

# Popular mobilisation and the rising of 1848: the clubs of the Irish Confederation

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In the twelve months leading up to the Young Ireland rising in late July 1848, nationalists in cities, towns, and villages across the country established more than 200 organisations known as confederate clubs. At their peak, these groups boasted a combined membership of more than 40,000 people, all of whom were, in the words of one of their leaders, joined in a common enterprise: 'to destroy the English interest in this country root and branch, to institute a national government . . . and, by our laws and arms, to restore the country in its full integrity and glory to its own brave people'.<sup>1</sup>

Ireland had not heard political rhetoric of this kind or witnessed political mobilisation along these lines since the 1790s. Like the United Irishmen and the Defenders of a half-century earlier, the confederate clubs aimed to mobilise a broad section of the population and to achieve self-government for Ireland through physical force if necessary. But unlike their eighteenth century counterparts, the confederate clubs have not stirred the interests of many historians. As far as I am aware, only one writer – the Japanese scholar Takashi Koseki – has studied the clubs in any detail and he has focused on the Dublin organisations.<sup>2</sup> Others who have discussed the clubs in passing have under-estimated their size and over-emphasised their urban character, resulting in an imperfect image of their basic structure. One recent survey claims, for example, that 'at their widest extent the clubs never numbered more than about seventy', that total membership barely exceeded 20,000, that they were concentrated mainly in Dublin, and that 'organisation in the countryside, not surprisingly, was virtually non-existent'.<sup>3</sup> In reality, as we shall see, the number of clubs was more than three times this estimate, membership was well in excess of 40,000, and by the eve of the rising at least three-quarters of the clubs were located, not in the capital, but in the country at large.

Our relative ignorance of the confederate club movement reflects a general tendency among historians over the past hundred and fifty years to view the background of the Young Ireland rising from the perspective of its Dublin-based

1 Thomas Francis Meagher, 'The Clubs and the Council', *Nation*, 8 July 1848. 2 Takashi Koseki, *Dublin Confederate Clubs and the Repeal Movement*. Hosei University Ireland-Japan Papers, No. 10 (Tokyo, 1992). William Nolan discusses aspects of club activities in a single county in 'The Irish Confederation in County Tipperary in 1848' in *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 1998, pp. 2-18. 3 James S. Donnelly Jr, 'A Famine in Irish Politics', in W.E. Vaughan (ed.), *A New History of Ireland. V, Ireland under the Union, I (1801-70)*, (Oxford, 1989), p. 368.

leaders and to ignore the mobilisation taking place among ordinary Irish people outside the capital. The clubs offer ways of seeing the events of 1848 unfold from another vantage point – that of rank and file nationalists. Before exploring the reasons why tens of thousands of people became drawn into these organisations in the space of a few months, it would be worthwhile to understand how the clubs originated and how they grew and changed over time.

## 1

The rift that developed between the so-called Young Ireland and Old Ireland groups in the mid-1840s became a formal split in January 1847 when the Young Irelanders established a new organisation called the Irish Confederation. Like the O'Connellite Repeal Association from which it sprang, the Confederation was a centralised body controlled by a large Dublin-based council.<sup>4</sup> Within a few months of its creation, however, the Confederation began to reconstruct itself along new lines. In late July 1847, its leaders announced plans to broaden the base of the organisation by forming branch societies in Dublin and provincial towns. These local clubs were intended to provide ordinary members of the Confederation with a variety of useful activities that would make them direct participants in national affairs. Above all, they were literally meant to be schools for their members and the public at large. Their meeting rooms were to be stocked with an array of nationalist books and newspapers; they were to sponsor fortnightly lectures on Irish history, literature, and economic development; and they were to hold regular formal classes in these subjects, replete with examinations and prizes for the top students. As their proponents saw it, by establishing a vast network of such bodies across Ireland, they could create an organisation more vibrant and more potent than the ossified Repeal Association. Charles Gavan Duffy of the *Nation*, who was the most vociferous promoter of this new venture, was convinced that clubs would breathe fresh life into the nationalist movement. Unlike the centralised Repeal Association, which ultimately marched to the commands of a single leader, the new locally-rooted Confederation would be 'founded on the liberty of individual and local opinion, [and] shall carefully substitute silent, progressive work, for clamour and idleness'.<sup>5</sup> Thomas D'Arcy McGee, another champion of the clubs, elaborated on this theme, suggesting 'that instead of one centre of agitation, Ireland should have a thousand – that instead of one committee we should have many – that instead of

