjust laws could be abolished forever. In this sense, Browne's thoughts and writings of the 1820s were little different to those of the firebrand magistrate of the 1790s.

(i.) Optimism and disillusionment, 1800-1811.

While rebel fugitives threatened the security of the west in the early years of the nineteenth century, there was a sense among the ruling elite of Mayo that the worst had passed and that the Union assured a new secure and prosperous relationship between the two islands. Leading gentry figures and Irish MPs hoped for an equal footing in addressing Napoleonic hegemony on the continent and the successful harnessing of Britain's Industrial revolution. The mathematical simplicities of Pitt's argument for Union seemed to resonate more clearly in predominantly Catholic counties like Mayo than in anti-unionist circles in Dublin and Meath. The Union effectively meant that the Protestant ruling elite was now part of the majority population that made up the United Kingdom. This increased sense of security amongst liberal Protestants in Connacht contributed to a diminution of their fear in calling for full Emancipation. In theory, Catholics in turn would become a content and satisfied minority within the broader United Kingdom.

This optimism, although hampered by the memories of rebellion, was the context in which the Brownes took up their respective civic roles in the early years of the century. Denis Browne was one of the one hundred Irish MPs in the new six hundred and fifty-member parliament. He was still High Sheriff (until 1802), magistrate, foreman of the Grand Jury in Mayo and advisor to government as a member of the Irish Privy Council. John Denis Browne was the newly created marquess of Sligo and member of the House of Lords in Westminster. Both men energetically pursued their new roles in this new political landscape, Denis as active lawman and parliamentarian, Lord Sligo as the

quintessential improving landlord, eagerly exploring ways to stimulate local commerce and improve the wider infrastructure of the region.

Early in 1800, John Denis was confident that the proposed Union would provide the necessary capital and stimuli to overhaul the local economy of Mayo. Writing to Richard Bingham (Lord Lucan), he stated that already ‘the purchase of land has increased and shown clearly that we shall benefit at least in confidence and security’.⁶ In preparation for the projected increase in production, Browne had participated in the establishment of the Farming Society of Ireland, which he hoped would encourage large landowners to adopt less wasteful agricultural methods. Browne described, to the habitually absent Bingham, the central reasons behind the move, ‘We have formed here [in Dublin] a new farming society, hoping by such means to turn the views of people from politicks and treason, to industry and to emulate English improvements and exceed them if we can. We have about two hundred members, I hope you will be one whenever you come over’.⁷ The Farming Society was formed under the patronage of the Dublin Society in March 1800 and Browne was elected to the Standing Committee, which oversaw its nascent activities.⁸

One of the first priorities of the society was to establish an experimental farm using the plans of Sir John Sinclair, the distinguished Scottish agriculturist and founder of the British Board of Agriculture. Thomas Pelham, the Chief Secretary for Ireland between 1795 and 1798, was also elected as an honourable member along with John Russell, the Duke of Bedford. By 1802, societies were becoming more popular in Ireland and Lord Sligo stated his hope to establish one in Mayo.⁹ Indeed, Browne had earlier been ‘the Father and President of one [a society] in Roscommon until it got on its legs enough to be more properly placed under its own gentry’.¹⁰ The fact that, at this stage, the Brownes owned just over 100,000 acres in Mayo, and could personally improve it, lessened the urgency for Lord Sligo to establish such a society in the county. Indeed, the rent levels on

⁶ Lord Altamont to Lord Lucan, 23 Jan. 1800 (N.U.I.G., Hardiman Library Collection, P48/2/4).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John Watson Stewart, *The Gentleman's and Citizen's Almanack* (1801), p. 116.

⁹ Lord Altamont to Lord Lucan, [no date] 1802 (N.U.I.G., Hardiman Library Collection, P48/3/1).

his estates had increased by about 1.8% per annum between 1787 and 1802, despite the political turmoil and devastation of the revolutionary decade.¹¹ Furthermore, as James McParlan observed in his statistical survey of Mayo (1802), the majority of Mayo landlords were resident in the county. Lord Sligo believed that if this sound social foundation could be further enhanced by the opportunities of a united economic and political system, then the spectres of agrarian violence and radicalism could be erased for good in the region.

Central to Sligo's plan was the notion that local infrastructure needed to be improved if the town of Westport and its environs were to increase its capacity to trade. McParlan had noted that even in the absence of these essentials, Westport had become 'a pretty and not a small town, already of some consequence in trade and expanding every day'.¹² However, the harbour and roads leading to the market town were in urgent need of enlargement and improvement. Like many 'improving' Irish landlords, Sligo realised that political influence could only be maintained successfully if improvements promoted the 'double end of power as well as profit'.¹³ With this in mind, Lord Sligo embarked on an ambitious project of town planning and began to petition the Dublin administration for assistance for improvements to the harbour in order to establish a steady linen trade to Britain.¹⁴ By the end of 1806, the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Hardwicke, had agreed to the proposals laid before him by Sligo concerning the expansion of the harbour.¹⁵ The entire project was estimated at costing £18,225 of which the government pledged £9,625, confirming that as soon as further checks were made, 'his Excellency's direction will be given to the Treasury for issuing the sum required'.¹⁶

¹⁰ Lord Altamont to Lord Lucan, 31 May 1800 (N.U.I.G., Hardiman Library Collection, P48/2/4).

¹¹ Eric Almquist, 'Mayo and beyond: land, domestic industry and rural transformation in the Irish west.' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Boston University, 1979), p. 129.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹³ Lindsay J. Proudfoot, *Urban patronage and social authority: the management of the duke of Devonshire's towns in Ireland, 1764-1891* (Washington D.C., 1995), p. 172.

¹⁴ See Fintan Duffy, 'Westport Estate and town: an example of planned settlement according to picturesque principles' in *Cathair na Mart*, no.19 (1999), pp 48-65, no. 21 (2001), pp 14-27.

¹⁵ Charles Long to Denis Browne, 18 Nov. 1805 (N.L.I., Ms 41,000/1).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

In 1817 Denis Browne procured a further capital sum of £12,000 from the government to complete the work along with a thousand pounds to improve the road surface between his well travelled route of Westport and Claremorris.¹⁷ The grassy road from Castlebar to Westport was also turned into a gravelled mail coach road during this period.¹⁸ By 1818, Westport Quay was fully developed as a port and a contemporary traveller, J.C. Curwen, noted that the export of grain from the port was ‘considerable’ and that the population of the town had doubled to almost 3000 by 1815.¹⁹ There were significant indicators of Westport’s economic regeneration during the Peninsular war of 1808 to 1813; over 12,000 tons of oats left Westport each year between September and December and as many as twenty ships were registered to town merchants at the port.²⁰

Lord Sligo was less successful, however, in his wish to encourage further migration from Ulster to the sparsely populated estates owned by Lord Lucan. Browne urged Bingham to establish a village near Castlebar called ‘New Antrim’ in order to stimulate the linen industry in that area. He hoped, too, that the new settlers ‘would generally be Protestant’, an ambition based on the belief that ‘not only [are] they most industrious, but I think the scale of the population in our country wants a little balancing, to give confidence to the minority if it was nothing else’.²¹ At length, this ambitious ‘settlement’ came to nothing and the population of Mayo remained as homogenous in its religious and social make up as the century beforehand. However, the improvements made to Westport town and the wider infrastructural improvements in south Mayo (at the behest of the Browne-dominated Grand Jury in Castlebar) brought about a certain level of resentment and rancour among the leading gentlemen in the north of the county, who believed that a disproportionate amount of government funding was diverted to projects in the Westport area. By 1824, this resentment had channelled into a campaign to deprive Dominick Browne and James Browne (Denis’s son) of their parliamentary seats during the 1826

¹⁷ *Reports made to the Irish Government by the civil engineer employed during the late scarcity in superintending the public works in Ireland*, H.C. 1823 (249), x, 40.

¹⁸ McCabe, ‘Westport’ in Simms and Andrews (eds), *More Irish country towns*, p. 139.

¹⁹ J.C. Curwen cited in Ó Flanagan, ‘Westport – a new town, 1780-1825’, p. 137. See also Jarlath Duffy, ‘The port of Westport, 1800-1850’ in *Cathair na Mart*, no.15 (1995), pp 1-15.

²⁰ McCabe, ‘Westport’ in Simms and Andrews (eds), *More Irish country towns*, p. 138.

²¹ John Denis Browne to Richard Bingham, 31 May 1800 (N.U.I.G., Hardiman Library Collection, P48/2/4).

election. An anonymous correspondent to the *Ballina Impartial* calling himself 'A Tyrawly Freeholder' complained bitterly:

Why is it that thousands have been expended on the improvement of the quay and river of Westport, while not a single shilling of the public money has been laid out in rendering any assistance to the mercantile interest of Ballina. The independent county of Mayo is nothing better than a closed borough, solely under the influence and government of one family, who reign as absolute in their own sphere as the most despotic monarch in Europe.²²

This outburst reflected the success of the Brownes as lobbyists even during the latter stages of Denis Browne's career. This anti-Browne campaign in the newspapers of north Mayo was largely a political attack on the family but personal insults were not uncommon. 'Brownish tyranny' and 'Brownish poison' were some of the more unpleasant sobriquets given to the larger Browne family.²³ This continued criticism eventually took its toll and Richard Bingham's son, Charles, replaced Dominick Browne as the member for Castlebar in 1826. However, the profligate and absentee Bingham eventually lost his seat four years later. Jealousy emanating from a perception that the Brownes had benefited from the monopoly of government funds was not confined to the gentlemen of north Mayo. The O'Donels of Newport often clashed with the brothers on matters concerning Westport quay and the distribution of local market royalties. The central issue of contention was the fact that the improved harbour in Westport had diverted large amounts of commerce away from their harbour at Newport Pratt.²⁴ Neal O'Donel even petitioned Dublin Castle to undo the plans of Lord Sligo to build a lighthouse on 'his side' of Clew Bay. The O'Donel's aversion to the Brownes was reciprocated entirely and Denis Browne would often state publicly (with some justification) that the family had amassed its fortunes through lucrative smuggling on the west coast.

Regardless of these minor county quarrels, and before any post-Union funds had arrived from Dublin, Lord Sligo had already made significant efforts to modify and improve the

²² *Ballina Impartial*, 18 Oct. 1824.

²³ *Ibid.* 5 Sept. 1825.

²⁴ McCabe, 'Westport' in Simms and Andrews (eds), *More Irish country towns*, p. 137.

farming techniques and husbandry of the peasants on large tracts of his estates. In 1802, for instance, McParlan dedicated his statistical survey to the Marquess, complimenting him as being, ‘the most extensive farmer in Connaught, perhaps in Ireland’.²⁵ Browne also managed to harness the Carrowbeg River, which ran through several miles of his demesne, in order to convey seaweed and manure to different parts of the estate and deposit turnips at the mouth of the river near the quay. In early nineteenth-century Mayo, large numbers of peasants managed to pay their rent by selling large quantities of oats to Liverpool and Glasgow through this vital infrastructure.²⁶ McParlan was also enthusiastic about Lord Sligo’s lease of Killery harbour in the attempt to stimulate an industry in salmon fishing, an industry that Denis Browne would later urge government to further develop in his economic ‘manifesto’ of 1822.

The Brownes were proud of the ‘agricultural revolution’, which they had effected in the county. In evidence to a Select Committee (1823), Denis boasted about having introduced new tools into the county in the early years of the century, stating that ‘my brother and myself [had] imported some scotch ploughs and were astonished with their effect. I now find ploughs for all my tenants and they are delighted to get them, I put them only to the expense of feeding the horses’.²⁷ In 1812, he also commented to the Chief Secretary on the thriving local economy; ‘the trade, industry and prosperity of Mayo’, he asserted, ‘in commerce, manufacture [and] agriculture is unequalled by any period within my recollection’. He added that there was enough corn in Westport to load seventy merchant ships, while the ‘roads were crowded with produce of every kind going to the sea’.²⁸

Ironically, the economic prosperity of the region was due in no small part to the duration of the French wars and the resilience of Napoleon’s armies, the source of so much of Browne’s domestic and political anxiety. For a time, the Napoleonic wars ensured that this solid economic foundation was exploited fully by the Brownes and used as a means

²⁵ McParlan, *Statistical survey*, p. 2.

²⁶ Desmond McCabe, ‘Law, conflict and social order: County Mayo, 1820-1845’ (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, U.C.D., 1991), p. 190. During the famine of 1822, incoming relief vessels would often meet similar outgoing ships full of oats destined for the British market.

²⁷ *Select Committee concerning the employment of the poor in Ireland*, H.C. 1823 (561), vi, 46.

²⁸ Denis Browne to William Wellesley Pole, 7 Feb. 1812 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers 1408/18).

of bringing the necessary finances to build the tree-lined malls, stone-arched bridges and public buildings that were part of the town's expansion during 1800-1810. An early tourist industry was also encouraged by Lord Sligo during this period. A large hotel on the mall was established by Browne and in an attempt to entice sea bathers to the town he installed warm water baths at the quay, which survived until 1883. It is estimated that this ambitious project of town planning and re-structuring cost the marquess at least £25,000, a sum that adequately reflected the accumulated wealth and economic power of the family in the early nineteenth century.²⁹ Indeed, when Sligo died in 1809, the *Freeman's Journal* stated that he had 'spent upwards of £20,000 a year' over the previous decade in 'exciting her [Ireland's] industry and promoting her agriculture'.³⁰



Above: The planned nature of Westport's growth can be seen in this Six Inch Ordnance Survey map from 1837. Westport House is situated on the left.³¹

²⁹ Ó Flanagan, 'Westport – a new town, 1780-1825', p. 139.

³⁰ Obituary of Lord Sligo, *Freeman's Journal*, 11 Sept. 1809.

While Lord Sligo used the initial years after Union to improve the structural and economic fortunes of Westport and his wider estates, Denis Browne focused upon parliamentary duties in London. However, after the 1802 election, he commented on the lack of unity and purpose of the Irish representatives in raising Irish issues at Westminster. Indeed, to the uneasy English members who were wary that one hundred Irish MPs could unsettle the ‘dispassion’ of the parliament, it was a welcome surprise. Far from forming a distinctive, disgruntled and separatist faction, the newcomers merged easily into the life of the house.³² However, it was no surprise as little appeared to separate the Irish members from their English counterparts – most were related to great political families and were adept at using local patronage judiciously.

