

The Non-Agricultural Working Class in 19th Century Thomastown

by Marilyn Silverman.

Irish historians, both professionals and amateurs, tend to see rural parishes as made up of farms, farmers and agricultural labourers. Similarly, they tend to study the non-agricultural working classes, such as industrial labourers, only in the cities. In this paper, I try to bridge this gap by describing a non-agricultural, labouring class in Thomastown parish during the nineteenth century.

Finding the Non-agricultural Labourer: 1800-1901

For people in Dublin, Waterford, Kilkenny City or New Ross, Thomastown parish is "up the country" and "very rural". It is made up of 54 townlands containing approximately 20,450 acres of which 100 or so function as a small service centre with shops and relatively dense housing.

In 1981, the parish had a population of 2,500. Not surprisingly, in 1841 — prior to the Great Famine — the population was larger and there were 7,410 people in the parish. This number was reduced to 5,540 by 1851, immediately after the Famine. There then followed a period of continuous population decline, largely because of emigration. By 1901, Thomastown parish had a population of 2,840.

Throughout this same period — between the mid-1840s and the late 1970s — only one-third of the houses in the parish were located in the service centre or in the so-called "town streets". Instead, most Thomastown people have lived in the more rural parts of a country parish.

Yet, in Thomastown, there is a non-agricultural labouring class of very long standing. If we begin in the first part of the nineteenth century, we find several references to these labourers.

For example, the failure during the latter half of the eighteenth century to "establish a navigation from Kilkenny to the sea" using a system of canals along the Nore meant that, in the early part of the nineteenth century, there was a thriving river trade between Thomastown and Inistioge. As of 1800, Thomastown served as a transshipping point for a

wide region.

"The boats that now navigate from Inistioge to Thomastown carry 13 or 14 ton down the river when it is full, and can sometimes bring up 10 ton, but only 3 or 4 when the water is low. They are drawn by eight men and require two more to conduct the boat, and are helped occasionally by a square sail; the men are paid 13d. a day, with three penny worth of bread, or 3d. in lieu of it".¹

Another example is a report in the *Kilkenny Moderator* of March 9, 1816 on a Grand Jury Presentment Session where it was decided to build "a new line of road between Thomastown and Mullinavat, by which the ascents ... along ... the Walsh mountains will be avoided". The jurors stated that the project not only would help farmers and Waterford merchants, but that benefits would "follow to the county from the circulation of so much money among the labouring classes". Indeed, the building of the road itself was expected "to circulate near £5000 among the working classes". Thus, there was road work, road workers and "labouring classes" in Thomastown parish in 1816.

In addition, Thomastown had several breweries which were leased to a series of tenants in the early nineteenth century and which likely hired labour. Throughout the parish, also, were numerous mills and lime kilns. Most of these probably required labourers. For example, an advertisement in the *Kilkenny Moderator* (January 4, 1817) to let 20 acres in Ballynamona — a townland in the southwest part of the parish — noted that the holding was near "several flour mills and two newly built lime kilns".

Thomastown also had a tannery which had been established in 1785 by John Ryan. In his 1815 marriage settlement, he placed his properties in trust to provide his wife — "in consideration of (her) marriage portion" — with an annuity of £60 in case of his death or bankruptcy. Ryan's properties comprised not only the tannery, but also about 25 acres in the townlands of Newtown and Jerpoint West. These committed him to paying rents of about £65 a year. To derive such an income or annuity meant that Ryan's enterprise used considerable labour.

Finally, there are references to the road workers again in

the early 1830s when it was reported that 20 to 30 road workers "had employment on the public roads . . . within the past year"² in the area of Jerpoint Abbey. In the northern part of the parish, it was estimated that another 50 men were so employed. However, many were not in "constant employment". Others, because wages were not paid "until the work is done, . . . are often obliged to go into debt for their support which reduces their wages considerably".³

Overall, the extent of local industry, commerce and transport in Thomastown parish and, therefore, the presence of a large non-agricultural labour force is not surprising — at least from the point of view of some historians. According to Cullen, commenting on industry in pre-Famine Ireland:

"Only in the textile industry was a general crisis experienced. . . . If one takes into account a large variety of other industrial occupations with significant numbers employed, . . . an impression of vigorous industrial activity remains".⁴

This general pattern persisted into mid-century in Thomastown parish. Griffith's valuers, who surveyed the area in the mid-1840s, found twelve mills in the parish. Four were flour mills and one of these was the fourth largest in County Kilkenny which, in turn, had 127 mills in all. The other eight were corn mills. There was also employment provided by the Ryan tannery and the numerous lime kilns. The parish also had about 30 retail shopkeepers and about twenty self-employed artisans, many of whom hired labour. In all, I estimate that about 130 people were employed in these concerns. In addition, the Waterford-Kilkenny turnpike ran through the parish, and the maintenance of this main thoroughfare also provided employment for even more workers.