<sup>4</sup> The most comprehensive histories of the Confederation can be found in Richard Davis, *The Young Ireland Movement* (Dublin, 1987); and Denis Gwynn, *Young Ireland and 1848* (Cork, 1949). See also Richard Barrett, *History of the Irish Confederation* (Dublin, 1849). The surviving manuscript records of the Confederation are in the possession of the Royal Irish Academy: MSS. 23, H.40-4 and 62-3. <sup>5</sup> *Nation*, 28 Aug. 1848. See also Gavan Duffy's *The Use and Capacity of Confederate Clubs: A Lecture Delivered at the Dr Doyle Confederate Club, Dublin* (Dublin, 1847).

having public opinion under the absolute dictatorship of a Dublin meeting or a Dublin majority, we should have a political union of several free and independent agencies'.<sup>6</sup>

Such worthy goals were more easily proclaimed than achieved. By January 1848 – nearly six months after their creation – only a handful of clubs were operating in Dublin and barely a dozen others existed in the country at large.<sup>7</sup> Total membership stood at less than 2,000 and the likelihood of expanding much beyond that number was not great.<sup>8</sup> The experiences of the Cork club were probably typical: after an initial recruitment campaign that saw 200 young men attracted to the organisation in a few weeks, the numbers slowed to a trickle.<sup>9</sup> In Kilkenny, membership drives aroused the hostility of local O'Connellites who demonstrated noisily outside club meeting halls, smashed their windows, and threatened those gathered inside.<sup>10</sup> In other places, famine conditions dampened recruitment efforts. 'We have not done much for the Confederation', lamented the secretary of the Galway club in early 1848, 'but that entirely results from dreadful local privations and the difficulties consequent on the famine. Once out of that pass', he bravely predicted, 'we will go on rapidly'.<sup>11</sup>

These first clubs also lacked a clear political focus. A few of them sponsored lectures upon such diverse topics as Irish ballad poetry, the industrial resources of Ireland, the history of paper-making in the south of Ireland, and something entitled 'self-culture'. Dublin clubs conducted weekly classes in mathematics, book-keeping, industrial knowledge, English grammar, and ancient Irish history. One organisation boasted that it had set a few silk-weavers to work in its neighbourhood producing green and orange cravats, while club members in Ballina, County Mayo, conducted a survey to determine the value of English-made goods being sold in their town with an eye toward promoting Irish manufactures.<sup>12</sup>

But such activities, however worthy, were not what some Young Irelanders had in mind. As John Mitchel put it in a speech before his own club in the autumn of 1847, '[I do] not approve of making these Clubs mere reading-rooms or mechanics' institutes . . . their great object and study . . . should be to rid the island of English rule – how we should re-conquer this country from England'.<sup>13</sup> Mitchel's remarks reflected the radical turn that his thinking had taken over the previous year as well as his growing impatience with his moderate colleagues on the Confederation council such as Gavan Duffy and William Smith O'Brien. Whereas they remained wedded to the traditional O'Connellite strategy of seeking self-government for Ireland through constitutional means and in alliance with landlords, Mitchel and his followers stressed the need to prepare for armed

**6** *Irish Felon*, 15 July 1848. **7** Clubs were established in Cork, Waterford, Cappoquin, Ballina (Co. Mayo), Galway, Limerick, Kilkenny, Ardfert (Co. Kerry), Belfast, Derry, Newry, and Drogheda. There were six clubs in Dublin. **8** Reports on club activities, *Nation*, 15 and 22 January 1848. **9** *Ibid.*, 22 January 1848. **10** *Ibid.*, 2 October 1847. **11** *Ibid.*, 12 February 1848. **12** Reports of activities in individual clubs appeared regularly in the *Nation* in 1847 and 1848. **13** Report of the Swift Club, *Nation*, 2 October 1847.

confrontation and to broaden the social base of the Confederation to include more of the labouring poor.

