

FREEMASONRY AND THE POLICE

- The Irish Experience

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"The thinking policeman" is invited by Charles Stratton (Police Review, 24 March, 1978) "to wonder whether secrecy is necessarily synonymous with evil".

The writer, an Irish policeman, cannot question the good faith of Mr. Stratton's apologia for the Society of Freemasons in England; but Freemasonry has an unhappy history in Anglo-Irish relations.

Since in Mr. Stratton's eyes there is nothing evil in policemen belonging to secret societies, he will be interested to learn that in Ireland, up to 1916, membership of the Freemasons by policemen was actually protected in their Oath of Allegiance to the Crown.

In that year of bloody rebellion in Ireland, the Dublin Metropolitan Police, threatening to strike for more pay, blocked a move to arm the men on the beat.

They were also instrumental in purging the police and constabulary forces on the island of a sinister sectarian influence. The amendment of their Oath of Allegiance gave to a simple unopposed money Bill in the House of Commons the status of a landmark in Irish police history.

Secret societies have always been the curse of Irish politics. The Ribbonmen, the Hearts of Oak and other similar groups spawned by the land wars in the 19th century, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Society of Freemasons and its offshoot, the Orange Order, were oath-bound societies. And that was the rub.

"I would certainly (reconstitute the Irish Constabulary) in such a manner as to preclude all just objections to it on the score of partiality. I presume that at present all party distinctions in the police are forbidden, all attendance at Orange Lodges and so forth, and I think that the regulations in that respect... cannot be too scrupulously enforced. It would be a great object to infuse into the police force an esprit de corps obliterating all other distinctions local or religious but it will be greatly obstructed by the existence of any political clubs or exclusive combinations in the police itself".²

In the Ireland of 1916, no police station was without its compliment of protestant members, including Freemasons. The common purpose and a strong spirit of comradeship bonded the police. But after 1912 and the resistance to Home Rule in the north of Ireland relationships tended to be uneasy. But the Catholic policemen always looked on the Freemasons among them as secret agents, and frankly suspected their intentions.

The dust of the 1916 rebellion had hardly settled in the ruins of O'Connell Street when Dublin Castle decided to arm the Metropolitan Police. Rifles were issued to each of the 24 stations in the police district, and urgent arrangements were made to train the Force in the use of firearms.

The problem is not secrecy itself, as Mr. Stratton perfectly understands. There are State secrets sanctified by law; legitimate family and commercial secrets acknowledged as such by consent, freely given, of the interests concerned.

The professional confidence observed by doctors, lawyers, clergymen - and the police - is protected by the law of evidence; and journalists have gone to prison to uphold this ethic of the Fourth Estate.

The mischief is caused when individuals surrender free will in often terrible oaths to further the designs of self-appointed protectors of the oppressed, or to defend the privileges of an ascendancy class; a form of slavery that must result in moral disorders. It is for this reason that membership of oath-bound secret societies is condemned by the Catholic Church.

The Acts of 1836 establishing the Constabulary of Ireland and the Dublin Metropolitan Police defined identical Oaths of Allegiance to the Crown.¹

As an undertaking by police to discharge their duties impartially the Oath was impeccable down to the final clause, which contained an unfortunate qualification.

"I (A.B.) do swear... that I do not belong to, and that... I will not join or belong to, any political society whatsoever, or any secret society whatsoever, unless the Society of Freemasons. So help me God."

The father of the Irish Constabulary, Sir Robert Peel, who was out of office in 1836, would not have countenanced a qualified Oath. On 14 August, 1829, when he was Home Secretary and at that very moment preoccupied in launching the New Police in London, he took the trouble to write to his successor as Chief Secretary for Ireland, Lord Francis Leveson Gower:

This ill-judged move failed when the police, agitating for more pay, threatened to go on strike. They found a champion in John Dillon Nugent M.P., general secretary of the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

The AOH was not a secret society. According to one of their more romantic rules, they were "founded by the ancient princes and chieftians of Ireland".

They were "pledged to forward by every legitimate and honourable means the securing of religious equality and self-government of Ireland... (and) to unite the Catholic children of the Irish Race in an organisation for the defence of faith and fatherland, and mutual aid, also providing funds to relieve members, their wives and children during sickness and infirmity".

Nugent himself justified the AOH as necessary "to counteract the Ascendancy Party... The Catholic Irishman must stand on an equal footing with his Protestant fellow countryman: he claims no ascendancy, but he demands absolute equality... The Castle system is overwhelmingly Protestant and is dominated by the compass and square of the Masonic lodges of Ireland".