Nevertheless, by early 1803, Lord Sligo noticed some resentment among the Irish peers in the House of Lords. Writing from London to Alexander Marsden, the Irish under secretary, Browne complained of ‘great caballing and ill will among the few Irish here. They think themselves neglected and are one and all privately dissatisfied’.³³ Several days later he again noted that the Irish were ‘growling’ in private chambers in what he perceived to be a pique of petulance regarding their standing in London. It seemed to Lord Sligo that many Irish peers were becoming increasingly aware of the limitations of being part of a larger assembly and the increased anonymity that went with it. Browne was also disappointed at the lack of opposition to Addington’s administration, which briefly replaced Pitt’s government. Delivering his views to Marsden, he resented the fact that ‘Mr. Addington’s administration most assuredly gains in popularity’ while there was ‘no opposition at all, especially among our countrymen’.³⁴ However, security considerations again united the Irish members of parliament when Robert Emmet attempted his rebellion in July 1803. Emmet’s attempted coup, combined with a return to war with France saw the Brownes dismiss any further discussion of organised opposition to Addington’s administration. Denis Browne’s immediate disillusionment with the

³¹ Detail of ‘Six-inch Ordnance Survey map of Westport’, courtesy of Sarah Gearty, Royal Irish Academy.

³² R. B. McDowell, *Public opinion and government policy in Ireland, 1801-1846* (London, 1952), p. 18.

³³ Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, 5 Feb. 1803 (N.A.I., Rebellion Papers 620/18a/7/12).

³⁴ Lord Sligo to Alexander Marsden, 15 Feb. 1803 (ibid., 620/18a/7/13).

Union gave way to a fear of revolt, the emotion that had made the Union so attractive after 1798, and he revived his enthusiasm for the measure.

The return of William Pitt to Downing Street in 1804 reinforced this united stance behind the new government, which the Brownes hoped would rally Ireland against Napoleon by granting Catholic claims. Denis rose in parliament to deny that Ireland was still disaffected and claimed that if the French landed in the country again, that 'they would find themselves in an enemy's country, whatever part of it they came to'. In an attack against allegations of Irish complacency, Browne stated that 'Ireland had no more to do with that [Emmet's] rebellion than they had to do with Colonel Despard'. The reference of Despard was obviously an attempt to remind English MPs that radical 'extremists' were not the preserve of Irish political culture.³⁵ It was also an allusion to the Whig involvement with Despard's previous co-conspirators, Arthur O'Connor and James Coigly. Leading Whig figures such as Charles James Fox were not to be allowed to forget their support of O'Connor and other 'traitors' during the Maidstone trials of 1798.³⁶ Lord Sligo joined in with the loyal exhortations supporting a call for the unity of Irish and British militias in the current crisis with the French. Hoping that Irish Militia units would be used as part of a British/Irish fencible force, he declared that 'the sooner a complete union in every point of view was effected, the better it would be for both countries'.³⁷

However, during the first decade of the new parliament one particular issue made the Brownes less eager to rally behind Pitt and his cabinet. Showing inveterate caution and conservatism which was heightened by the possession of large Jamaican sugar plantations, the brothers quibbled over how best to approach the contemporary abolitionist campaign led by Pitt's great friend, William Wilberforce. Lord Sligo's father, Peter Browne (1730-1780) had inherited substantial estates in Jamaica when he married Elizabeth Kelly in 1757. As with many other landed gentlemen in Britain, Lord Sligo was

³⁵ *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates*, vol.ii (London, 1804), 685-6. For the conspiracy of Colonel Edward Despard see Marianne Elliot, *Partners in revolution: the United Irishmen and France* (London, 1982), pp 282-90, Malcolm Chase, 'Edward Marcus Despard', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004-08), <http://www.oxforddnb.com>.

³⁶ Elliot, *Partners in revolution*, p. 211.

³⁷ *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates*, vol. i (London, 1804), 1056.

cautious of the abolitionist movement in the latter stages of the eighteenth century. From an economic viewpoint, Browne feared a collapse of regular sugar annuities paid to him if the slave trade was abolished in Britain or its dominions.

Although Wilberforce and the abolitionists did not yet advocate an outright ban on slavery or slave ownership in the West Indies, large industrialists and wealthy landowners viewed their campaign as the thin end of a liberating wedge that would destroy their fortunes, or worse still, see them taken over by the French or their Spanish rivals.³⁸ The radical ideology of the French Revolution further delayed the abolitionist debate as the monarchies of Europe battled with republicanism during the 1790s. Ironically, the slave rebellion on the French colony of St. Dominique also delayed the momentum of the abolition movement. News reports of armed slaves in active rebellion against their former masters were disturbing images for even the more committed abolitionists. By 1804, however, the political landscape had radically changed as Britain faced a more conventional foe in the form of Bonaparte, who had reined back the utopian notions of the Jacobins and re-instated slavery in the French colonies with the sweeping Napoleonic Code of March 1804. The post-Union addition of one hundred MPs from Ireland also gave the abolitionists a welcome addition as many of these Irish MPs were well disposed to ending the transatlantic trade.³⁹

All of these factors, compounded by the resumption of war, gave Wilberforce an unexpected majority of seventy-five when he asked the Commons for a first reading of his Abolition Bill on 30 May 1804. Showing caution a week later during the second reading of the bill, Denis Browne stated that 'he was a friend to the principle of the bill, but before he voted for it, he wished for further information'.⁴⁰ Although this debate included many anti-abolitionist speeches from powerful government and opposition figures such as Lord Castlereagh and William Windham, it was carried by one hundred

³⁸ See Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic slave trade and British abolition* (London, 1975), Hugh Thomas, *The slave trade: the story of the Atlantic slave trade, 1440-1870* (London, 1997), A. Hochschild, *Bury the chains* (London, 2005), William Hague, *William Wilberforce, the life of the great anti-slave campaigner* (London, 2007).

³⁹ Hague, *William Wilberforce*, p. 317.

⁴⁰ *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates*, vol. i (London, 1804), 546.

votes to forty-two. The summer recess postponed the more difficult task of getting the bill passed through the House of Lords. Furthermore, when Addington returned to government in January 1805 he displayed a lack of enthusiasm for abolition, choosing instead to further regulate the West Indies trade. In May 1806, Lord Sligo took part in a regulatory debate, put forward as the Slave Importation Restriction Bill. This bill was framed to prevent the exportation of slaves from British islands or vessels into foreign colonies. Although the bill was passed, Browne voted against it, stating that he 'opposed the bill as [it was] pregnant with infinite danger to the very existence of the West India islands'.⁴¹

Sligo's conservative stance on abolition was based primarily on crude economics and not on a rigid principle that supported slavery. His was a pragmatic concern, which assumed that France would merely appropriate the trade routes that Britain wished to abolish. Eventually, the voracious appetite for sugar in Europe would still be fed by slave labour but without the financial dividend that was accrued by its taxation. On a more personalised and local level, the steady income from Jamaica would be sorely missed in the ongoing regeneration of Westport and its environs. Sligo was in bad health when the Slave Trade Abolition Bill was introduced to the House of Lords in February 1807 by the new Prime Minister, Lord Grenville. He was helped into the chamber by servants due to his acute 'dropsy' (brought about by a slight stroke). Sligo, however, was indignant and considered some of the clauses and the preamble of the motion to be unacceptable, stating that they 'contained a gross calumny' on those who wished for further regulation and not an outright ban.⁴² Clauses had been added to ensure that loopholes were avoided and that 'negroes seized in consequence of illicit trade should be set free'. Indeed, Grenville was uneasy about the preamble and hoped to have its contents deferred for a later date. Wilberforce, however, pressed the Prime Minister for urgency on the matter and the bill was eventually passed.⁴³

⁴¹ Hansard's *Parliamentary Debates*, vii (London, 1807), 230.

⁴² Hansard's *Parliamentary Debates*, ix (London, 1807), 170.

⁴³ Nini Rodgers, *Ireland, slavery and anti-slavery: 1612-1865* (London, 2007), p. 262.

The Brownes divided on the issue of slavery. Sligo eventually sided with the minority of thirty four Lords who voted against the Abolition Bill. Denis Browne joined the larger than expected majority of MPs who voted to finally end the British slave trade. It is not impossible that the ageing marquess's economic concerns had also been further piqued by the fact that William Wilberforce, a dissenter, and many other abolitionist MPs had unequivocally spoken out against parallel attempts to consider limited Catholic concessions in 1807.⁴⁴ Indeed, when the abolition bill had passed through parliament, William Wilberforce congratulated himself on having stopped Grenville's simultaneous proposal to increase the government grant to Maynooth, stating that it was folly to pander to the good wishes of the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland. Wilberforce was grateful that 'the moment the ministry began to venture [Ireland's] happiness on a popish foundation, they found the ground cut from under them'.⁴⁵

In the aftermath of the abolition campaign and the failure of the Maynooth proposal, Denis Browne was more determined to publicise Irish Catholic grievances and took a part in a Whig campaign to highlight tithes as the most obvious and immediate inequity that needed to be addressed. The cut in Maynooth's grant, the ongoing denial of emancipation and a series of sectarian outrages, which saw several yeomen go unpunished for their excesses, contributed to a collapse in Catholic morale in Ireland during 1807. The former Lord Chancellor, John Mitford (Lord Redesdale), commented that Irish Catholics were 'more down than they have been since 1793'.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, during 1807 and 1808, several county meetings were organised by Whigs in Queen's County, Tipperary, Kerry and Clare, which called for the abolition of tithes and the payment of the clergy through alternative means.⁴⁷ Grenville had planned to address the problem urgently but his government fell before he could initiate any legislation.⁴⁸ Browne joined Henry Grattan in parliament during May 1809 in an invigorated call for the abolition of tithes, citing them as the foremost reason of discontent among the peasantry of Ireland. Displaying a

⁴⁴ Hague, *William Wilberforce*, pp 349-50.

⁴⁵ Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce* (5 vols, London, 1838), iii, 305.

⁴⁶ Redesdale to Lord Vansittart, 24 May 1808, cited in Bartlett, *Fall and rise of the Irish nation*, p. 291.

⁴⁷ *Dublin Evening Post*, 29 Aug, 26 Sept., 22 Oct. 1807, 12 May 1808; *Belfast Newsletter*, 10 Apr. 1808. See also Bartlett, *Fall and rise of the Irish nation*, p. 298.

progressive stance in the Commons, Browne thought 'it was the most serious duty of government to attend to the evils arising out of the present system of tithes in Ireland', and urged that a bill be brought forward 'to ameliorate the state of the Irish peasant'.⁴⁹ The pleas were made late in the parliamentary term and a relieved government postponed any further discussion of the wider Catholic question, which had already dragged down two administrations under Pitt and Grenville. The death of Lord Sligo also meant that Denis Browne was unable to attend the new parliamentary term to press for further action from the new administration.

John Denis Browne, the first marquess of Sligo, died on 2 January 1809 at the age of fifty-two in London. His health, already poor since suffering a stroke, was made worse when he contracted tuberculosis, despite the fact that he travelled annually to his residence in Portugal to avoid the harsh Irish winters. His only child, Howe Peter, inherited all his titles and estates. The twenty-one year old peer was not then equipped to manage and maintain the large acreage and Denis was compelled to spend the next four years in Mayo, overseeing the collection of rents and royalties derived from the various markets under the patronage of his late brother. Unable to travel as frequently to Westminster, Browne only took part in one debate in four years. That in itself was a necessity as the Irish Chancellor, John Foster, was investigating the workings of a Finance Committee, of which Browne was a member. The Committee had been thought to be 'disharmonious and unfruitful'.⁵⁰ Browne expressed his 'readiness to defend himself and the other members of the Committee from any charges made against them', but was unsuccessful and the Exchequer 'moved an amendment, that Mr. Denis Browne be substituted'. This decision (which concluded that Browne's forceful personality had divided the committee) as well as the increased workload in Mayo obviously irked Browne and uncharacteristically, he avoided the Commons until May 1813.

The pressure of Browne's workload also led to a certain amount of personal disillusionment that in turn led to him questioning the United parliament, which seemed

⁴⁸ McDowell, *Public opinion and government policy*, p. 21.

⁴⁹ Hansard's *Parliamentary Debates*, xiv (London, 1809), 643.