Because they were badly outnumbered on the governing council, the Mitchelites turned increasingly to local clubs for support, hoping to use those bodies as levers to shift the nationalist movement onto a more radical course. 'I believe that times are fast approaching', wrote Mitchel in mid-January 1848, 'when the safety and strength of the national organisation will depend entirely upon the Clubs. I hold that if our Clubs be properly developed, it will be of comparatively little moment what divisions, vacillations or weaknesses may possibly occur in our national council'.<sup>14</sup>

The Mitchelites captured the allegiance of a handful of clubs in Dublin and Cork, but it took a series of unforeseen events in the first months of 1848 to politicise all of them more sharply and to expand the club movement beyond anyone's expectations. First came the news in late February of the revolution in Paris that overthrew the French monarchy. Most Confederate groups responded to events in France with public letters supporting the revolutionaries who, like themselves, had begun to form political clubs. Some displayed green flags and French tricolours from the windows of their meeting rooms, while the members of at least one Dublin club closed each of their gatherings by singing what they called 'The Irish Marsiellaise', that is, John Kells Ingram's 'The Memory of the Dead', more popularly known as 'Who Fears to Speak of '98?'<sup>15</sup>

Hard on the heels of the French revolution came the arrests in late March of three prominent Confederates – Mitchel, Smith O'Brien, and Thomas Francis Meagher – on charges of sedition. Clubs immediately staged protest demonstrations, one of which saw more than 1,500 individuals parade through the streets of Dublin in late March to a huge gathering in the Music Hall. There, Mitchel addressed them once again on the need to strengthen the club movement, concluding with the brazen announcement: 'I mean to commit high treason and to ask you all to commit it too (cheers). I tell you to be prepared to rise . . . and to smash through that Castle, and tear down the union flag that insults our city (loud and continued cheers)'.<sup>16</sup> Over the weeks that followed, lecturers at club meetings who had hitherto restricted themselves to cultural or economic topics, now addressed such subjects as 'Popular Power in Revolutions', 'The Pike: Its History and Use', and 'The Chemical Properties of Sulphur, Nitrate, and Charcoal, With Their Compounds as Gunpowder &c'.<sup>17</sup> The names of clubs also reflected a new militancy following the arrests. Most of the original organisations had identified themselves with nationalist patron saints who were not connected with the physical force tradition such as Thomas Davis, Jonathan Swift, Bishop James Doyle, and St Patrick. From April onward, however, new clubs increasingly adopted names that

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 January 1848. <sup>15</sup> Report of the St Patrick's club, *ibid.*, 18 March 1848.

<sup>16</sup> *United Irishman*, 25 March 1848. <sup>17</sup> Reports of the Doyle and Davis clubs, *Nation*, 15 and 22 April 1848.

linked them to Ireland's revolutionary past, among them Wolfe Tone, 1798, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Bagenal Harvey, Robert Emmet, and Hugh O'Neill.

This was also the point at which many clubs began to gather arms, to display them at their meetings, and – more ominously – to use them. Dublin clubs held weekend rifle practice in the Wicklow Mountains and staged shooting competitions, while in Kilkenny some 200 clubmen spent Sunday afternoons in April firing at targets in a garden in upper Patrick Street. Similar gatherings took place in Limerick, Galway, Cork, and Waterford.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, the number of clubs grew steadily from eighteen to forty during the first five months of 1848. They expanded even more spectacularly during June and July, swelling more than fivefold from 40 to around 225 in a mere seven weeks. This dramatic growth arose from two related developments. First, John Mitchel's conviction on a treason-felony charge and his subsequent transportation to Bermuda in late May whipped up nationalist fury to an unprecedented degree. As a consequence, thousands clamoured to join existing clubs while thousands more formed new ones and gave them names that proclaimed their support for Mitchel: 'The Mitchel Club', 'The Irish Felon Club', and 'The Bermuda Club' were typical.<sup>19</sup>