According to the 1841 census, in the central and most densely populated part of the parish — in the DEEDS of Thomastown and Jerpoint Church — over 28 per cent of the households were involved in the "manufacturing and trading sector" as compared with 72 per cent in the "agricultural sector". By 1851 and 1861, this manufacturing/trading sector incorporated a growing proportion of Thomastown's families. It incorporated almost 31 per cent of the families in 1851 and almost 37 per cent in 1861.

It is also important to add here that the census category of "manufacturing and trade" included shopkeepers and factory owners as well as labourers and artisans. In Thomastown during the 1841 and 1861 period, the number of shopkeepers stayed the same while the number of factory owners decreased. Therefore, the proportion of labourers and artisanal families in manufacturing/trading was increasing.

During the remaining decades of the nineteenth century, the 1861 proportions stayed the same. Certainly this was the case for the parish as a whole in the 1901 census: 37% of the population was in the non-agricultural sector. Of the men over age 16, 271 called themselves "labourers" or "artisans;" and they comprised almost a third of the male adults in the parish in 1901.

Why are there "People without History"?

Although we can see that there was a relatively large and growing non-agricultural, labouring sector in Thomastown during the nineteenth century, and although it is possible to point to some of the industries in which it was employed, there is little information on these labourers — their numbers, lifestyle, wages, etc. Why?

The people who left records (such as deeds), or the people who were named in the records (such as land registers), either owned or rented property. Labourers had little property and left few records. In addition, people who provided information for most historical records in the nineteenth century had little concern for non-agricultural labourers.

We can look at one important source of historical information to see how these biases were expressed. Parliamentary Commissions periodically investigated and reported on Irish conditions. Witnesses were called to give information on their locality and in their area of professional competence — as doctors, land agents, shopkeepers, "respectable" farmers, etc. Few witnesses were called from amongst labourers. This meant that labourers were usually described in terms of how non-labouring gentry, professionals and farmers perceived them. What was this perception?

We can answer this by looking at the evidence taken by a parliamentary investigation in the early 1830s into the "conditions of the poorer classes". The investigation was stimulated largely by the Tithe Wars which centred in County Kilkenny and to the north. The resulting report is often quoted by historians.

The witnesses from Thomastown provided information on an area somewhat larger than the present-day parish, for they included Tullaherin in their observations. According to the witnesses, this area contained 11,980 people of whom 1,216 were labourers. Of these, approximately 50% had permanent work.⁵ If we assume that 50 per cent of Thomastown's population was made up of elderly people and children, then the Thomastown area had a labouring, adult population which formed 20 per cent of the total in the early 1830s. What information did the witnesses provide us about this population and how did they perceive them? First, the witnesses saw these labourers as one of the "poorer classes" — along with "cottiers" and "smallholders". Second, they saw the labourers as either "casually" or "constantly" employed. Constant labourers were employed in agriculture. Casual labourers took whatever work they could get. Although the witnesses did not describe the nature of this work, they generally assumed that casual labourers usually were part-time agricultural workers. Third, some labourers were road workers. As noted above, these numbered between 70 and 80; but apart from witnesses' reports that some were casual and others were in debt,⁶ there were no further comments on the road workers. Finally, the witnesses saw that Thomastown had two benefit societies in 1833 — both based on self-help rather than organised by the local gentry as charitable associations. One was "a mortality society composed of tradesmen, farmers and labourers with each member paying 1s. per month to give support to any of them who may fall sick and to pay their funeral expenses". The second was for the "interment of the dead . . . and also the support of them when sick". It "chiefly consist(ed) of the mechanics (artisans) residing in the parish".⁷

In dozens of pages of evidence, there is little else that we learn about the non-agricultural labourers. For the witnesses

and Commissioners were concerned only with the "poorer classes" in agriculture. Yet, at the time of the investigation in 1833, Thomastown had a thriving tannery, two breweries, a woollen mill, two flour mills and numerous corn mills, lime kilns and a turnpike. Not only were there non-agricultural labourers therefore, but they probably were constantly employed in many of these industries. For one witness described what happened to evicted smallholders and cottiers:

"Of those who have . . . been ejected, . . . some have fixed themselves in the outskirts of towns, and endeavour to subsist by occasional hire and by taking conacre; others have left this part of the country altogether".⁸

There is thus no indication that the rural displaced became the non-agricultural labourers or that the non-agricultural working class was anything but a permanent part of local, rural society. This is substantiated by the self-help institutions organised by local workers and artisans, because these show that non-agricultural labourers shared common experiences, interests and needs over lengthy periods of time.