⁵⁰ Hansard's *Parliamentary Debates*, xv (London, 1810), 265.

to dither on Irish economic and political affairs. Writing to William Wellesley Pole, about a routine matter of patronage, Browne outlined his concerns about what he perceived to be an element of interference coming from Britain in relation to Ireland's security and prosperity. Citing parliamentary dithering during the Regency crisis, he noted that, 'America was lost by the debates of the British parliament. So would Ireland be lost if we were not so near England'.⁵¹ Browne was also convinced that the appointment of the (nominally pro-emancipation) Prince of Wales as Regent in February 1811 had radicalised the Catholic Committee in Ireland, which in turn had given succour to agrarian secret societies. This belief was an exaggeration but it displayed a return by Browne to a siege mentality that was so often brought about by political instability or uncertainty. He warned that 'the [Regency] debate attended to has now given a head to the Threshers and county insurgents, namely the Catholic Committee'.⁵² This reactionary letter to Wellesley Pole seemed to question, for the first time, Browne's staunch advocacy of Union and the centralised parliament in London. Ending the letter, he stated that he believed that power was slowly ebbing away from the landed gentry, the very people, he believed, that had saved the country from dissention and rebellion on so many occasions. Believing that the Union was becoming ineffective, Browne complained, 'if we were left to ourselves we could keep this country and now for the first time I begin to think the Union an indifferent measure'.⁵³

(ii.) *'My fortune did not equal my rank in life'. The battle for patronage and political hegemony in Mayo, 1812-1820.*

Browne's disillusionment was compounded by the irresponsible behaviour of his nephew, the second marquess, who was jailed in December 1812 following a conviction for bribing royal navy personnel to sail his private yacht back from Greece to Ireland. The young noble man spent four months in Newgate prison in London before spending further time away from Mayo with his close friend, the Prince Regent, in a profligate

⁵¹ Denis Browne to William Wellesley Pole, 28 Feb. 1811 (N.A.I., Official Papers 351/4).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Denis Browne to William Wellesley Pole, 28 Feb. 1811 (N.A.I., Official Papers 351/4).

bout of gambling and drinking. As Browne visited his wayward nephew in prison, he took time to write and introduce himself to Robert Peel, the new Chief Secretary of Ireland. Determined to resist what he perceived as a departure from the traditional gentry-led governance of local affairs in Mayo towards a more centralised model directed from Dublin, Browne was keen to impress upon Peel the continued necessity of placing patronage in the hands of the leading gentlemen as the most effective, indeed the only means of providing security and loyalty in the remote areas of the kingdom. Nevertheless, Peel's administration was determined to press ahead with administrative reform, which had been deemed necessary for over a decade. The rapid turnover of Chief Secretaries since the Union (nine in all) had already hindered the establishment of a more centralised authority. Wellesley Pole brought a certain degree of stability to the office, but the appointment of Peel gave the Castle an opportunity to put forward the policies that reflected Ireland's 'exceptional circumstances'.⁵⁴ The conditions, which distinguished Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom, were its overwhelmingly Catholic population, widespread poverty and the high levels of agrarian violence. In the face of these exceptional circumstances, the new administration called for governance through exceptional measures.⁵⁵ The perilous state of Ireland's finances also led Peel to withhold certain pensions to claimants who cited government promises, which had been made at the time of the Union.⁵⁶

Indeed, the politics of patronage in Ireland at the time strengthened Peel's view that Ireland was indeed unique within the United Kingdom. He resented the difficulty in securing the support of Irish MPs for Irish measures in parliament, lamenting that the Irish received 'ten times as many favours as the English members' yet in return, they 'do not give us one-tenth of their support'.⁵⁷ Indeed, Peel was appalled by what he saw as the shamelessness and excess of the Irish appetite for jobbery.⁵⁸ This was a common perception. Charles James Fox, the leader of the opposition, noted how, 'in Ireland the

⁵⁴ Brian Jenkins, *Era of emancipation: British government of Ireland, 1812-1830* (London, 1988), p. 9.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵⁷ Norman Gash, *Mr. Secretary Peel: the life of Sir Robert Peel to 1830* (London, 1985), p. 119.

⁵⁸ S. J. Connolly, 'Union government, 1812-23' in W. E. Vaughan (ed.), *A new history of Ireland, v. Ireland under the Union, 1801-70* (Oxford, 1989), p. 64.

Protestant caste had been permanently conditioned to look solely to the state for support and nourishment'. This was not the case in England and Fox attributed the difference to a lack of independent wealth in Ireland. Believing that increased wealth in Ireland would raise all boats, he concluded that Ireland merely stagnated under its reliance on government adding that; 'one would sooner find an Irishman without a brogue as without a job'.⁵⁹

By 1817 Peel had written to the Lord Lieutenant, Charles Whitworth stating that he had grown 'tired and disgusted with the shameful corruption which every Irish inquiry brings to light'.⁶⁰ From the lowest reaches of patronage to the irksome dependence of the subsidised Irish press, Peel sought to overhaul and review government expenditure. Indeed, Peel's antipathy to patronage reflected the new ideas of 'administrative impartiality' that were gaining ground in British public life. These ideas eventually led to the progressive dismantling (particularly in the 1830s) of the gigantic system of patronage and vested interests that the radical William Cobbett had dubbed 'Old Corruption'.⁶¹ This very system, however, was inextricably linked with the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland and any attempts to reform the former, by applying the new standards that were gaining ground in Britain, would inevitably lead to disaffection amongst the latter.⁶²

Consequently, the fresh approach that Browne had hoped for in Peel's appointment gave way to a lengthy but uneasy correspondence between the two, which eventually ended in an abrupt and cool manner. Indeed, the varying tone of this correspondence affected the political and parliamentary outbursts of Browne. On several occasions, after being personally rebuffed or disappointed by Peel, he rose in the Commons and delivered vigorous speeches in favour of Catholic claims, as if to chide the administration of Whitworth for its vacillation on the issue. Tithes and absentee landlords were the habitual

⁵⁹ Charles James Fox to the duke of Bedford, June 1806, cited in Edward Brynn, *Crown and castle: British rule in Ireland, 1800-1830* (Dublin, 1978), p. 78.

⁶⁰ Gash, *Mr. Secretary Peel*, pp 125-6.

⁶¹ W. D. Rubenstein, 'The end of 'Old Corruption' in Britain, 1780-1860' in *Past and Present*, no. 101 (Nov. 1983), pp 55-86.

⁶² Connolly, 'Union government, 1812-23', p. 65.

targets of Browne. Nevertheless, in January 1813, he put forward his first requests to Peel and made sure that he was aware of his standing in Mayo society. Writing from London, Browne assured Peel that he would not be kept long by the imprisonment of his nephew, as several matters needed attention in Mayo. He informed Peel:

Arrangements must be made in my county of Mayo necessary for the agency of government there, which has been in my hands nearly twenty-five years. I must gratify those who assist me with small patronage.⁶³

There was a host of calls on Browne; a wealthy Catholic called Lynch hoped to get his son moved from serving with the dragoons in India to a preferable post in Europe. Another Catholic gentleman desired ‘an ensigncy’ for his younger brother in a regiment of the line that was based in Europe. To politicians of Browne’s generation, patronage was the currency of government. Indeed, he stated as much to Peel when he assured him that ‘the instruments of trust’ that he used there simply went on to ‘smooth [Peel’s] measures in the Catholic question’.⁶⁴ Browne was astonished several days later when a reply came from Peel rejecting his intercession for the two local Catholics. He wrote to Peel expressing confusion at the rejection, and added that it had only been through similar personal favours to influential Catholics that had prevented the county from ‘being, in a very troublesome twenty years, just a thorn in the side of government’.⁶⁵

Browne was not to be so easily rebuffed and interpreted the Secretary’s action as simple inexperience reminding him that ‘great services have been done to my nephew and to my friends by the Duke of Richmond’, since he had been appointed Lord Lieutenant in 1807.⁶⁶ Peel was unmoved by Browne’s relationship with Richmond and restated his inability to interfere with the deployment of the King’s troops, in order to satisfy the wishes of local gentlemen. Stung by this rejection, Browne took the opportunity to question Peel in parliament several months later when the Irish firearms bill was being renewed in the context of an outbreak of agrarian violence in Tipperary. Peel moved the

⁶³ Denis Browne to Sir Robert Peel, 4 Jan. 1813 (B.L., Peel Correspondence, MSS 40,217 (2)).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Denis Browne to Sir Robert Peel, 20 Jan. 1813 (ibid., MSS 40,217 (4)).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

bill in the Commons stating that no search for firearms should take place unless two magistrates were present at the scene. Browne wished to affirm the primacy of local law enforcement and replied that the principle of the act was good, but that 'if he knew of concealed arms, he would seize them without any application to the Lord Lieutenant'.⁶⁷

This public display of independent self-confidence by Browne masked a private belief that his influence and importance in Mayo had been on a downward trajectory since the death of Lord Sligo in 1809. With Howe Peter still absent in England, Browne's great asset, that of being a close relation to a powerful and wealthy marquess, was obviously missing. While forwarding a friend's credentials to Peel about the vacant Barrack Masters place in Ballaghadereen, Browne was remarkably frank about the importance he attached to patronage to sustain his position in the county. He wrote:

The patronage of this county is very small, of no consequence but to enable me to do the government's business. When it is taken from me, it weakens [and] disables me. I have no fortune of my own and in my brother I lost a prop in that way and others.⁶⁸

However, Browne's gloomy assessment belied his personal wealth and the fact that his estate had produced over £15,000 in 1812.⁶⁹ The thousands received from government to improve Westport's harbour and roads were also conveniently overlooked. Nevertheless, Browne's gloom was temporarily lifted by an opportunity to bolster his local influence brought about when Henry Dillon, the Mayo MP, succeeded to his father's title (Lord Clonbrock) in 1813. Dillon and Browne had occupied the two Mayo seats since 1802 and his death gave Denis the chance to replace him (Dillon was a compromise candidate in 1802) with a closer ally in parliament.

Browne supported the candidature of his cousin Dominick Browne, of the Browne family of Castle MacGarrett (Oranmore, county Galway), which owned large tracts of land in

⁶⁷ Hansard's *Parliamentary Debates*, xxvi (London, 1813).

⁶⁸ Denis Browne to Sir Robert Peel, 12 Sept. 1813 (B.L., Peel Correspondence, MSS 40,217 (11)).

⁶⁹ Keville, 'Aughagower', p. 47.

counties Mayo, Roscommon and Galway.⁷⁰ Dominick Browne shared Denis's views on Catholic relief but as a much younger man of twenty-six, he was perceived by Browne as an impressionable apprentice and a perfect candidate to bolster his political hegemony in the region. Peel did not agree with the selection of Dominick Browne as he was rumoured to be a follower of the radical parliamentarian, Francis Burdett, a rumour of which Denis Browne knew nothing.⁷¹ The threat of a Burdetteite representing the county alongside Browne might also explain the increased reticence on the part of Peel to meet Denis's patronage requests. However, as Col. Cuffe and Col. Jackson were not interested in the position, the Chief Secretary acquiesced in the choice. The by-election, however, saw a repetition of the violence that had marred other elections involving Browne and soon descended into assault, threats and a duelling challenge, which led to the imprisonment of Sir Neal O'Donel.



Dominick Browne M.P.
(1787- 1860).⁷²

⁷⁰ See Lord Oranmore and Browne, 'The Brownes of Castle MacGarrett' in *Galway Arch. Soc. Jn.*, no. 1 (1907-8), pp 48-59.

⁷¹ Thorne (ed.), *History of Parliament*, ii, 676.

⁷² Portrait of Dominick Browne, courtesy of David MacNaughton, Trinity College Dublin.

Browne prepared for the election by requesting Peel to invite Lord Tyrawley (James Cuffe) for the votes of his freeholders. Tyrawley had been an MP for Mayo before the Union and carried great influence in the north of the county. This request to Tyrawley by proxy was a clever ploy by Browne designed to diffuse opposition towards the Brownes within the merchant community of Ballina, arising from the perception that the family (and southern Mayo) had gained disproportionately from the allocation of government funds. Browne also assured Peel that the young candidate would cause no trouble or dissension in parliament, 'I cannot promise that he will be as staunch as myself but I expect to give him good dispositions towards the government'.⁷³ Unknown to Browne, however, was the fact that Richard 'Humanity Dick' Martin, another longstanding rival, had also petitioned Peel for the delivery of Tyrawley's votes, in favour of Dominick Browne's rival, Martin Kirwan. Richard Martin had been harshly criticised by the Brownes on account of the indifference he had allegedly shown when dealing with agrarian rebels or fugitives. Martin informed Peel that although Kirwan was related to him, the principal reason for supporting him was 'his contrasting principles [when] compared with those of Mr. Browne'.⁷⁴ Unsurprisingly, 'Neal Beag', the tempestuous son and heir of Browne's other great rival Neal O'Donel, also endorsed Kirwan's candidacy and instructed all the freeholders on his Newport estate to vote for him. The election campaign ran from 29 December 1813 to 4 March 1814 (an unprecedented 57 days) and turned out to be, in Denis Browne's words, 'most unpleasantly contested'.⁷⁵

Although the families had clashed over political matters before the act of Union, this particular disagreement was purely personal. This animosity was inflamed further when Neal O'Donel junior swore an affidavit in the county court alleging that Denis Browne and his land agent, Mark Bourke, had repeatedly assaulted him during the contest. O'Donel asserted that Browne had attacked him in Castlebar court on the 29 January, and knocked him to the ground with two blows of his stick. A general melee erupted in the courtroom when O'Donel retaliated. O'Donel alleged that he was then attacked by Browne's agent before Browne himself 'took the informant [O'Donel] by the hair of the

⁷³ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 25 Nov. 1813 (N.A.I., Official Papers 396/3).

⁷⁴ Richard Martin to Robert Peel [Nov. 1813] (*ibid.*, 396/4).

⁷⁵ Denis Browne to Sir Robert Peel, 29 Jan. 1814 (B.L., Peel Correspondence, MSS 40,217 (11)).

head and gave him a violent punch in the stomach'. O'Donel passed out and 'remained apparently dead for some time'.⁷⁶ The alleged assault was remarkably similar to the allegations made against Browne during the earlier elections of 1786 and 1802, as was the eventual outcome. O'Donel's allegations were struck out as being merely an unfortunate part of the robust nature of politics. The verdict was held in contempt by O'Donel and had even led to a violent confrontation between the parishes of Kilmeena and Aughagower, the principal villages located on O'Donel's and Browne's land.

Dominick Browne scraped to victory by a mere 114 votes when the contest eventually concluded. Browne won 4,464 votes, Kirwan 4,350, and a third candidate, Samuel O'Malley polled 46. The narrow margin between Browne and Kirwan suggested that the Tyrawley votes in north Mayo had largely gone to Kirwan, while Castlebar, Westport and Claremorris voted, unsurprisingly, for Browne. This disaffection with the Brownes in northern Mayo continued to rise until George Bingham temporarily ousted Dominick Browne as MP in 1826. As a direct result of the contest, Dominick Browne introduced a bill to limit the duration of Irish elections to 20 days, which became law in 1817.⁷⁷ However, the by-election victory was not the great result that Denis Browne had hoped for. He had hoped to return a young and malleable member that could represent the family's interests for decades to come. But Dominick Browne proved to be as independently minded as Peel had feared when he heard of his selection and from 1816 he began voting steadily with the opposition on all major issues, but particularly on retrenchment, Irish questions, parliamentary reform, and to the chagrin of Denis Browne, with Francis Burdett on all his motions.⁷⁸

With this in mind, Browne came to the conclusion that by the next election, it would be better for him to vacate his long held county seat in the hope that one of his sons would be returned for it in the future. Still recovering from the Castlebar assault, O'Donel's bitterness towards Browne festered for several months. Unwisely, he then demanded a

⁷⁶ 'The Informations of Sir Neal O'Donel of Newport House in the Said County of Mayo', 9 Feb. 1814 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers 1558/17).