To make his point, Nugent published figures showing the predominance of non-Catholics in a wide range of public and commercial positions filled by the nomination of approved candidates, including (Catholics in parenthesis) Constabulary county inspectors 36(2), and district inspectors 170(10).³

The AOH were also the grassroots organisation of the Irish Nationalist Party in the British House of Commons. On the 15th August every year they paraded in full regalia with bands and banners in imitation of the Orangemen's more strident triumphalism on the 12th of July. They survive today only in the north of Ireland.

At a time when the top rate of pay for a constable in the London Metropolitan Police was 40s/- a week and the men were already on the road to Desborough, the pay of a DMP constable was 33s/- after twenty years.

The movement in Dublin was led by a former Irish Guardsman, Constable William Hetherton, an unmarried man in his early thirties, from Ballinalea, Co. Longford.

The first meetings were held under official auspices in the Police Depot in Kevin Street. When their respectful memorials were ignored, Hetherton booked the Ormonde Hotel, a stone's throw from the Castle. In the subdued surroundings of Mrs. de Massey's hotel, the rebellious policemen were on their best behaviour.

Their subsequent meetings in the AOH hall in Rutland, now Parnell square were noisy gatherings. There were "fiery" speeches, "great outbursts of cheering" and sudden rushes from the hall to evade their officers observing the activity outside.⁴

Nugent assisted the DMP men in forming their organisation, the Catholic Police Benefit and Holiday Society (which was to reform itself in 1917 as the Dublin branch of the National Police and Prison Officers Union).

He then went out of his way to create the impression, and succeeded in misleading Dublin Castle into believing that the men had actually joined the Hibernians.

The precaution had already been taken of withdrawing the service rifles from the police stations, an inevitable response when the men made the AOH hail their rendezvous and welcomed by the rank and file as a return to sanity.

The Commissioner of Police was a former heavyweight boxing champion of England and Ireland and a noted all-round sportsman, Lt Col Walter Edgeworth Johnstone, "always in times of danger and tribulation cool as a cucumber".⁵

In a fit of exasperation on 15 November he was to write to the Under-Secretary, Sir William Byrne: "It is essential for the well-being and discipline of the force that the men should clearly understand that Mr. Nugent and the AOH are not all-powerful".

Byrne had not seen the beginning of the affair. His immediate predecessor, Sir Robert Chalmers, head of the Treasury in London, had been sent to Dublin as caretaker until a replacement could be found for the ill-starred Sir Mathew Nathan, whose career had ended in the ruins of the recent rebellion.

Chalmers had been forced to take on the job. "He hated the squabbles and despised the ideals of the (Irish) people... His one idea appeared to be to get back to London as soon as ever he could."⁶

The political head of the Irish government of the day was another misfit, Henry Edward Duke, M.P. for Plymouth, the man who replaced Augustine Birrell as Chief Secretary when Birrell, like Nathan, returned to London in disgrace.

The new Chief Secretary "was so full of sound law that there was little room in him for imagination... He did not seem to have the least understanding of what was resented in the attitude of England to Ireland... the very act of giving the country to such as he - wise, superior and English in thought - which made the Irish people so fractious and so difficult to govern."⁷

On the 5 August, Johnstone grasped the nettle. He wrote to Chalmers, "Two courses are now open, to appoint a Commission to inquire into the pay of the D.M.P., or to issue an Order to the Force (proscribing the meetings). The appointment of a Commission at the present juncture would savour too much of a victory for agitation." Chalmers dispatched the file to Duke in London, "Pressing. I discussed this matter repeatedly with the Chief Commissioner... It is vital to enforce discipline through the Chief Commissioner firmly and at once."

The meetings were duly proscribed in Police Order No. 395 for 9 August. But the men, with John Dillon Nugent M.P. and the forces of the AOH ranged behind them were in no mood to back down, and the Commissioner's order was ignored.

By the end of October, Johnstone was convinced that "contrary to their Oath (the men) were no doubt enrolled as members of the AOH". Spurred by this confirmation of their worst fears, Duke acted at once.

In the event of a police strike, he directed on 28 October, the RIC were not to be drafted into the city; instead, special constables would be enrolled, with the Army standing in the wings.

The men who had attended the meetings were to be paraded by their superintendents and asked to explain their insubordination. *Johnstone* himself was to see the ringleaders and "in exercise of his discretion punish offenders by fine, transfer or otherwise, or by immediate dismissal".

On 30 October, *Johnstone* ~~he~~ advised the Chief Secretary: "The summary dismissal of the men... while the admitted grievance of the Force as to rates of pay is unredressed might reasonably be expected to have an ill-effect on their comrades, and might be misunderstood outside the Force".