Second, Mitchel's plight deepened the divisions that had already emerged between his militant supporters in various clubs and the more moderate leaders on the Confederation council. Gavan Duffy, Smith O'Brien, and others not only refused to exert themselves on Mitchel's behalf during his trial, they and their colleagues on the council urged the clubs to refrain from staging anti-government protest demonstrations and they turned down all suggestions of a prison rescue. Their reluctance to act enraged large numbers of clubmen, particularly in Dublin, who openly condemned the council for its faint-heartedness and demanded the removal of its members. 'The council are charged with cowardice', reported a Castle spy who had infiltrated the Swift club in Dublin, 'and the clubs are talking of shaking them off'. A few days later, he informed his government contacts that a number of activists were determined to form a new, more streamlined council whose members would be elected by the various clubs and who would therefore represent a more militant outlook. Most important, he noted how more than two dozen men from his own club had gone into the countryside 'for the purpose of organising Ireland from end to end' in preparation for a rising later in the summer when the harvest was complete.<sup>20</sup>

Militant clubmen, in other words, were seizing the initiative from the more cautious Confederate leadership. Over the weeks that followed they became the

**18** The *Nation* reported extensively on these kinds of activities throughout the month of April 1848. **19** Information about the names and number of clubs has been compiled from the three main nationalist newspapers, the *Nation*, the *United Irishman*, and the *Felon*.

**20** Reports of informant 'E.F. no. 1' on activities of the Swift club, 26 and 30 May 1848, Trinity College Dublin, MS. 2038, pp. 32–3. The divergence at this time between militant clubmen in Dublin and the more moderate leaders of the Confederation is discussed more thoroughly in Koseki, *Dublin Confederate Clubs*.

driving force of the nationalist movement, as Confederation leaders tried as best they could to give direction to their activities and to assist the campaign to form new clubs. By the eve of the rising, the clubs had become, for all intents and purposes, the only effective nationalist organisations in Ireland. 'We have no real power but that which the clubs have', wrote Gavan Duffy from his prison cell in mid-July, 'and we must hold them fast or all is gone'.<sup>21</sup>

In the end, however, the leaders of the rising were either unable or unwilling to utilise the clubs. What is more, the clubmen who did turn out to assist Smith O'Brien and his colleagues in south Tipperary in late July were too inadequately trained, too poorly armed, and too badly led to give the rebel cause any hope of victory. 'The organisation was more extensive than most persons think', a Co. Tipperary priest recorded in his diary a few days after the collapse of the rising, but 'the clubs were taken completely by surprise. These said clubs, after a great deal of bravado, showed the white feather when called on to give effect to their professions and I do not at all feel disappointed in my estimate of them . . . Nor is my opinion of the principal leaders [of the rising] much higher.'<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the club movement itself should not be dismissed as a total failure for it represents a remarkable and, in some ways, a successful attempt at mass mobilisation that anticipated certain features of subsequent nationalist movements in Ireland. This can best be understood by examining the nature of these organisations more closely – beginning with their numbers, distribution, and recruitment techniques – particularly during the summer of 1848 when membership was at its height.

## II

By the time of the rising, there were no fewer than 224 confederate groups spread across twenty-six of Ireland's thirty-two counties. Another dozen clubs existed among the Irish living in cities in Britain. Assuming an average of 200 members per club – and this is almost certainly a conservative estimate – total membership in Ireland on the eve of the rising was approximately 45,000.

Not surprisingly, clubs were thinnest on the ground in Ulster where a mere nine of them operated in five counties: Antrim, Down, Derry, Monaghan, and Fermanagh. In the rest of Ireland, only two counties – Leitrim and Westmeath – appear to have lacked confederate organisations altogether. Munster, particularly its eastern portion, accounted for nearly half of the total number of clubs (that is, 107) followed by Leinster with ninety and Connaught with eighteen.

As the accompanying map indicates, clubs were concentrated most heavily in three places. First was the city and county of Dublin with fifty-six clubs. Many of

<sup>21</sup> *Nation*, 22 July 1848. <sup>22</sup> Diary of Fr Thomas O'Carroll, Pastor of Clonoulty, in Revd Philip Fitzgerald, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Confederates of '48* (Dublin, 1868), p. 105.