⁷⁷ Thorne (ed.), *History of Parliament*, ii, 676.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, iii, 281.

duel with Browne as the most honourable way to settle their private and political differences. The 'fire-eater' age of duelling in Ireland had largely come to an end by this period and challenges to 'regain honour' by this method were viewed with increasing concern by Lord Whitworth's administration in Dublin.⁷⁹

Browne reported the threat and assault allegation to the Grand Jury in Castlebar and O'Donel was brought before a magistrate during the winter assizes of 1814. He was tried in Castlebar at the end of February 1815, and received twelve months in prison for threatening the life of a sitting MP and common assault. The verdict delighted Browne as a long-standing rival had been neutralised by imprisonment and all the social isolation associated with it. However, a campaign by some of O'Donel's influential relatives to secure his release on grounds of ill-health, angered Browne intensely, though he had employed the same tactics in London when the second marquess was in prison. Several letters supporting O'Donel were sent to the Lord Chancellor and William Gregory by Lord Annesley (O'Donel's father-in-law) and Sir Capel Molyneux (his brother-in-law) in the hope of swaying the opinion of the Castle. However, O'Donel was keen to stress to the Lord Justices in Dublin that he would only accept remission of his sentence through the machinations of his close family and certainly not 'through the interference of Mr. Denis Browne'.⁸⁰ O'Donel's concern was unfounded, as Browne had already sent several letters to the Castle, demanding that 'the wildest delinquent' he had met in his life serve his sentence in full.⁸¹

Browne sought an audience with Peel in London and Whitworth in Dublin in an attempt to prevent any clemency towards O'Donel. The Chief Secretary and Lord Lieutenant assured Browne that they could not interfere with the decisions of the King's Bench in Dublin. Two days later, while still in London, Browne learned that O'Donel had been released on grounds of ill health by the Lord Chancellor. Writing in a rage to William Gregory, Browne demanded to know 'what those reasons were for taking this unusual step' and called for the 'copies of all documents on which it was founded' to be

⁷⁹ Kelly, *That Damn'd Thing called Honour*, pp 239-47.

⁸⁰ Sir Neal O'Donel 'to the Chief Justices of Ireland', 27 Apr. 1815 (N.A.I., Official Papers 439/19).

⁸¹ Denis Browne to William Gregory, 14 Feb. 1815 (ibid., 439/19/1).

immediately sent to him.⁸² Gregory rejected these overtures and reminded Browne curtly that he could not interfere with the decision and that the Lord Justices owed him no explanation for their actions. Browne was chastened by this rebuke and replied with a full apology: ‘my only object is to set myself right as to [my] meaning and intention, disclaiming the most remote [idea] of giving offence of any kind to the Lord Chancellor’.⁸³ This legal and personal setback was another disappointing reminder to Browne that, although he still enjoyed significant local leverage in Mayo, the influence that he had once enjoyed within government circles had unmistakably diminished. It was in this context that Browne sought to rejuvenate the Brownes’ political profile by plotting the return of his son for a seat in Scotland. This strategy carried innumerable difficulties, not least the lack of a suitable constituency, and eventually came to nothing. Browne then toyed with the idea of procuring the seat for Kilkenny City for himself, with the help of his brother-in-law, John Ottway Cuffe, the second earl of Desart, who had been the Mayor of Kilkenny and Lord of the Irish Treasury from 1809 to 1810.

By 1816, however, the most pressing problem in the west of Ireland was the slump in linen manufacturing and food exports, which followed the conclusion of the French wars that had buoyed the local economy for over twenty years. The eight-year period between 1816 and 1824 was one of particular devastation for many Mayo estates.⁸⁴ During 1820-21, on one of Howe Peter Browne’s estates in Murrisk, a large area of land was depopulated by peasants who simply threw up their holdings and moved on. It was reported that ‘whole villages were deserted and the stock removed without previous notice’.⁸⁵ Howe Peter, when second marquess, eventually established a large mountain farm on the depopulated areas of Murrisk, where he grazed cheviot sheep.⁸⁶ Denis Browne noted the decline in his income arising from delayed rental payments when he wrote to Peel to describe the worsening local economy. He painted a bleak economic picture, and characteristically, warned of the potential for violence, stating that, ‘if I gave my tenants any further time to combine against me [they were unable to pay rent], I

⁸² Denis Browne to William Gregory, 11 May 1815 (ibid., 439/19/3).

⁸³ Denis Browne to William Gregory, 23 May 1815 (ibid., 439/19/4).

⁸⁴ McCabe, ‘Law, conflict and social order’, p. 17.

⁸⁵ *Report on the employment of the poor*, H.C 1823 (561), vi, 48.

should lose all my means for the support of a large family of grown men and women'.⁸⁷ In a frank admission of his financial worries, Browne also asserted a self-pitying belief that his fortune had never equalled his 'rank in life' during previous decades.⁸⁸ Indeed, Browne's rather pessimistic report to Peel gave way to an unusual display of self-commiseration as he weighed up his options for the future. Recognising a changing political landscape, he informed Peel that he was thinking of relinquishing his seat in parliament to his son because of a disinterest he felt for the job, 'it is my intention to, as immediately as possible, to put my son in my place, who is more fit for an MP than his father [is]'.⁸⁹

However, Browne's morale soon recovered sufficiently for him to launch a fresh and spirited attack on tithes during yet another parliamentary debate to alter the hated impost. This was part of several major debates concerning Ireland orchestrated by the Opposition in an attempt to rally support from the many Irish MPs who, like Browne, were alienated from the government by the steady curtailment of patronage in Ireland. Peel had intended to exclude the issue of tithes from the debates but was unsuccessful and used the debate to skilfully prevent any direct investigation into the tax. During the early nineteenth century, there was a significant shift towards tillage crops such as grain, corn and wheat as a result of the continental wars. By the end of the European conflict, the agricultural economy of Ireland was virtually dependent on the British market. As a result, the country was fully exposed to post-war deflation and the associated collapse in agricultural prices. As tithes were payable on tillage crops, many small farmers found themselves in no position to pay the tax.⁹⁰ During the debate Browne declared that 'no step would be more desirable for the tranquillisation of Ireland than an alteration in the system of its tithe laws'.⁹¹ The issue of tithes had often divided Protestant opinion. The nobility and gentry favoured the commutation of tithes, if not an outright abolition, but

⁸⁶ *Observations on the nature of agriculture, Poor Inquiry appendix (f.)*, H.C. 1836 (38), xxxiii, 365.

⁸⁷ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 30 Jan. 1816 (B.L., Peel Correspondence, MSS 40,217 [unnumbered]).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Samuel Clarke and James S. Donnelly (eds), *Irish peasants: violence and political unrest, 1780-1914* (Manchester, 1983), pp 30-31.

⁹¹ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, xxxiv (London, 1816), 699-702.

the bishops and clergy, however, were generally opposed to either measure.⁹² Browne favoured an abolition of the tax and asserted in parliament that he had often witnessed gross abuses of the system, ‘instances in which the Catholic tenant of five acres had paid the full tithe whilst a Protestant proprietor of a thousand acres had paid nothing’.⁹³

Browne’s position was admonished by certain conservative figures as being disingenuous and potentially dangerous. One member, John Leslie Foster, even accused Browne of initiating an attack on the Protestant clergy of Ireland.⁹⁴ Browne apologised for any misunderstanding and rejected the charge. However, this populist display from Browne did not impress Peel. The outcome of the debate was a decision to delay any investigation into Irish tithes. Moreover, Peel referred to the tithe as only an ‘alleged cause of popular discontent in Ireland’, before insisting that an inquiry into tithe commutation in England should also include Ireland.⁹⁵ Browne’s contribution to the debate, however, lifted his spirits. He invited Peel to Westport for a hunting expedition on Croagh Patrick, included some wild venison in the package and stated that on the Secretary’s arrival he ‘would kill the fatted calf without meaning to call [him] a prodigal son’.⁹⁶ This barbed, yet effusive, invitation brought a cool response from Peel, who gave a ‘qualified refusal’ and hoped to take it up at a future date.⁹⁷

This, more personal, approach to Peel had mixed results as several of his petitions were successful. An appeal to place the land agent of Robert Lynch, a modest landlord from Claremorris, in the position of gauger of Westport quays was successful. This was particularly gratifying for Browne as the placement promised to ‘put an end to opposition to me in Mayo’.⁹⁸ A personal request by Browne to be appointed to the Mayo Linen Board was also sanctioned by Peel in December 1816. Furthermore, a lengthy request urging the review of salt tax used for curing fish on the west coast of Ireland was

⁹² Clarke and Donnelly (eds), *Irish peasants*, pp 124-5.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ John Leslie Foster (1780-1842), M.P. for Dublin University 1807-12, made Advocate-General in Ireland in June 1816, M.P. for Armagh 1818-1820. He was opposed to Catholic Emancipation until it became inevitable under Peel’s government.

⁹⁵ Jenkins, *Era of emancipation*, p. 122.

⁹⁶ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 5 Aug. 1816 (B.L., Peel Correspondence, MS. 40,217 [unnumbered]).

⁹⁷ Robert Peel to Denis Browne, 11 Aug. 1816 (*ibid.*).

forwarded by Peel to be viewed by a special commission in London, which was tasked with the overhaul of the British fishing industry. It is unclear, however, whether the Commission considered the equalisation of taxation in the two kingdoms.

Nevertheless, by 1819 the Fishery Board of Ireland was set up to supervise and encourage activity in the industry. In one of its first recommendations, the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Talbot, appointed several commissioners who were to pay bounties for boats and catches and to make loans available for boats and equipment. However, the fact that Browne called for more direct capital to be supplied to the fishermen of the west in his *Letter on the State of Ireland* suggested that he was rather impatient with the work of this Board in the more remote parts of Ireland. Nevertheless, Browne felt that his personal standing with Peel had improved and took the opportunity to call for further assistance to remedy the terrible poverty that was beginning to take its toll as a fully fledged famine threatened the region during the winter of 1816-17. The worsening economic crisis in Mayo was summarised by Browne when he sent Peel a county map in November 1816. A postscript on the map described terrible misery in the region:

Country quiet, potatoes will be mostly consumed, as I think by April, crop is so bad. Oats very good, abundant, wheat very bad. No barley this year in Mayo. Land fallen in rent one half. Flax crop abundant, prices very low. This country is in a miserable state as to its finances. Farmers bankrupt must fly from this country, gentry nearly as bad. In six months, I will venture to say there will be a general bankruptcy in Mayo.⁹⁹

The ‘very good’ supply of oats was not enjoyed by the local peasantry as the export market of this crop remained strong, guaranteeing a scarce supply at Westport market. Browne told Peel that there had been a ‘great rise in [the] price of oats’ and that the ‘roads [were] covered with carts carrying it to the sea port [of] Westport’.¹⁰⁰ The continuation of normal commerce during this period of dire poverty and starvation naturally led to an upsurge in agrarian crimes in a desperate attempt to reduce prices and increase the circulation of food. The outbreaks in various parts of Ireland disturbed the

⁹⁸ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 8 Oct. 1816 (ibid.).

⁹⁹ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 3 Nov. 1816 (ibid.).

¹⁰⁰ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 18 Nov. 1816 (ibid.).

government enough, not only to pass the Peace Preservation Act and to apply the Insurrection Act in Tipperary, but also to examine ways of directly intervening in the market in cases of 'extreme necessity', where persons were 'actually starving and without the hope of relief from other quarters'.¹⁰¹

Steps were taken to secure oats and seeds for Ireland, and to ensure that they found their way to tenants. In addition, the government purchased unused stocks of corn held by distillers and suspended the duties on imported rice and Indian corn.¹⁰² These relief measures were initially drawn from the Irish treasury but were eventually incorporated into a broader relief bill from parliament that earmarked £250,000 for Ireland. The money from this bill was also used to fund large scale public works throughout the country. The Lord Lieutenant appointed the commissioners charged with advancing money from the fund and they proceeded to make loans to Grand Juries around the country for the construction of roads, bridges and court houses.¹⁰³ County workhouses were to be cleared of the 'lunatic poor' who were to be placed in asylums. Browne advised the select committee on conditions in Connacht on how best to secure more room in the workhouse for the physically and mentally fit. The Irish Chancellor, William Vesey Fitzgerald, interviewed Browne about the necessity of an asylum in Connacht. Remarkably, Browne stated that after several unsuccessful attempts, he had collected £5000 in fines from illegal distilling, and successfully proposed to the gentlemen of the county that an asylum should be established in the disused Charter School in Castlebar.¹⁰⁴

Twenty cells were built but Browne was convinced that a much larger establishment would be needed if the workhouses of Connacht were to be emptied of their 'lunatic paupers'.¹⁰⁵ Parliament authorised Lord Talbot to order the establishment of asylums within the various provinces with the expenses being defrayed by the respective Grand Juries. While these government interventions set a worrying precedent among conservative members of the cabinet members, Peel was satisfied with the strategy in

¹⁰¹ Robert Peel to Lord Whitworth, 8 Mar. 1817, cited in Jenkins, *Era of emancipation*, p. 129.

¹⁰² Jenkins, *Era of emancipation*, pp 129-30.

¹⁰³ R. B. McDowell, *The Irish administration, 1801-1914* (London, 1964), p. 202.

¹⁰⁴ *Report on the Lunatic Poor in Ireland, 1817*, HC (430), viii, 23.

Ireland. Indeed, he echoed Denis Browne's well worn views on confronting outrage with a combination of coercion and concession when he wrote to Whitworth in July 1817: 'We must repel force with force but the more we can soothe, the better for the future at any rate'.¹⁰⁶

In 1817, Browne's reputation was further enhanced when Lord Whitworth, in one of his last acts as Lord Lieutenant, appointed him as one of the public advisors to issue money from the consolidated fund for public works for a term of five years. Even the presence of Richard 'Humanity Dick' Martin on the same commission failed to dampen Browne's happiness at his appointment. A series of reports in 1824 by this commission revealed that Browne had secured loans of £16,120 in his and Lord Sligo's name to build several roads and improve Westport harbour.¹⁰⁷ Several thousands more were forwarded to the Grand Jury of Mayo to repair the court houses of Castlebar and Ballinrobe and to build a road from Castlebar to Blacksod Bay in the north of the county. The infrastructural improvements that Browne had long petitioned for were at last taking shape. A mail coach road from Westport to Ballinrobe was completed, along with a more direct route between Westport, Claremorris, Ballyhaunis, Castlerea and the Royal canal, all within the Brownes geographical sphere of influence. Alexander Nimmo, the civil engineer assigned to the west, stated that the Grand Jury of Mayo had prioritised and completed this work. Dominick Browne was also successful in his request for £2,000 for a road between Ballinrobe and Tulsk, an area near his family's residence in Castlemagarret. However, the long awaited road through Erris was delayed due to a lack of additional funding. Nimmo stated that an extra £6,000 would be needed to finish the road, which was only fit for horsemen at that time. The engineer, however, stated that Lord Whitworth had deemed the road necessary in 1817 and that the work should be completed sometime in the future.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Peel to Lord Whitworth, 25 June 1817 (B.L., Add. MS. 40293).