The problems in using the Parliamentary Papers — and, indeed, most government documents — as historical records for analysing the non-agricultural labourers continue throughout most of the nineteenth century. When labour was discussed, the concern was with agricultural employment and the problems of the casually employed. As a result, the major historical sources fail to provide the contemporary historian with any details on what had to be a relatively large and constantly employed, non-agricultural working class in Thomastown.

This bias in the data sources clearly was related to the particular interests of those who created the historical documents. Indeed, it has been noted, for Ireland as a whole, that:

"Little interest was shown in the industrial sector . . . until after 1880. By then the years of agricultural prosperity which followed after the Great Famine had come to an end. . . . (As well,) the changing position of Britain in international trade brought a corresponding weakening of the authority of

free trade dogma. Undoubtedly it was this as much as anything else which led to interest in industrial development in Ireland”⁹

What we learn from this more generally is that the documents which historians use to reconstruct the past are very much dependent on the interests and events of those who made and entered into the records. Because of this, entire classes of society may be lost from our contemporary view. Yet, it must be remembered that —

“ . . . the common people were as much agents in the historical process as they were its victims and silent witnesses. We thus need to uncover the history of ‘the people without history’”¹⁰

The Case of the Grenan Mill Workers, 1873-1886

Although the character of the Thomastown non-agricultural labouring class is hidden because of the perceptions which structure the historical records, the situation improves somewhat later in the nineteenth century. This is because local records have survived and because local concerns — and non-agricultural interests - began to be taken up by newspapers.

By 1870, the industrial base of Thomastown’s non-agricultural sector had contracted considerably. The breweries were gone as were several corn mills. However, the two flour mills, the woollen mill, the tannery and numerous corn mills remained. Several industries even had expanded¹¹. This was sufficient to maintain over a third of the population in non-agricultural occupations especially because the population of the parish was declining at the same time. Thus, the number of workers actually employed in non-agricultural pursuits was decreasing even as they formed a growing proportion of the total population.

Wage books have survived from Grenan Mills for the period 1873 to 1886. The owners, the Pilsworth family, also held a farm. The wage books refer to their entire enterprise — both mill and farm. From these books, we learn something about their labour force and about Thomastown non-agricultural working class.

First, the number of workers in the Pilsworth enterprise

was large. Over the 14 year period, an average of 29 workers were employed at all times. Of these, 24 were employed in the mill. If these 24 are added to the numbers likely employed in Thomastown’s second flour mill, woollen mill, tannery and roads, it is clear that this non-agricultural working class was fairly extensive indeed.

Second the mill labourers in the Pilsworth enterprise were not seasonal. They were constantly employed throughout the year even during the slack season from January to July before the local harvest. This is because the mill was grinding imported grain throughout the year for export to England.

Third, there was a severe depression in Ireland and Europe between 1876 and 1882. Yet, the number of mill workers increased during that time. In addition, wages continued to rise through regular increments — as the Table indicates.

TABLE OF MILL WAGES, 1873-1886

WEEKLY WAGES

Type of Worker	1873	1880	1886
Miller (artisan)	£0-18s-0d	£1-0s-0d	£1-8s-0d
Mill Worker	£0-7s-6d	£0-10s-2d	£0-12s-0d
Farm Worker	£0-5s-0d	£0-9s-2d	£0-11s-0d

Other mill records also show that the output of flour stayed the same during the depression; it remained at about twenty thousand sacks (20 stones) per year. Meanwhile, the price of imported wheat dropped from £1.67 per sack in 1873 to £1.23 in 1879 to £0.72 in 1895. Profits in the mill, therefore, were increasing.

Thus, the mill and its labourers experienced a permanency and prosperity which was somewhat different from the general condition of depression in Ireland. A local Government Report in 1880, quoted the Chairman of the Thomastown Poor Law Union as follows: “I have ascertained that about 30 labourers . . . are not attached to any farm or mill and are entirely dependent in Thomastown

on such chance days's work as they may obtain".¹² This is not a large number relative to the total population in the midst of a depression! Yet, amongst those unattached were soon to be added the employees of another flour mill, the Island Mill. With increasing debt and no capital to make technological improvements to compete in a highly competitive market, the aging proprietor was declared bankrupt in 1880. His mill was auctioned off by the banks and bought by Grenan Mills for use as a store.

Two points can be made about this. First, events in local history are not necessarily the same as those in the country as a whole. Local experience can be very different from national trends. Second, neither local nor national history affects all people or classes in the same way. Thus, in Thomastown between 1876 and 1882, farming was depressed, one flour mill and its labourers experienced prosperity, and a second mill went bankrupt and its labourers lost their jobs.