<sup>23</sup> James Donnelly has studied the activities of agrarian secret societies extensively. See



these were large organisations boasting more than 500 members and their activities received extensive coverage in the nationalist press. It must be borne in mind, however, that even at their peak the Dublin clubs never constituted more than one-quarter of the total. Measured solely by the number of organisations, the club movement was predominantly a provincial phenomenon. This is particularly apparent in the examples of counties Tipperary and Cork whose clubs made up more than one-third of the total (forty-nine and thirty-three respectively). When combined with the Dublin clubs, these areas boasted 139 confederate organisations, or more than three-fifths of the total.

Clubs flourished in Dublin and east Munster for a number of reasons, not the least of them being that these were among the most highly politicised districts in Ireland. Here was where the Catholic Association had enjoyed its greatest support in the 1820s and where the O'Connellite Repeal Association had established a solid base during the early 1840s. Tipperary, Cork, and Limerick were also notorious for the activities of other, less reputable groups that operated on the fringes of the nationalist movement – namely, agrarian secret societies and fighting factions. The culture of violence that they embodied fed naturally into the insurrectionary objectives of the confederate clubs during the summer of 1848.<sup>23</sup> According to the future Fenian, John O'Mahony, who was actively involved in establishing clubs in south Tipperary, faction chiefs in that region assumed the leadership of rural clubs whose membership presumably coincided with the factions themselves.<sup>24</sup>

The efforts of prominent local figures also helped to promote clubs in these areas. Recruitment in Dublin benefited from the presence of the many Young Ireland leaders who resided there as well as the work of particularly zealous club members. Certain Dublin organisations even specialised in founding new clubs. Typical of these was the Curran club whose members busied themselves during a single week in June 1848 with the following:

Sunday. – Deputation to Swords – a large and influential meeting, supported by the clergymen of the parish, and attended by all sections of repealers in that locality; club formed. Same day, another deputation to Cabinteely; club formed. Monday. – Deputation to Constitution-hill; a club established. Tuesday evening. – general meeting of the club. J.B. Dillon, Esq., president in the chair. Presentation of colours to the club by Thomas F.

especially his 'Pastorini and Captain Rock: Millenarianism and Sectarianism in the Rockite Movement of 1821-4' in Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly Jr (eds), *Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780-1914* (Manchester, 1983), pp 102-39. Also, Michael Beames, *Peasants and Power: The Whiteboy Movements and Their Control in Pre-Famine Ireland* (New York, 1983). On the activities of fighting factions in Munster, see Gary Owens, "'A Moral Insurrection': Faction-Fighters, Public Demonstrations and the O'Connellite Campaign, 1828' in *Irish Historical Studies*, 30, no. 120, (Nov., 1997), pp. 513-41. <sup>24</sup> John O'Mahony, 'Personal Narrative of My Connection with the Attempted Rising of 1848', National Library of Ireland, Ms. 7977, pp. 10, 38.



Meagher, Esq. An eloquent and spirit-stirring address delivered by this gentleman which was responded to on the part of the club by the vice-president Mr. C.R. Mahony. Wednesday and the remaining days of the week, collectors employed in augmenting the fund for the heroic wife of John Mitchel. A deputation from this club will proceed tomorrow to the Seven Churches on the mission of club organisation.<sup>25</sup>

Well-known local personalities could be particularly effective recruiting officers for clubs in the countryside. Munster was home to some of the most charismatic figures in the Irish Confederation, including Thomas Francis Meagher, Smith O'Brien, Michael Doheny and the outspoken Mitchelite, Fr John Kenyon of Templeberry. Their frequent appearances around the region kept attention focused upon the aims of the Confederation and, in turn, drew men into the clubs. Meagher and Doheny, for example, were the featured speakers at a massive gathering on the summit of Slievenamon in south Tipperary in mid-July, after which one nearby club reported how 'we enrolled near 700 last night and were obliged to stop from sheer fatigue alone. To-night we expect to enrol double that number'.<sup>26</sup>