¹⁰⁷ *Account of Sums advanced by Commissioners for Issue of Money from Consolidated Fund for Public Works in Ireland, 1817-23*, H.C. 1823 (249), x, 40, and H.C. 1824 (278), xxi, 4.

¹⁰⁸ *Account of Sums advanced*, H.C. 1823 (249) x. pp 32, 35, 40.

Browne's constructive relationship with Whitworth ended with the arrival of Lord Talbot as Viceroy in October 1817. While Browne's, already strained, relationship with Peel cooled further when his recommendations, which concerned the general election of 1818, were ignored by the Chief Secretary. A serious disagreement also came from Peel's decision to appoint a rival landowner, William Brabazon, to the position of High Sheriff of Mayo. Browne had petitioned Peel several months earlier about the 'grave threat' to government if Brabazon was appointed Sheriff. This 'grave threat' was, more accurately, a threat to Browne's self interest in the county. Central to Browne's dislike of Brabazon was not his suitability for the position but the fact that his family had bought up 'Browne land' when the family had been in financial difficulties at the beginning of the eighteenth century.¹⁰⁹ However, the main reason for Browne's distrust was simply the fact that Brabazon was close friends with George Bingham, and therefore a threat to him politically. He described Brabazon as, 'the gentleman of Mayo most inimical to my family interests and the most likely to do us injury in the event of an [election] contest'.¹¹⁰ He then proceeded to give Peel further reasons why the Brownes' preferences [either William Bingham or Colonel Cuffe] should be adhered to:

Our fidelity to your political friends, in all fortunes, from Regency inclusive. The faithful use we have made of this office for public service for thirty years. That it has been bound to us invariably well, we should nominate as to this post.¹¹¹

Another reason for the Brownes' consternation was the fact that, if appointed, Brabazon would be an unreliable adjudicator at the coming elections in the county. Dominick Browne, fearing a possible threat to his seat, wrote to Denis from London imploring him to meet with Peel in Dublin to impress on him the seriousness of the situation. Dominick Browne regarded Brabazon as being a 'most violent enemy of your family's pretensions to the representation of Mayo, as well as to mine'.¹¹² Denis travelled to Dublin to meet Peel but was refused an audience with the Chief Secretary. Noting a decline in the value of his opinions, Browne lamented that the office of Sheriff, 'had been trusted to us in

¹⁰⁹ <http://www.landedestates.ie/Brabazon>.

¹¹⁰ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 24 Nov. 1817 (B.L., Peel Papers, Add. MS 40,217 [unnumbered]).

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Dominick Browne to Denis Browne, 1 Dec. 1817 (*ibid.*).

critical times', and that the decision should be reversed 'as an act of justice' to the two sitting MPs. Peel was unmoved and stood firmly by his decision.¹¹³

Brabazon's appointment was compounded by a further delay in making funds available for a road through Erris. Browne accused Peel of having some 'jealousy as to the grant for the Erris road', a remark that could not have improved the chances of a satisfactory reply from the Castle.¹¹⁴ The last letter from Browne to Peel, before the latter vacated the office of Chief Secretary, was written a week before the general election in June 1818. Browne was keen to relay the bitterness that he felt from what he perceived to have been Peel's attempt to place the local governance of Mayo within the hands of 'novice' politicians and 'fair weather' supporters. In a long letter that contained a mix of self-pity, pathos and anger, Browne bitterly accused the government of only referring to him during times of crisis, when rebels needed to be pursued and punished. The reward for this loyal service, he believed, was political isolation and a deaf ear to regional progress. Neither was Peel receptive to Browne's request to place his son, James, into the parliamentary seat for Hamilton in Scotland. Browne fumed to the departing Secretary:

Why then has the government refused to bring us forward when we were able to assist, doing preference to new friends, whom they have tried only in prosperous times. Times of prosperity [and] the old hands are discharged. All this to a certain degree is [the] common course of things but the treatment I have met with is beyond that. I have no occasion for lessons of life, mine is nearly over. Neither will the treatment I have received be a lesson for you. Your abilities and fortunes will ever keep your place for you. If you could know how I have been injured and trampled on, I am certain you would be sorry for it.¹¹⁵

Peel ignored this plea, which served to confirm his growing impatience for Browne and his like. Indeed, he was glad to be out of Ireland and 'free of responsibility, anxiety, Ribbonmen, Orangemen, patronage mongers and the daily trivia of Irish administration.'¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 4 Dec. 1817 (ibid.).

¹¹⁴ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 14 May 1818 (ibid.).

¹¹⁵ Denis Browne to Robert Peel, 5 June 1818 (ibid.).

¹¹⁶ Peel to ____, June 1818, cited in Jenkins, *Era of emancipation*, p. 137.

As Peel left Ireland, Browne took the decision to step down as MP for Mayo County after holding the seat for thirty-six years. The imagined threat from William Brabazon or Martin Kirwan towards the Browne's electoral chances did not materialise during the summer election of 1818 and Denis's son, James, was successfully returned alongside Dominick Browne as the county's newest MPs, heralding a new 'Brownish' ascendancy in the county's representation, which would last another twenty years.¹¹⁷

(iii.) Observations, recommendations and death, 1820-28.

Denis Browne revived his plan to secure one of the borough seats of Kilkenny City and his latter years were remarkably active despite the fact that he was suffering terribly from gout and approaching sixty years of age when he was elected. This was enhanced further by the publication of a detailed pamphlet, *A Letter on the State of Ireland*, which outlined his observations on the political and economic woes of the country and the recommendations to finally overcome them. The *Letter* was essentially a political and economic manifesto, a personal testimony that instructed the government on how to defuse the growing threat from 'firebrands' like Daniel O'Connell. The formation of the Catholic Association in 1823 reinforced the urgency of this message. Mass based organisations troubled Browne immensely, and he felt the only way to neuter any revolutionary intent of the Association was to grant a full Catholic relief bill, accompanied with the safeguard of a state payment for priests.

This was, in fact, a resurrection of the arguments he had made so forcefully in the 1790s. Browne believed that the Catholic Association of the 1820s was similar to the radicalised Catholic Committee that had organised the Catholic Convention in 1792. He was determined to prove this connection and remind the ruling elite that the logical intention of such 'radical' movements was a conflagration on the scale of 1798. The Under-Secretary, William Gregory had similar anxieties about the Association, referring to it as

¹¹⁷ Apart from George Bingham holding Dominick Browne's seat from 1826-30.

a 'popish parliament'. Gregory was also concerned that the membership fee or 'Catholic rent' of a penny could do enormous damage, by opening 'a direct communication between the popish parliament and the mass of the popish population'.¹¹⁸ In hindsight, these fears of O'Connell's 'moral force' movement were misplaced, but they accurately reflected the great unease that was felt by conservative gentry figures when faced with the highly organised and resourceful Catholic campaign of the 1820s. It was a non violent campaign, but one that was backed by seven million people. As Wellington noted in 1824, 'if they can raise money, they will soon have arms and ammunition'.¹¹⁹

Browne's victory in the borough seat of Kilkenny was a formality as his brother-in-law Lord Desart had secured the support of the city's freeholders for his chosen candidate. The City's register contained a paltry poll of one hundred and fifty five voters, of whom Browne secured one hundred and eight to his rival William Fletcher's forty-seven. The new MP never resided in the city, apart for a few nights spent in Desart's country house when local matters needed attention. Furthermore, the death of the young lord, within months of Browne's election, further weakened the link between the MP and the closed borough. However, Browne was quick to make his mark on the new parliament and he seconded a motion in February 1821, which called for a committee to be established to consider Catholic claims. While this motion called simply for the 'consideration' of Catholic emancipation, Browne revived memories of the broken promise of 1800 and the consequences of what Grattan had called 'a narrow union'. To deny Catholics now, Browne argued, was to 'scatter the seeds of future woes'.¹²⁰

Indeed, Browne had to assert his right to speak because of a rule which denied members who had seconded a motion from taking part in the subsequent debate. The Speaker overruled the query and, adopting the role as a spokesman for Irish Catholics, Denis Browne

¹¹⁸ William Gregory to Robert Peel, 11 Apr. 1824 (B.L., Peel Correspondence, Add. MSS 40334/87).

¹¹⁹ Wellington to Peel, 3 Nov. 1824 in Robert Peel, *Memoirs of the Right Honorable Sir Robert Peel* (2 vols, London, 1857), i, 348-9.

¹²⁰ Hansard's *Parliamentary Debates*, iv (London, 1821), 1013.

‘was loudly called for’.¹²¹ Browne took to his feet and called for the immediate establishment of a Select Committee:

To inquire into the truth of the allegations contained in the petitions of five million people, who paid the taxes, who supported the establishment, who had defended the country in times of danger, and who were, nevertheless de-barred the enjoyment of the constitution. If an absolute promise of emancipation had not been made to the Catholics, there certainly had been a hope held out to them. Mr. Pitt saw that whilst the legislatures were separate, the claims of the Catholics could not be granted – hence the Union. If, before that measure, it would have been madness to grant those claims, it would be madness to refuse them now.¹²²

It was certainly robust language on the part of Browne and he was roundly applauded after the speech. *The Times* also reported cheers and cries of ‘spoke’ for Browne, adding that ‘the Hon. Member concluded by hinting at the dangers which might attend a continual refusal of the boon in question’.¹²³

Browne’s line of argument underlined the threat of O’Connell’s ‘moral force’ strategy, the implication being that if Catholic claims were not addressed then the leaders of the Catholic people could not be responsible for the outcome. The motion itself was passed by two hundred and sixteen votes to one hundred and ninety seven after a third reading in the Commons during April 1821. The complexities of Browne’s political philosophy was demonstrated within days, however, when in a response to Matthew Wood’s debate on brutality in English prisons, he made a strident defence of law and order.¹²⁴ Browne urged the House ‘not to be led into serious discussion by all the babbling trifles that were uttered [regarding] every gaol in the Kingdom’.¹²⁵ This characteristically tough stance was questioned by Opposition members who expressed surprise at Browne’s words, ‘as he had come from Ireland, where oppression, especially in prisons, was notoriously so familiar’. The radical Scottish MP, Joseph Hume, challenged Browne and ‘hoped [that] the parliament of England was not yet prepared to adopt such indifference or sanction

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *The Times*, 1 Mar. 1821.

¹²⁴ Sir Matthew Wood (1796-1843), lord mayor of London, 1815-17, M.P. for the City of London, 1817-43.

¹²⁵ Hansard’s *Parliamentary Debates*, v (London, 1821), p. 162.

such scenes as had desolated or degraded Ireland'.¹²⁶ It was clear, that although Browne was to consider, and state, relatively liberal views regarding the Catholic question in Ireland, there was still no room for discussion when it came to a vigorous and uncompromising observation of the law and the appropriate punishment for its transgressors.

1822 was a year of frenetic activity on the part of Denis Browne. He took an active part in several high profile debates in parliament concerning the dangers that would accrue from additional tithes and the 'evils' inherent in tolerating absentee tax evasion. These efforts were underpinned by the publication of his 'Letter' to the Lord Lieutenant, Richard Wellesley. Browne printed the pamphlet in London and timed its publication to test the long held belief that Wellesley was sympathetic towards Catholic Emancipation.¹²⁷ The pamphlet's introduction dealt with an anomaly that Browne felt was peculiar to Ireland – an unending loop of outrage and rebellion, that was brought about by degradation and injustice, and carried out with virtually no expectation of success. Browne contradicted some of his earlier beliefs by asserting that this rebellious spirit often occurred during relatively prosperous economic periods, citing the 1798 rebellion as a prime example. Poverty was not the bedrock of rebellion and revolution but civic and religious exclusion, which resulted in 'the madness of despair' as Browne called it.¹²⁸ In this context, Catholic emancipation would tranquilise and no longer antagonise the kingdom.

However, he noted that the United Irish conspiracy had been markedly different from the usual agrarian outbreaks, describing it in terms similar to those offered by the Anglican bishop, Joseph Stock, in the immediate aftermath of the insurrection. Browne stated that the organisation of the United men had been so complete and disciplined that it almost entirely eradicated the 'habitual and inveterate' vice of the peasantry, their inclination to

¹²⁶ Ibid. Joseph Hume (1777-1855) was a radical Scottish M.P. who voted at various times for Catholic Emancipation, parliamentary reform and free trade.

¹²⁷ Patrick Hogan, 'Denis Browne: from reaction to reform: the mellowing of a Connacht squire' in *Galway Arch. Soc. Jn.*, 57 (2005), pp 29-38.

¹²⁸ Denis Browne, *A Letter from the Right Hon. Denis Browne, MP from Kilkenny to the Noble Marquess Wellesley, on the Present State of Ireland* (London, 1822), N.L.I., P.668, no. 6, pp 5-6.

drunkenness. He continued that, while interviewing rebels as part of the parliamentary Secret Committee, he had noticed that 'its [the United Irishmen's] inferior agents were for the most part, diligent, discreet and zealous, while its leaders and directors were men of great powers and ability'.¹²⁹ This recognition of the complexity of the United Irish system of command, represented an apparent shift from his post-rebellion stance. In the aftermath of 1798, he publicly subscribed to the 'papist conspiracy' narrative of the rebellion. That, which viewed the rebels as deluded wretches in search of plunder.