Dublin Castle had just announced to the press the intention of the government to increase the pay of the D.M.P. and R.I.C. Duke was to appear in the House of Commons the following day, and he wanted time to get the debate started. He was happy to agree with Johnstone's assessment of the situation and he carefully marked the Commissioner's cards, "As is sometimes done in grave disciplinary cases, the Chief Commissioner might properly, after hearing the charges and evidence, adjourn his decision of the cases to a later date... November 7th, stating the gravity of the charges as his reason for adjournment."

Early in the debate, Duke begged the issue of allegiance, The enrolment of DMP men in the AOH had, to told the House, alarmed many people in Dublin. In an obvious reference to Nugent, he complained that the member for Dublin, in a conversation in the lobby had "made two absolutely conflicting statements to me... as to whether in (Nugent's) judgement this society was or was not a political society."

The Irish Nationalist for Liverpool, T.P. O'Connor was on his feet at once challenging the Chief Secretary on the police Oath and the exclusion of the Society of Freemasons from the prohibition on membership of political and secret societies. The debate on police pay in Ireland now got lost in sectarian definitions.

Major John Robert Bramston Newman for Enfield-Middlesex attempted a subtle distinction between the A.O.H. and the Orange Order, on the one hand, and the Freemasons: "The Hibernians and the Orangemen stand on the same plane: both are... more than sectarian; they are both great political assets of Ireland; they dabble in politics... The Freemasons take no part in politics."

The member for Enfield was speaking as an Englishman, and Joe Devlin for West Belfast accepted Major Newman's word for it that Freemasonry as he knew it was a charitable organisation. But in Ireland, it was "a most powerful and scientific political machine... It eats into and corrodes the whole social and political life of Ireland."

The political character of Freemasonry in either England or Ireland was denied by Colonel James Craig (East Down) the future Lord Craigavon. But he was, he contradicted himself, "fully alive to the fact that... (the Freemasons were) a secret society".

And that was the very heart of the matter. The Nationalist leader, John Dillon (East Mayo) with devastating insight now identified the root cause, after the Act of Union, of a century of ~~mistrust, not to mention bloodshed and grief~~ in Anglo-Irish relations.

Catholics were forbidden by their Church, under pain of mortal sin, to join secret societies. When the Oath as it stood was imposed on the constables of a Catholic nation in 1836,

"(that) was an act of high-handed oppression and was calculated in the eyes of the people to mark out the policeman as partisan of the ascendancy faction... This act destroyed all idea of faith in the impartiality of the administration of the law".

Duke now echoed the sentiments of his famous predecessor, Sir Robert Peel, to Lord Francis Leveson Gower in 1829: "There must be equal treatment for everybody in these matters of police discipline".

There was one faint protest from Colonel Craig: "I do not intend to press my objection further than to say that, as a member of the Masonic Order, I do not think it is necessary that this step should be taken".

And so the House of Commons, without a division, agreed to delete the reference to the Freemasons in the Oath, in the historic Third Schedule to the Constabulary and Police (Ireland) Act, 1916.

In the final stages of the debate Duke made the remarkable statement that he had been misled by false statements deliberately circulated by troublemakers in Dublin "that a very large number if not nearly all of the members of the D.M.P. (had joined the O.A.H.) in breach of their Oath of office... I am now satisfied... that not merely have not a large body of the D.M.P. joined that society, but none of them have joined it." The inscrutable Nugent added, "That is so."

Under the new legislation, basic pay ~~for constables 33s/-~~ ~~after twenty years~~ was increased by 3s/-, in addition to a war bonus of 3s/6d a week paid in July in an effort to settle the dispute; and the men looked forward to an extra £5 in arrears of pay in time for Christmas.

The ringleaders, Constable Hetherton and four of his comrades were sacked.⁹ The real merit of their sacrifice was the survival of the principle of an unarmed civil police, and the defeat of sectarianism in the police service in Ireland.

References

1. Constabulary (Ireland) Act, 1836 (s.17); Dublin Police Act, 1836 (s.44).
2. Galen Broeker, Rural Disorder and Police Reform in Ireland (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970) p.199
3. J.D.Nugent, The AOH And Its Critics (Dublin, 1911)
4. London, PRO, CO 904/174/4
5. Sir Henry Robinson, Memories Wise and Otherwise (London, 1923) p.241
6. Ibid. p.245-6
7. Ibid. p.247
8. Hansard, 1916, Vols 86-87
9. Constable Hetherton and one of the men dismissed with him were reinstated in 1922 by the Irish Provisional Government.