In some places local clergymen took the lead in establishing clubs, recruiting members, and in some instances serving as club officers. A striking example occurred in the town of Carrick-on-Suir, County Tipperary, where the parish curate, Fr Patrick Byrne, became, in the words of John O'Mahony who lived nearby, 'the great originator and chief promoter of the movement in that quarter'. Byrne oversaw the establishment of eleven clubs that enrolled no less than one out of three of the community's adult males. In the nearby parish of Ballyneil, the local curate created a club and persuaded O'Mahony, whose family was highly respected in the locality, to become its president. 'Out of this sprang other rural clubs', O'Mahony later recalled, '. . . and our ramifications were soon extending widely throughout the district'.<sup>27</sup>

The spread of the club movement obviously owed much to the political culture of particular regions and to the recruitment efforts of prominent local figures, but these were not the only reasons why individuals committed themselves to confederate clubs. Some did so in response to particular events. As we have seen, many joined out of anger over the trial and sentencing of Mitchel in the late spring. Others were drawn to the clubs in the belief that the desperate conditions brought on by the famine called for desperate remedies. Speakers at club meetings pointed to the distress in the countryside as a justification for radical political action that

<sup>25</sup> *Irish Felon*, 24 June 1848. Another organisation that specialised in starting new clubs was the Students' club, a group composed of Trinity College undergraduates. <sup>26</sup> *Nation*, 22 July 1848. <sup>27</sup> O'Mahony, 'Personal Narrative', pp. 1-2. See also James W. O'Cavanagh to O'Mahony, 5 April 1848, National Archives of Ireland, Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers (CSORP), Tipperary, 27/1635, asking him to become the head of a local club.

would lead to Irish self-government. A typical example was William Barrett, a leather dealer from Fermoy, County Cork, who addressed a large crowd in a farmyard near Kilworth in early June 1848 on the need to form a confederate club. A police constable in the crowd noted how Barrett 'commented at some length on the calamity of these past years and went on to say how the state of things were at Skibbereen and other parts of Ireland and of the people begging bread from the Infernal Government'.<sup>28</sup> In Ballina, County Mayo, a club member reminded his colleagues that 'men, women, and children who this time twelve-month walked our streets and with whose countenances we were as familiar as with the light of day, have been thrown overboard as food for sharks [during their passage to America], have died in the fever sheds of Montreal, or are now perhaps gasping in the last stage of that cursed pestilence that followed them'. To avoid the same fate, he urged others to stay in Ireland, to become members of confederate clubs, and to help bring an end to British misrule.<sup>29</sup>

Many individuals were drawn to the clubs for reasons that were not solely political. They might have shared the aims of the confederate movement but they also joined because they saw their friends, their neighbours, and their work-mates doing so. In Dublin, medical and university students, shop assistants, journalists, trades bodies, and entire urban neighbourhoods each formed their own clubs, as did a group of sea-captains in Wexford, cabinet-makers in Limerick, ships' carpenters in Glanmire, County Cork, and, as noted above, whole fighting factions in south Tipperary.<sup>30</sup>

The clubs also appealed to the (mainly) young men who joined them because they offered an enticing combination of adventure, patriotism, comradeship and, above all, good times. Clubs sponsored shooting competitions, football and hurling matches, band concerts, excursions to sites of historic interest such as Wolfe Tone's grave, and public social events to which young women were sometimes invited.<sup>31</sup> Besides reading rooms where members could either read or listen to recitations from books and newspapers, many clubs boasted their own libraries and even gymnasiums.<sup>32</sup> Some organisations devised flags that they displayed proudly on their walls; others created fanciful membership cards and designed uniforms replete with military-style caps.<sup>33</sup> By the early months of 1848, three Dublin clubs were