However, his assessment of the rebellion in 1822 was more nuanced. Browne did not regret his reactionary campaign in its aftermath. However, he warned the government against underestimating the 'spirit' amongst the disaffected and 'to impress upon their minds, that what has been, may be again'. Browne thought that clear civic equality was an imperative to defuse this cycle of violence and rebellion. If the Catholic bourgeois class could be officially represented in society, then the recourse to arms would not be an option for the 'multitude'. However, civic equality could only be maintained if was afforded to Ireland on economic and political ground. Browne believed an equal and intimate 'connection must exist, though England were to spend her last shilling and her last man in effecting it'. Browne was confident that the time was right to 'lay the foundations of future security', which would stop a reoccurrence 'of the calamities, through which our fortune and the error of our enemies, we have so narrowly escaped'. This could only be done by identifying and examining in detail 'those anomalies in the situation of Ireland, which occasion and perpetuate this state of things'.¹³⁰

Browne identified six direct causes for the insecurity and economic backwardness of Ireland and six corresponding remedies to neutralise them in the longer term. The first cause he dealt with was the sense of dislocation evident among Irish Catholics towards the established church of the country and therefore, from the state itself. Browne believed that it was not only wrong but also counterproductive that the 'clergy of the mass of the population (had) no connection with the state'. In this arrangement, while the local priest

¹²⁹ Ibid., pp 6-7.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

had the moral attention of the congregation, 'the penitent held the key of the purse and his payment'. Browne remembered (correctly) that during 1798 many 'well disposed clergymen of the Catholic faith [had] warned their congregations against the guilt of rebellion', only to be cautioned by the same parishioners that they should 'beware of meddling with the views of your paymasters'.¹³¹ To counter this dangerous resentment in Ireland, Browne believed that 'all distinctions on account of religious belief', should be removed, and that the state should pay the Catholic clergy, a notion first articulated during the vice royalty of the Duke of Portland in 1782. Portland's private secretary Thomas Lewis O'Beirne had suggested the idea in the belief that it would make the clergy independent of the laity and bring 'their bishops more in contact with the government'.¹³² Browne noted that a continuance of the remaining penal laws had not made the Irish people Protestants: 'that experiment has been tried for two hundred years and it has failed'. However, a caveat inserted in the text stressed that no plan could be entertained that would compromise the security of the established church, as 'the Protestant religion' was a plank in the immutable union and Empire. While the 'the down fall of one would be accompanied by the ruin of the other'.¹³³

Browne identified the second cause for Ireland's precarious state as a population beyond the means of supporting itself. In the absence of sufficient resources, assisted emigration or 'a system of colonisation when practicable' was advanced as the most direct means to alleviate the population 'of some seven millions [or] about two hundred and forty persons to a square mile, including bog and water'.¹³⁴ Assisted emigration was an attractive proposal to many landlords in Connacht and Lord Lucan as well as Lord Sligo funded the travel expenses of many tenants during periods of particular hardship. In 1828 it was reported in the *Times* that 'some of the great landholders of Ireland are seriously engaged in devising means for the transfer of their superabundant tenantry to places where there are superabundant acres'.¹³⁵ It also reported that 'the marquess of Sligo has purchased a large tract of land in Van Daemon's land' with the intention of transferring tenants

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp 8-9.

¹³² O'Beirne to Castlereagh, Nov. 1800, cited in Keogh, *French disease*, p. 69.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp 15-16.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9

¹³⁵ *The Times*, 11 Sept. 1828, p. 3. It cited efforts by the Duke of Leinster to buy large tracts of land in Texas (then in Mexico) as a way of emptying parts of his estate.

there.¹³⁶ His initial, and preferred, choice had been in Canada, but the deal had fallen through due to Protestant opposition [Canadian opposition intensified strongly during the 1840s].¹³⁷ When the population of Ireland had ‘decreased to manageable proportions’, Browne believed that venture capital and centrally funded works could assist in the successful employment of the remainder. Further improvements in agricultural techniques and the funding of the fishing industry would also deliver much needed revenue. Indeed, Browne was confident that ‘the sources of wealth and industry in Ireland’ were already in existence, they only needed the sufficient ‘capital to bring them into action’.¹³⁸ Improvements on the Brownes’ estates, often with the support of government funds, served as viable example.

The third and fourth ‘causes’ in Browne’s pamphlet were old and constant bugbears of the ageing MP, namely the tithe system and the ‘evils of the absentee system’. On tithes, Browne was again quite radical in his outlook, and recommended that the entire system should be scrapped and replaced with a land tax, which he believed, ‘was a tax upon produce and nothing else’.¹³⁹ If this were combined with an ‘agistment tithe’ on all pasture lands, then the ‘the evil of the tithe system [would] in a great measure disappear’. On absentees, Browne was unreserved in his contempt, describing it as ‘the greatest evil with which Ireland is afflicted’.¹⁴⁰ The practice, he believed, posed a twin threat to Ireland’s economy and security. The absentee landlord ‘consumed the produce of the soil but never returned to fertilise it’. In other words, the paternal and watchful eye of the resident landowner was missing and replaced the selfish whims of agents, bailiffs and middlemen. Browne was thinking of himself when he wrote that the ‘protecting eye of the landed gentleman of the country, the natural protectors of the lower classes does not

¹³⁶ Ibid. For assisted emigration in nineteenth-century Ireland see Gerry Lyne, *The Landsdowne Estate in Kerry under the agency of William Stuart Trench, 1849-72* (Dublin, 2001), pp 25-59; Robert James Scally, *The end of Hidden Ireland: rebellion, famine and emigration* (Oxford, 1995), pp 89-96; Gerard Moran, ‘Escape from Hunger: The Trials and Tribulations of Irish State-Aided Emigrants in North America in the 1880s’, in *Studia Hibernica*, no. 29, (1995-1997), pp 99-115; ‘James Hack Tuke and Assisted Emigration from Galway and Mayo in the 1880s’, in Mary Clancy (ed.), *The Emigrant Experience* (Galway, 1994), pp 73-8; Desmond Norton, ‘Lord Palmerston and the Irish Famine: A Rejoinder’, in *The Historical Journal*, vol. 46, no.1 (March, 2003), pp 155-165.

¹³⁷ Scally, *End of Hidden Ireland*, p. 90.

¹³⁸ Denis Browne, *A Letter*, pp 17-18.

¹³⁹ Ibid., pp 18-19.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., pp 11-12.

watch over their wants or difficulties', leaving them to become miserable, impoverished and, most importantly, rebellious.¹⁴¹ According to Browne, these 'evils' could only be lessened by an alteration in the mode of taxation with a property tax replacing excise duties on certain commodities and luxuries as an inducement to remain resident in Ireland. He believed that this move would also hit the ubiquitous smuggling trade on the west coast of the country.

The last two points that were examined by Browne were the deficiencies in the circulation of currency in the country, particularly in the more remote parts of the kingdom, and the freeing up of church and corporation lands for economic development. To remedy the paucity of currency circulation in Ireland, Browne recommended the establishment of provincial banks in central areas, each having a capital of half a million pounds. This, he insisted, would encourage industry and stimulate various kinds of local commerce. In 1825, whether swayed by this argument or not, Westport was selected by the Wellesley administration as an appropriate site for the establishment of a Bank of Ireland, one of the first branches of the Bank outside Dublin. The Bank of Ireland began to open branches throughout the country during the 1820s along the lines of the Scottish pattern and in response to newly created rival banks such as the Northern and the Hibernian.¹⁴² George Clendenning, the land agent of Lord Sligo since 1798, was appointed as agent to the bank, much to the satisfaction of Denis and his nephew.¹⁴³ Referring to the 'episcopal' and corporation lands, Browne recommended enabling the bishops to grant leases for over thirty years, thus providing a degree of security to land that he estimated took up one-ninth of the country's total. In this event, 'improvements would rapidly take place, houses would be built and a large body of the Irish peasantry would procure immediate employment'.¹⁴⁴ The *Letter* was an impressive attempt by Browne to extol the virtues of Union when it came to security and defence, while at the

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.11

¹⁴² Oliver MacDonagh, 'The Victorian Bank, 1824-1914' in F. S. L. Lyons (ed.), *Bicentenary essays: Bank of Ireland, 1783-1983* (Dublin, 1983); David Dickson and T. M. Devine (eds), *Ireland and Scotland, 1600-1850: parallels and contrasts in economic and social development* (Edinburgh, 1983), p. 213.

¹⁴³ Ó Flanagan, 'Westport – a new town, 1780-1825', p.138.

¹⁴⁴ Denis Browne, *A Letter*, pp 21-2.

same time being critical of the economic restraints and disadvantages, he believed, it had unintentionally caused. In the conclusion, Browne clarified this position:

By the terms of the Union, it is said [that] the taxes, drawbacks and regulations must be similar in both countries and therefore Ireland is barred from any alteration. I deprecate this argument *in toto*. Circumstances must regulate the respective arrangements of both countries. By circumstances alone, the affairs of mankind can be directed, otherwise we should be wise in theory and fools in practice.¹⁴⁵

This was essentially a call for recognition of regional circumstances between the two countries, in effect a more flexible Union. Indeed, as Browne called for ‘tranquillity, union and the permanent prosperity of Ireland and the Empire’, the broader tone of the *Letter* revealed an unmistakable regret on his part that the Union had not in itself delivered many of the economic and social advances that he and his brother had envisioned twenty years previously.

Browne’s pamphlet was complemented by a series of contributions in parliament, where he railed against the injustice of tithes and absenteeism and called for a more protectionist type of economy for Ireland. Nevertheless, Browne criticised those MPs who called for radical action to deal with the ongoing problems of Irish society. In June 1822 he strongly condemned a proposal from the Whig MP, Edward Ellis, which recommended not only the commutation of tithes, but also the distribution of church property as the only real way to conciliate and ‘benefit all classes of the community’.¹⁴⁶ Browne was appalled by the motion and its implications. He ‘implored his countrymen to vote against [it], as it was calculated so completely to mar their own work and utterly to disconnect themselves from any liability of [being] deemed participators in those revolutionary and monstrous measures’.¹⁴⁷ Browne’s predictable retreat from any measure that was deemed ‘revolutionary’ was likely to have been further encouraged by efforts made by Daniel O’Connell. In 1822 O’Connell issued a lengthy manifesto calling for the formation of a

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 22-3.

¹⁴⁶ Hansard’s *Parliamentary Debates*, vii (London, 1822), 1180.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

new Catholic Board to petition for emancipation and a system of domestic episcopal nomination.¹⁴⁸ In Browne's mind, any radical departure from parliamentary procedure was, at best, counterproductive but more worryingly, had the potential to become seditious and a focal point for 'rabble rousing' rhetoric.

By 1824 Browne's concerns were extenuated by the formation of a new Catholic Association that was financed by small, regular subscriptions called the 'Catholic Rent'. Embarrassingly for Browne, this Association was also appointing 'committees' to inquire into issues that he had identified in his *Letter*, the abolition of the tithe and the under-use of Dublin Corporation land. Reports of Catholic Rent payments in Galway and Mayo brought about more reactionary outbursts (in personal correspondence to government). He argued that if the rent was not stopped 'by a strong hand directly, then it will run through the province'. The leaders of the O'Connell movement were even described by Browne as 'the leading insurgents in Dublin'.¹⁴⁹ It is reasonable to believe that Browne had heard of certain emancipation meetings, where O'Connell had used rhetoric that seemed to have been ambivalent to violent organisations, as if he might need them in the future. O'Connell, of course, used this populist rhetoric to drum up as much support as possible, and had no intention of calling the Ribbonmen to arms in the future.¹⁵⁰ Browne urged the government to both give into the 'insurgents' and make peace or immediately 'stop this levy of money'.¹⁵¹ A report that Peter Ward, a Catholic priest from Auhagower, the village nearest his Westport residence, had given sermons supporting the Catholic Rent, led him to gather as much information as possible about the preacher. On finding that Ward was in receipt of an annual government pension of £60, for loyal service in the past, Browne immediately recommended that this payment be cancelled and added a well worn aside to the new Chief Secretary, Henry Goulburn:

¹⁴⁸ McDowell, *Public opinion and government policy*, p. 98.

¹⁴⁹ Denis Browne to William Gregory, 14 July 1824 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers 2624/16).

¹⁵⁰ M. R. Beames, 'The Ribbon Societies: lower class nationalism in pre-Famine Ireland' in C. H. E. Philbin (ed.), *Nationalism and popular protest in Ireland* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 255.

¹⁵¹ Denis Browne to William Gregory, 14 July 1824 (N.A.I., State of the Country Papers 2624/16).

The whole object of the [sermon by Ward] appears to me to be unquestionably open rebellion and war to get rid of taxes by the Protestant religion and to recover their rights as they call them.¹⁵²

Nevertheless, Browne's *Letter* and his obvious grasp of many economic and social problems in Ireland did not go unnoticed within the broader political establishment in Britain and Ireland. In 1823, he was a member and witness to a Select Committee established to inquire about the employment of the poor in Ireland, while in early 1825 he was called to give evidence about recent disturbances in the country, in which he essentially blamed O'Connell and the Catholic Association. The evidence that Browne gave to the 1823 Committee mirrored what he had written in his *Letter* the previous year and concerned the best ways to stimulate industry and agriculture. His views on the over-population of the country were also similar. Browne believed in population reduction and coldly observed to the Committee that 'if we had two millions of people less, we should be better than we are'.¹⁵³

The testimony given by Browne to the 1825 Committee examined the various disturbances that had taken place in Ireland during outbreaks of Rockite violence in Munster and Leinster.¹⁵⁴ However, the Committee's work essentially became an examination on the possible outcomes of Catholic Emancipation and, critically, of what caveats, amendments and precautions should accompany any future measure. Browne was one of thirteen witnesses who gave evidence to the committee, alongside high profile figures including Daniel O'Connell and Anthony Richard Blake, a Catholic who had been appointed as a Commissioner for Education in Ireland. Browne's evidence was given with a sense of weariness towards government inaction on the whole issue, a demeanour that hinted to the Committee, that had his advice been followed thirty years ago, then the most recent manifestations of popular anger would not have occurred. However, while Browne was not particularly worried about the Rockite threat, he was deeply concerned at what he believed was being thrust upon the Catholics of Ireland, 'a

¹⁵² Denis Browne to Henry Goulburn, 19 Dec. 1824 (ibid., 2625/17).

¹⁵³ *Select Committee concerning the employment of the poor in Ireland*, PP. H.C. 1823 (561), vi, 50.

¹⁵⁴ Donnelly, *Irish peasants*, pp 102-43.

sort of violent agitation of the mind', that he 'never saw equalled in that country'.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, this threat seemed to afflict 'all classes of Roman Catholics in the country, high, middling and lower'.¹⁵⁶

The proof given for this assertion was the fact that he could not collect sufficient information about the Catholic organisers from the reliable sources he had used in the community for over thirty years. These Catholic sources, or agents, had been habitually sent by Browne to various parishes, during periods 'when the Roman Catholics [had been] very violent', as a means of steering popular opinion away from illegal activity and towards a patient and loyal petition for civic inclusion. At this point, however, Browne found 'that those people who were in my confidence, and who acted with me, and whose existence depended upon me, were changed in their feelings'. When pressed for a reason for this change of feeling, Browne was unequivocal as to where the blame lay, 'the whole body of the population are joined heart and hand with this Catholic Association'.¹⁵⁷ This was clear evidence of the success of O'Connell's overall strategy — to impress on Catholics of all classes their common 'non-privileged' status, their ethnic distinctiveness and their common suffering at the hands of a privileged minority.¹⁵⁸ O'Connell was creating a movement of mass protest, which he roused with speeches that blamed Britain for turning Ireland into 'a pitiful province', and with a toast that declared 'Ireland to themselves'.¹⁵⁹ This was disturbing rhetoric for Browne, who likened it to the radicalism of the United Irishmen during the 1790s.

While Browne blamed the Dublin press, an argument he had made for decades, for the dissemination of 'incitements and incentives', he was very clear that the entire problem could be instantly solved by the removal of the Catholic grievances themselves. With two personal caveats, the state payment of Catholic clergy (one of the so-called 'wings' that was mooted to accompany a future relief bill) and the retention of a property qualification

¹⁵⁵ *Select Committee on the State of Ireland with References to Recent Disturbances*, PP H.C. 1825 (129), viii, 28.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Jenkins, *Era of emancipation*, p. 216.

¹⁵⁹ Patrick Geoghegan, *King Dan: the Rise of Daniel O'Connell, 1775-1829* (Dublin, 2008), p. 223.

for the forty-shilling freeholder. Referring to an Emancipation Act without these inclusions Browne added that he ‘would not give sixpence for it’.¹⁶⁰ The reasons for this were similar to those he had put forward in his *Letter*, to remove priests and bishops from the whims of their ‘paymasters’ (the laity), and to create a sense of loyalty and dependence to the state. Browne was convinced that if the clergy were paid then they ‘would preach peace and quietness, and would become, instead of what they are now the secret enemies of government, the friends of that government that paid them’. He also pointed to the fact that the Presbyterians of the north had reverted to loyalty after their long association with radicalism and republicanism after the government had granted a *regium donum* to their clergy in the 1670s.¹⁶¹ In reference to the abolition of the voting rights of forty shilling freeholders (which later accompanied the bill in 1829) Browne was openly more self-serving. He stated that a large part of his family’s interest lay with the Catholic forty shilling freeholds in the west of Ireland, but added that if the Protestant equivalent in England and in the north of Ireland could be trusted to follow the wishes of the resident landlord, then ‘his’ freeholders could also be. When he was asked about the possibility of Catholic priests influencing the voting patterns of an election, Browne responded that he would not personally permit it, but that in general, an *esprit de corps* existed within an estate where a landlord was resident. Indeed, O’Connell did not regret the elimination of the forty shilling freeholders as he believed they were too dependent on the political dictates of the local gentry.¹⁶² At length, both of Browne’s recommendations were ignored in the 1829 bill, along with a further deferral on the issue of tithes, which guaranteed that the Catholic Question rumbled on without definitive closure for several more decades.

The activism of Browne during the 1820s culminated in the disappointing election of 1826. On the grounds of age and ill health, he vacated his seat in Kilkenny to John Doherty, a friend of the Desart family. In Mayo, Denis’s eldest son, James, retained his seat while George Charles Bingham received a strong vote, particularly in the north of

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁶² McDowell, *Public opinion and government policy*, p. 108.

the county, where an 'anti-Browne' agenda had been pursued by the local papers and supported by a mercantile interest that was eager for change. Various letters appeared in *Ballina Impartial* bitterly asserting that Denis Browne's hegemony was coming to a close in the region, that the 'aristocracy, which has so long governed our county with a rod of iron' was coming to an end and that the people intended to show 'a certain Right Honourable that his reign of despotism [was] drawing to a close, that the sun of his power has nearly set for ever'.¹⁶³ A report that Dominick Browne was seen canvassing in the Ballina area was accompanied by the observation that he had received very little support and that the more conservative Bingham was likely to take his seat. The *Impartial* asserted confidently that 'the principal body of Tyrawly (and we might say the entire county's) Freeholders [were] determined to support Lord Bingham.'¹⁶⁴ In reality, George Bingham's politics did not differ dramatically from Browne's. He was in favour of Catholic relief and had signed a requisition for a county meeting in support of emancipation in February 1825. Bingham's cousin, Thomas Spencer Lindsey of Hollymount, county Mayo, subsequently wrote to Daniel O'Connell and assured him that Bingham would 'certainly give the electors of this county an opportunity at the next election of exercising their franchises'.¹⁶⁵ Bingham duly put his name forward for the election and said he would be 'bound to no party', but was standing as an opponent of the 'coalition' that had 'taken deep root' in the county.¹⁶⁶ The thrust of Bingham's election campaign was that he was not a Browne.

The campaign was successful and Bingham captured the seat in June 1826, relegating Dominick Browne to foreman of the Grand Jury for the rest of the year. Dominick Browne was perplexed at the result as he had gained a high profile the previous year when he had presented a petition to the Commons in support of Francis Burdett's failed Emancipation Bill of 1825. This petition had been signed by the leading nobility, gentry

¹⁶³ *Ballina Impartial*, 15 May 1825.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 25 Oct. 1824.

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Spencer Lindsey to Daniel O'Connell, Feb. 1825, in Maurice O'Connell, (ed.), *The correspondence of Daniel O'Connell*, (8 vols, Dublin, 1972-80), iii, 106. Lindsey was a former high sheriff of Mayo and referred to the Brownes disparagingly in the letter, describing them as 'the family who, at present, rule with despotic sway here'.

¹⁶⁶ *Dublin Evening Post*, 25 May, 27 June 1826.

and Catholic clergy of Mayo. It is likely that Denis Browne's hostility towards O'Connell's campaign prior to the 1826 election affected the family's performance, and while Dominick Browne was a pro-emancipation Burdettite, he was the person suffered most from the reaction. Subsequently, when O'Connell invited the Protestant peers and supportive gentry to a 'sumptuous public dinner' in Dublin in appreciation of their efforts, neither Lord Sligo, Dominick Browne or James Browne accepted the offer. However, the 'golden opportunity', as the Ballina press called Bingham's election, did not last long and Dominick Browne successfully won the seat back in 1830. Bingham succeeded his father in 1839 and became the third earl of Lucan, before becoming a representative Irish peer in the House of Lords. He earned the opprobrium of the Mayo peasantry when he 'modernised' the Bingham estates in 1845 and cleared vast tracts of land of small plots and strips, evicting hundreds in the process.¹⁶⁷

Browne, however, was disappointed by the defeat of 1826 and withdrew from national politics to concentrate on local security matters (the growth of the Catholic Association in Mayo) during the final years of his life. He was a member of the four-man Grand Jury of Mayo until 5 August 1828 and died from suspected heart failure or 'acute dropsy' on 14 August 1828. The obituary referred to a man of great energy and integrity, stating that he represented the wishes of Mayo in both the Irish and British parliaments. It added:

In the more private, though not less useful situation of a resident county gentleman and landlord, Mr. Browne was, by example and precept, an encourager of industry and agriculture. Whilst in execution of this duty, he was seized with the illness, which terminated so fatally.¹⁶⁸

There were various accounts regarding the burial of Browne but the most reliable report states that he was buried in a vault beneath the Church of Ireland in Claremorris, not far from his residence at Claremont House.¹⁶⁹ A local story alleges that Browne's crypt was robbed of its ornamental sword several years after he was interned there.¹⁷⁰ A more

¹⁶⁷ See *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 2004), v, 119.

¹⁶⁸ *Mayo Constitution*, 18 Aug. 1828.

¹⁶⁹ Quinn, *History of Mayo*, p. 60.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

intriguing local tradition soon grew that reflected the contentious nature of Browne's legacy in the area. It also portrayed the popular memory of Browne, as an evil reactionary and mercenary, a folk tradition that survives in Mayo. The tradition, recorded in a contemporary manuscript, maintained that when 'Denis the Hangman's remains' were deposited in the small church, 'the devil came and took, not only his body, but his soul as well'.¹⁷¹

This traditional view of Denis Browne does not, however, convey the longevity and activism of his parliamentary career. For over forty years, he took his parliamentary responsibilities extremely seriously, taking part in countless debates and contributing to numerous commissions, which covered subjects from Catholic Emancipation to the health of the fishing industry in the west of Ireland. While predominantly loyal to the various administrations in Dublin and London, he was not averse to voting or speaking against them if family loyalty or regional concerns deemed it necessary. His early political allegiance was, to be sure, unpredictable, as he journeyed from idealistic Patriotism to reactionary conservatism. His post-Union career, however, was grounded solidly in the belief that Catholic social and political inclusion was not only morally correct, but that it was the surest way to guarantee stability, tranquillity and prosperity in the country. As interested in economic progress as he was in high politics, Browne was keen to explore various ways that could lift the west of Ireland out of dependence and poverty. His economic ideas were grounded in protectionism and government stimuli but they highlighted the fact that he believed in some form of regeneration for the poorest parts of Ireland and was not in parliament solely for selfish gain or social mobility. Although, remembered mostly for his repression following the 1798 rebellion, it should be noted that of all the MPs who sat in parliament for Mayo County from 1750 to 1850, it was Denis Browne who was the most vocal and active of them all.

¹⁷¹ Daniel Campbell, 'History of Knock, Co. Mayo, 1879' (N.L.I., MS. 31,718).

Conclusion

Although Denis Browne's obituary was predictably effusive in its praise of his public and political achievements, it was an accurate reflection on the vigorous attempts he had made during his life to navigate through the uncertainty of governing a county (although he never held the title of county governor) where Catholics allegedly outnumbered Protestants by about fifty to one.¹ It stated that during his time as MP for the county, Browne had 'held paramount sway over its internal discipline and local interests', adding that during 'the long voyage of his political life, he had to encounter many severe storms, in which he proved himself a skilful and successful Pilot'.² The 'storms' to which the obituary alluded were the French invasion of 1798 and the various outbursts of agrarian violence. However, Browne's continuous battle with the government for extra military personnel, patronage and economic stimulation for the region could easily be added to that list, along with numerous unsuccessful calls for Catholic relief, during a parliamentary career of forty years. Although the Catholic Emancipation act was unexpectedly passed a year after Browne's death, it is unlikely he would have approved a bill without the security of a clerical pension, or have entertained optimism of its ability to stem further agrarian outrage. It contained the very clauses that Browne had warned against; the abolition of the forty-shilling franchise and a failure to establish a state payment for priests. Indeed, by 1832 the electorate of Mayo had shrunk to 1055 freeholders out of a population of 367,956. The register had peaked at 15,000 in 1815.³

The 'internal discipline' that the obituary alluded to also resonated within the popular perception of Browne for decades after his death. The brutality of his methods during 1798, his ubiquitous presence and the obsessive vigilance he maintained throughout his life all fed into a folklore that, at times, portrayed him as the devil incarnate or the very symbol of what was perceived to be 'Protestant' or 'English' misrule. The long list of popular nicknames associated with the Brownes is mostly reserved for Denis or

¹ *Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into Irish Forfeitures, 1699*, cited in J. G. Simms, 'Connacht in the eighteenth century' in *Irish Historical Studies*, ii, no. 42 (1958), p. 116.

² *The Mayo Constitution*, 18 Aug. 1828.

³ Bernard O'Hara, 'Mayo elections, 1801-1982' in idem (ed.), *Mayo: aspects of its heritage* (Galway, 1982), p. 97; Walker (ed.), *Parliamentary election results in Ireland, 1801-1922*, p. 230.

his sons. ‘Denis the Rope’ and ‘Soap the Rope’ were the most popular but others also became popular; ‘Denis the Bear’, ‘The Hangman’, ‘The Bear of the West’, and according to Guy Beiner, an Irish nickname that was particularly odious, ‘Buinneacháí Buí’ (yellow diarrhoea or scourbag).⁴ These names reflect the ability of a (then largely) illiterate population to bequeath a figure of perceived injustice with a wretched legacy that is still remembered in Westport today. Indeed, while compiling the short history of the family, the tenth marquess of Sligo only briefly alluded to life of Denis Browne, citing that this ‘petty dictator’ had abused his privileged position.⁵

While an accurate assessment of Denis Browne’s behaviour during periods of upheaval, this popular perception reduced his political significance to that of a regional despot, which is both inaccurate and misleading. The complexity of Browne’s politics is not recognised in this popular assessment of his life. The reactionary ultra-loyalist is well remembered but the sincere advocate of Catholic relief and economic stimulation is conveniently forgotten. In contrast, Lord Altamont/Sligo, who was often as contradictory in his political career as Denis, was remembered as a benign landlord and a keen agriculturist that provided loans and tools to tenants in an effort to enhance productivity of the region. However, Sligo was never reluctant to hang or transport rebels when he believed a message needed to be sent to the ‘wavering’ peasantry. As such, the Brownes were both contradictory and controversial in their political careers but there is no doubt that history has been immeasurably kinder to the better-known, more illustrious but less politically active of the two brothers.

Indeed, it was Lord Sligo’s concentration on agricultural and urban improvement at the expense of his political contributions in parliament that helped to perpetuate a positive popular legacy. One of the notable features of Ireland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the widespread modernisation and reconstruction of large numbers of towns and villages. Lord Sligo was the epitome of this ‘improving landlord’ class and invested heavily in re-organising Westport with linear streets, octagons and malls, which were punctuated with architecturally important

⁴ Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish social history and social memory* (London, 2007), p. 88.