28 Constable Michael Daniels, et al., Kilworth, to Sub-Inspector R. Somerville, 18 June 1848, CSORP, 1848, Cork, 6/798. 29 *Nation*, 2 October 1847. 30 Reports on club activities, *Irish Felon*, 24 June 1848; *Nation*, 18 September 1847; *Tipperary Vindicator*, 14 June 1848; Report of 'E.F. no. 1', 20 June 1848, TCD MS. 2038. 31 See reports from provincial newspapers on club shooting activities, *Nation*, 8 April 1848; *Kilkenny Moderator*, November 1847, as cited in *ibid.*, 13 November 1847. On athletic competitions, excursions, and the like, see Wm. Upton to chief secretary, 26 June 1848, CSORP, 1848, Tipperary, 27/11009; report of the Kill confederate club, *Nation*, 8 July 1848. 32 Col. James E. McGee, *The Men of '48* (Boston, 1881), p. 267; Report of activities of the O'Meara and Fulton club of Nenagh, *Tipperary Vindicator*, 28 June 1848. 33 Reports of the Swift and Dundalk United Irish

publishing penny newspapers – the *Young Irishman*, the *National Guard*, and the *Patriot* – to keep their members abreast of events.<sup>34</sup>

We can catch glimpses of other recreational activities in the daily reports of a Castle spy who operated inside the Garryowen club of Dublin. He described how, in early April, two exuberant carloads of members rode back to the city following a rifle practice near Dundrum, amusing themselves by ‘snapping caps at each other’, as he put it, ‘the front car against the end one, ‘till they came to Kevin’s Port’.<sup>35</sup> A spy in another Dublin organisation reported how the Grattan club had challenged the Swift club to a weekend shooting competition at the North Wall, adding ‘the Swift club think they are the best marksmen’.<sup>36</sup> When other clubs gathered for rifle practice they amused themselves by pinning the word ‘Saxon’ or a picture of the lord lieutenant to the centres of their bulls-eyes.<sup>37</sup> Something of the social role that clubs played in the lives of their members is also suggested in another report by the Garryowen spy during the week of the rising. As he walked through the Liberties, he found the streets swarming with clubmen because the government had declared their organisations illegal. ‘On account of the clubs having no meeting, the streets are crowded’, he reported. Not only does his statement imply that club meeting rooms were normally thronged with members who now had no other places to spend their free time, it also testifies to the large numbers of young men who belonged to the clubs in that area.<sup>38</sup>

By occupying their members with a range of activities, the clubs also served an important social function. ‘The moral effect of these local associations was only second to their political utility’, one of their members recalled some years later:

They were composed for the most part of young men whose evenings, particularly in cities and large towns, were too often spent in frivolous or deleterious amusements; but, by gathering them in where good books were plentiful and companionship always to be found, it not only crystalized their opinions but removed them from many excesses and temptations.<sup>39</sup>

Clubs offered to nationalists of the late 1840s the same kinds of recreations and social opportunities that, as Vincent Comerford has shown, attracted so many young men to the Fenian organisation a decade or so later. More recently, Peter Hart has described similar patterns among the Cork brigades of the IRA in the period 1919–23.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, confederate clubs broadened the social horizons of many young men because, as members of organisations that were open to

clubs, *Irish Felon*, 15 and 22 July 1848. 34 Copies of these newspapers do not appear to have survived. 35 Report of informant ‘C.D.’, TCD MS. 2040, 1 April 1848. 36 Report of informant ‘E.F. no. 1’, TCD MS. 2038, 15 April 1848. 37 Reports of activities of ‘shooting clubs’, *Nation*, 8 April 1848. 38 Report of informant ‘C.D.’, TCD MS. 2040, 25 July 1848. 39 McGee, *Men of ’48*, p. 269. 40 R.V. Comerford, ‘Fenianism as Pastime: The Appeal of Fenianism in the mid-1860s’ in *Irish Historical Studies*, 32 (March, 1981), pp. 242–6; idem, *The Fenians in Context: Irish Politics and Society, 1848–1882* (Dublin,

all, they came into contact with individuals from occupations and status groups that differed from their own. As one of them remarked, the clubs 'constantly brought together for the interchange of opinions, men of different walks of life who, under ordinary circumstances, would never have known one another'.<sup>41</sup> This assessment is borne out in an April 1848 list of Dublin members, along with their addresses and occupations, that survives among the papers of the Confederation in the Royal Irish Academy. It shows a broad mixture of medical and law students, clerks, solicitors, carpenters, labourers, journalists, shoemakers, wine-porters, coach-makers, surgeons, and merchants.<sup>42</sup>