⁵ Browne, *Westport House*, p. 32.

buildings, such as opera houses and civic buildings. Like Lord Rosse in Birr and William Stewart in Cookstown, these improvements were not solely due to the aesthetic tastes of the landlord. In Lindsay Proudfoot's estimation, these towns were the 'material expression of landlordism as a state of mind', a 'controlled environment in a severely hierarchical world'.⁶ However, just as the landlord's approach to law and order was affected by the increasing role of a centralised state, so too was this reliance on significant landowners to found and stimulate towns on their estates. By the 1820s and 1830s, the accelerating pace of political, economic and social change had begun to undermine the landlords' social dominance and economic authority. Even the textile industry that Lord Sligo and his father had done so much to stimulate in Mayo was declining rapidly by this stage due to the end of the continental wars and the more industrialised and efficient output of Belfast and Derry. Nevertheless, Lord Sligo's efforts in town and estate improvement lay a foundation that the second Marquess, Howe Peter, was able to harness.

If the Ribbon crisis of 1819-20 reflected the gradual decline in the influence and authority of Denis Browne, then the opposite was the case in the career of Howe Peter. The heady and carefree days of his youth were replaced by a sense of duty and ambition that resembled his father. Similarly to the first Marquess, Howe Peter became an 'improving' landlord during this period, preferring to take more personal interest in the economics and industry of his vast estate, which contained well over 130,000 acres by the end of the 1820s.⁷ Browne also became popular among his tenants during a difficult economic period in 1831. He imported two cargoes of potatoes into Mayo and ordered that they were to be sold cheaply in local markets. During the same slump, he distributed £1000 worth of flax to the women on his estate in order to stimulate local employment.⁸ In providing local law and order, Howe Peter overcame his distrust of the official police force and he urged William Gregory to establish a permanent police presence in both Castlebar and Westport. However, Sligo was still central to law and order in the county and this role, as both magistrate and

⁶ Lindsay J. Proudfoot, *Urban patronage and social authority: the management of the duke of Devonshire's towns in Ireland, 1764-1891* (Washington D.C., 1995), p. 53.

⁷ *Return of Owners of Land of One Acre and Upward in the Several Counties and Towns in Ireland*, p. 312; Jasper More, *A tale of two houses* (London, 1978), p. 13. More reported the Brownes estate at over 200,000 acres but this is an exaggeration.

⁸ Desmond McCabe, 'Ghosts of moral economy' in R. Gillespie and G. Moran (eds), *'A various country': essays in Mayo History, 1500-1900* (Westport, 1987), p. 101.

governor during the late 1820s and early 1830s, is dealt with in Desmond McCabe's thesis, which covers that particular period of low intensity conflict in the west.⁹

In 1834, Howe Peter was appointed governor of Jamaica and only returned to Mayo in 1839, when the local economy and subsistence farming structures were on the verge of collapse. However, there was no resurgence of wide scale Ribbon activity or popular protest, which had accompanied earlier periods of social and economic distress. In fact, there were to be little, if any, outbursts of organised dissent in Mayo for several decades until the actions of the Land League took hold in the 1870s. While the imperial position of Captain General and Governor of Jamaica was a peak in the Brownes' status and wider importance, the 1830s showed a decrease in the family's influence and regard on the estates of Mayo. Similar to the absentee landlords that had punctuated the various criticisms of Denis Browne, the estates belonging to the marquess were soon solely administered by George Clendenning junior (until he was dismissed for corruption in 1847). The paternalistic approach of a resident and concerned landlord, which had marked the family's dealings with tenants, was missing and naturally this vacuum was gladly filled by other individuals. The 1830s and particularly the 1840s saw a marked increase in the influence of the Palmer and Bingham [Lucan] families in Mayo. Both families were habitually absentee and increasingly viewed their property as means for profit maximisation and were unwilling to inform themselves of the worsening conditions of their Irish estates, an indifference that was to have catastrophic effects during the ensuing Famine.¹⁰

The appointment of John MacHale to the archbishopric of Tuam in 1834 also had a profound effect on the political landscape of Mayo while the absentee Howe Peter Browne was administering Jamaica. Born in Mayo in 1791, MacHale had been Coadjutor to the bishop of Killala in 1825 and championed denominational education, tithe abolition, tenant rights and Repeal for Ireland in a letter to Lord Grey in 1831. Indeed, his success in becoming the archbishop of Tuam had come in the face of government opposition. In 1812 a committee of enquiry had recommended the establishment of a state-controlled, centralised system of elementary education. The

⁹ McCabe, *Law, Conflict and Social Order*.

¹⁰ See David Byrne, 'The impact of the Great Famine on the Palmer estates in Mayo' (unpublished M.A. thesis, NUI Maynooth, 1996).

government was not prepared to act on these recommendations at the time and instead provided a subsidy for the Kildare Place Society, which had been founded to provide a system of non-denominational elementary education. By 1830, this grant had reached £30,000 for the Society's 1,621 schools. However, allegations were soon made that members of the Society were involved in proselytising activity. The initial support of Catholic leaders for the schools soon evaporated and in 1831, the Chief Secretary, Edward Stanley announced the government's decision to administer a centralised system of non-denominational education.¹¹

It was against such proposals that Archbishop MacHale gained notoriety, citing the scheme for 'National education', as anti-Catholic and therefore anti-national.¹² MacHale's energetic campaign for a Catholic education system centred on a belief that Irish history, language and literature should be taught in any state system and that these new schools should be essentially organised along religious grounds. This early form of Catholic nationalism also had an important effect on the politics of Mayo and the other counties of Connacht and eventually signalled the end of the Brownes political hegemony in the region.¹³ MacHale was a charismatic leader and an indication of just how closely attuned he was to popular attitudes was a personal memoir written by Daniel Campbell from Knock in the east of Mayo. Campbell was born in 1825 and wrote about the archbishop's attempts to usurp the Brownes from their long held parliamentary seats during the 1830s:

When Bishop MacHale was translated to Tuam, he soon shifted the Brownes, who were always MPs for Mayo. And the marquess of Sligo, who is another Browne and relation of the two MPs for Mayo [John and Dominick Browne] often boasted that he could get his cowherd an MP for Mayo. But there was a cowherd near the butt of Nephin and his son [MacHale] soon turned the Brownes out of parliament, nevermore to enter it as MPs for the county.¹⁴

Returning from his pilgrimage to Rome in 1832, MacHale was appalled by what he considered to be the deteriorating economic and social situation in the west of Ireland. In a series of public letters to the prime minister he denounced the government's

¹¹ Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, *Ireland before the Famine, 1798-1848* (Dublin, 1990), pp 97-107

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹³ K. Theodore Hoppen, 'Nationalist mobilisation and governmental attitudes: geography, politics and nineteenth-century Ireland' in Laurence Brockliss, David Eastwood (eds), *A union of multiple identities: the British Isles c.1750-c.1850* (Manchester, 1997), p. 163.

¹⁴ Campbell, 'History of Knock, Co. Mayo' (N.L.I., MSS 31,718, p. 20).

indifference to the worsening condition of the poor and came to the conclusion that the only solution to Ireland's problems was the repeal of the Act of Union.¹⁵ In 1834, he was nominated by the senior clergy of the Archdiocese of Tuam to succeed the recently deceased Oliver Kelly. Protests from the British government about the appointment reflected its concern that MacHale would use the position to garner support for anti-Union candidates in future elections. In April 1840, MacHale publicly endorsed Daniel O'Connell's campaign for the Repeal and lent his name and office to help garner support in the west.

The elevation of Dominick Browne to the peerage in 1836, as Lord Oranmore, probably saved him from an embarrassing defeat. In the subsequent by-election, Robert Dillon Browne (no relation) was elected as a Repeal MP for Mayo County. This spelled the end of the Brownes lengthy political record in Mayo as John Browne lost his seat in 1841 to another Repealer, Mark Blake. By the end of the 1841 election, the two county seats of Mayo were held by Repeal MPs. The end of the Brownes parliamentary presence precipitated a popular ballad in the county, which Daniel Campbell recorded. It referred to the influence that Archbishop MacHale had had on the election, while the melody and verse satirised the Orange song of 1798, 'Croppie lie down' in an obvious attempt to link the Brownes' 'tyranny' to that of the Orangemen in the north. It was a popular reminder that Denis Browne's activities during the rebellion had been avenged:

Says his wife to John Browne,
 You look very blue,
 By my soul said poor John,
 You say what is true,
 Archbishop McHale gave me such a hit,
 That I never again will in parliament sit,
 A few years ago, I heard people say,
 That croppies lie down was the toast of the day,
 But now it is changed in county and town,
 And the cry of the people is,
 'Browne lie down'
 'Down, down, down'
 'Browne lie down'.¹⁶

¹⁵ Emmet Larkin, 'John MacHale', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004-08), <http://www.oxforddnb.com>.

¹⁶ Campbell, 'History of Knock, Co. Mayo' (N.L.I., MSS 31,718, p. 20).

While popular folksongs can only reflect a certain mood within a community, this ballad certainly pointed towards an invigorated Catholic leadership in the county, which culminated in the election of Dillon Browne, its first Catholic MP, in the 1836 bye-election. On hearing the 1836 result, MacHale wrote to Fr. Paul Cullen in the Irish College in Rome lauding the fact that the 'poor Catholics returned a talented and honest Catholic to represent them.'¹⁷ While MacHale undoubtedly helped sway the contest towards Robert Dillon Browne, John Browne did his own political career irreparable damage when he allegedly wished for the day he could hang a priest for saying mass, which earned him the sobriquet 'Sean na Sagart'.¹⁸

This hostile assessment of Browne was also based on a speech he gave in 1834, which criticised the Catholic clergy in the west of Ireland. A correspondent to MacHale's predecessor in Tuam, Oliver Kelley, described the anger over Browne's comments and added an assurance that it had 'made repealers of persons who hitherto were indifferent to the measure.'¹⁹ The defeat of John Browne, the continuing absence of Lord Sligo and the invigorated clerical leadership within Connacht undoubtedly hastened a further diminution of the family's status in the eyes of the Catholics of Mayo. Indeed, Daniel O'Connell wrote to Archbishop MacHale and congratulated him on having 'emancipated' Mayo 'from the Brownists'.²⁰ MacHale, the 'Lion of the West' had helped to eclipse and dilute the potent political legacy of Denis Browne, the 'Bear of the west'. However, any optimism on behalf of the Catholic peasantry was soon to be overtaken by a straightforward struggle to survive as the system of subsistence agriculture and subdivision collapsed totally during the potato blights of the 1830s and 1840s.

Howe Peter Browne died on 30 January 1845, before the full horror of the Great Famine took hold in Mayo later that year. His obituary reported that he had declared himself a Whig in politics, but had 'not mixed up in any party matters for many years past'.²¹ Ominously for the Brownes, above the obituary in the *Mayo Constitution* was

¹⁷ Archbishop John MacHale to Fr. Paul Cullen, 27 May 1836, cited in Eugene Hynes, *Knock: the Virgin's apparition in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Cork, 2008), p. 287.

¹⁸ Campbell, 'History of Knock', p. 20.

¹⁹ Martin Browne to Archbishop Oliver Kelley, 1 Apr. 1834, cited in Hynes, *Knock*, p. 287.

²⁰ Daniel O'Connell to Archbishop MacHale, 28 Apr. 1836, in *Correspondence of Daniel O'Connell*, ed. O'Connell, v, 369.

²¹ *Mayo Constitution*, 4 Feb. 1845.

the news that Sir Roger Palmer was set to succeed Browne as Lord Lieutenant of Mayo.²² Palmer was a firm supporter of Peel's government and was elected to the Conservative Party's Carlton club in London.²³ Palmer's *laissez faire* and market led approach to the suffering of tenants was similar to the Bingham of Castlebar and the Cuffes of Ballina and led to unimaginable scenes of eviction and starvation during the 1840s, which in turn led to a reinforced hatred of landlordism in the psyche of the survivors. On the estates of George Browne (1820-1896), the third marquess of Sligo, the population in nearly every district halved between 1841 and 1851. For example, the population of Aughagower, where MountBrowne House was located, declined from 12,235 in 1841 to 6,511 in 1851. The population of the county itself fell from 388,887 to 274,499 during the same period.²⁴ Only Westport increased in population size as desperate peasants made their way into urban areas in search of relief.²⁵ By 1847, there were 60,000 people crammed into the small town, which soon reeked of typhus and bacillary dysentery.

The third marquess saw his income collapse as tenants could no longer pay rent. However, unlike the Palmer and Bingham estates, Browne did not begin wholesale evictions and borrowed heavily to pay outstanding rates on his land. He also decided to board up Westport House and take up more modest accommodation in the town itself, before sharing the cost of a large cargo of meal in 1846, with George Moore of Moore Hall.²⁶ These measures afforded the Brownes heightened respect among the peasantry and Catholic clergy in the aftermath of the famine and helped rehabilitate the family to a certain degree within the popular conscience of the county. However, as the tenth marquess wrote in his short history of the family in 1981, 'the vindictive behaviour of Denis Browne was well remembered locally after the '98 rebellion. It was a sort of sick joke, (remembered) long after the third marquess's efforts in the Famine were forgotten'.²⁷ The tenth marquess was undoubtedly correct in his

²² William Henry Palmer [commonly known as Roger] became fourth Baron of CastleLacken in 1840 and inherited some 80,000 acres in Mayo.

²³ Byrne, 'The Palmer estates', p. 4.

²⁴ *The Census of Ireland for the Year 1851, Part One, Ulster and Connaught, Population and Housing*, H.C. 1852 (373), xlvi, 42. This census contains data from the earlier 1841 census.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Browne, *Westport House*, p. 49.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

assertion that the negative aspects of history tend to linger longer within the collective conscience of a people or a region.

However, this myopic view of the Brownes' historical legacy should be challenged and counter-balanced by a broader understanding of the family's political impact during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The family was vigorous and violent in the aftermath of rebellion and in the face of threatened agrarian outrage. But it was also actively involved in several key political questions of the period, from the Patriot parliament and the regency crisis to the Catholic question and the viability of Ireland's economic prosperity. Denis Browne was an extremely capable and active parliamentarian, magistrate and land owner. Lord Sligo was the archetypal 'improving landlord', whose contributions to Westport town and its environs can still be seen and enjoyed today. The finance for these infrastructural improvements came as much from successful political engagement as it did from the rent book of Sligo's large estates. Denis Browne's consistent calls for full Catholic inclusion and economic progress have been largely forgotten, hidden behind the numerous nicknames given to him after the terror of 1798 and 1799. Historical memory tends to dwell on the darker aspects of life. However, if both the negative and positive aspects of the Brownes' lives are examined, then a more balanced appreciation of the family's historical legacy can become apparent.

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