Belonging to a club also gave many young men of working class backgrounds their first taste of direct participation in political affairs. To at least one of them, P.J. Barry, the secretary of the Grattan club, this was of no small importance because, as he declared, 'for the first time in the history of popular movements in this country, men have been selected from humble walks of life to occupy the most influential positions in assemblies of the people. The Irish Confederation has done well to destroy that old routine by which men with high-sounding names were placed prominently before the country.'<sup>43</sup> An example of the kind of ordinary person that Barry had in mind was one John Poppins, a printer from Nenagh, County Tipperary, who, upon being elected to an office in his club, confessed to his colleagues that

in rising to respond to your call I feel embarrassed, having never before attempted to address an assembly of my countrymen . . . We are Irishmen (cheers) – we have the hearts and hands of Irishmen (loud cheers). We know our country's wrongs and miseries (hear, hear); and now that the country calls upon us, we, the men of no property, must knit together in friendly unison for her release from the galling hoof of slavery (vehement applause).<sup>44</sup>

1985), pp. 111–12; Peter Hart, *The I.R.A. and Its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916–1923* (Oxford, 1998). <sup>41</sup> McGee, *Men of '48*, p. 269. Gavan Duffy considered this to be an important aim of the clubs. As he put it, 'the chief purpose of these clubs in Ireland will be to homogenise the people of every locality, to blend up class and class, to mingle creed with creed, to associate man with man and thus use the natural passion for society common to all, for the creation of kindlier and worthier feelings among all', *Nation*, 20 May 1848.

<sup>42</sup> Royal Irish Academy, MS. 23.H.43. By the summer of 1848, substantial farmers were becoming members of the clubs. See, for example, the report of a recruitment meeting in Co. Cork run by Luke Shea, Esq., a local JP. Constable Patrick Reardon to sub-inspector Richard Hadnett, 10 July 1848, CSORP, 1848, Cork, 6/898; also, reports of prominent Protestants becoming club members: *Tipperary Vindicator*, 28 June 1848; report of Newry club, *Irish Felon*, 24 June 1848; William Wite to under secretary, 17 July 1848, CSORP, 1848, Cork, 6/905. <sup>43</sup> *United Irishman*, 25 March 1848. Barry himself was an obscure law clerk who later tried, without success, to take part in the rising in Tipperary. See Gary Owens (ed.), 'Patrick O'Donohoe's Narrative of the 1848 Rising' in *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 1998, pp. 32–45. <sup>44</sup> *Tipperary Vindicator*, 12 July 1848.

Clubs also offered opportunities, however limited, for nationalist women to take an active part in political affairs. Ellen and Esther Ormond were among the founding members of the Desmond club in Cork; elsewhere women were conspicuous at outdoor recruitment meetings where they encouraged their men folk to join local clubs.<sup>45</sup> By the eve of the rising, women were apparently asking to become regular members of clubs, though they encountered resistance. Speaking to members of the Felon club in Kilworth, County Cork in mid-June, a local attorney warned his listeners to 'allow no spies or informers to mix with you, or Women. There was women proposed at the Fermoy club but I am glad to inform you it was negatived by nine to one and I tell you again it is not women or little boys we want but men who will be able to do the work'<sup>46</sup>

Another way that the clubs represented a new departure in the history of popular movements had to do with their basic structure, aims, and outlook. They were not like other local activist groups that Irish people had grown accustomed to over the preceding decades in the sense that they were not secret societies, they were not focused upon agrarian issues, they were not answerable to the dictates of a Dublin-based executive that was built around a single personality, and they did not have a sectarian agenda. Their ultimate goal was to obtain independence through force of arms and, in the process, to politicise the majority of their countrymen. In these designs, they anticipated the central objectives of the Fenian organisation that former members of the confederate clubs – among them James Stephens, John O'Mahony, John O'Leary, Thomas Clarke Luby, and Charles J. Kickham – were to establish a decade later.

<sup>45</sup> *Nation*, 18 September 1847 and 29 July 1848; *Tipperary Vindicator*, 1 September 1848.

<sup>46</sup> Constable John Fitzgerald to sub-inspector Robert Somerville, 19 September 1848, CSORP, 1848, Cork, 6/798.