The records from Grenan Mills also can be used to describe something of the character of Thomastown's non-agricultural labouring class. This can be done by looking at the differing employment histories of the various labourers.

In Grenan Mills between 1873 and 1886, there were labourers who worked only in the mill and those who worked only on the miller's farm. Clearly, the Pilsworth enterprise had a core of permanent, long-term mill workers and it had a small core of permanent, long-term farm workers. At the opposite extreme, the enterprise employed over the years numerous labourers who worked in the factory or farm for less than a year. They gave up work after several weeks or months and do not re-appear in the records. It cannot be known whether this was the labourers' or the employers' choice.

Between these extreme patterns of great permanence or of high turnover, there were those labourers who worked off and on in a "casual" way over several years. They worked for several weeks or months, left, and then returned. In some cases, this pattern went on for the entire 1873-1886 period. Several of these labourers worked only on the farm, but the vast majority worked, at various times, both in the mill and

on the farm. Clearly, they were assigned to whichever place they were most required whenever they were needed.

In addition, there were two other kinds of employment history. First, some workers began on the Pilsworth farm in their early years with the enterprise but later moved permanently to the mill. Second, artisans often were hired to do a specific task which might take a day, a week or a month. These carpenters, masons, bootmakers and blacksmiths were paid at a wage equal to that of the miller (artisan) in the Table above.

Such were the difference in labourers' work histories. "Casual" employment typified about a third of those who worked on the farm at some point between 1873 and 1886. Casualness also typified every labourer who was assigned, at different times, to either the mill or the farm. However, apart from a high initial turnover, those who worked only in the mill were never casual; they always were permanent. Similarly, those who began on the farm but later moved to the mill — once they were absorbed into the mill — also were never casual labour.

What general points can we make from this material?

The Parliamentary Commission Reports which saw that farm work used large numbers of casual labour seems to have been correct. At the same time, the reports failed to see the permanently employed, non-agricultural labourers. In the Pilsworth enterprise, these were flour mill workers; and they emerged out of the Grenan Mill books which showed that the non-agricultural labourers were permanent and specialised.

Yet, an interesting issue is raised by the labourers who worked off and on in a "casual" way over the years. There were five of them who worked only on the farm and 23 of them who worked on both the mill and farm. On the one hand, it is possible to interpret this as the "exploitation" of workers by assuming that the miller only gave them casual employment to ensure that he had the right number of labourers in the right place at the right time. On the other hand, such an interpretation ignores the possibility that the labourers themselves may have chosen to be casual instead of permanent. It ignores the possibility that the labourers

were not victims but active agents. What choice did they have?

In Thomastown, as well as along most of the inland waters of the River Nore, there was another source of income available to any or all who chose to pursue it. This was fishing — mainly for salmon. In the nineteenth century, as in the twentieth, it is likely that numerous casual labourers chose to be casual because they were committed both to fishing and to its high profits. They therefore decided to labour in a mill or on a farm only in a temporary way. At the same time, there also were numerous labourers who were permanently employed but who chose to fish as a way of supplementing their incomes.

The Case of the Fishermen and the Development of Class Consciousness

The fact that numerous mill workers were also fishermen helps with the problems in the historical sources during the second half of the nineteenth century. This is because county newspapers began to carry more local news when it concerned issues which were of interest to a county-wide readership and to the gentry. One such issue was fishing, more particularly poaching. In Thomastown, it was the non-agricultural labourers who were the fishermen and the poachers. Because of their opposition to private property rights and gentry sportsmen, their activities were reported by the newspapers. These make up an historical record which gives some indication of the ideology of the non-agricultural labouring class in the nineteenth century.

In the mid and late nineteenth century, the landlords intensified their efforts to privatise and to control fishing resources. First, because they owned the land on both sides of the river, landlords prevented rod fishing from the shores. Second, landlords owned and rented out fishing weirs which trapped salmon swimming upstream and which allowed only a small portion to pass upriver to where cot fishermen were located. An editorial in the *Kilkenny Moderator* noted on October 21, 1863 that:

“The legendary lore of the district preserves curious stories of the ill-feeling which the strict enforcement of the

privilege engendered in the minds of the humble fishermen of those olden times, against the proprietors”.

The ill-feeling had long expressed itself through poaching. In 1863, however, a new Fisheries Act with new regulations and restrictions was passed. Immediately, “a conference of the gentry” was held “as to the best steps to be taken under the new Act, for the protection of the rivers from illegal fishing for the future” (*Kilkenny Moderator*, October 24, 1863). A subscription was begun in order to pay water bailiffs to enforce the new regulations and to end the poaching.

As the controls increased, however, so did the poaching. The gentry actions were couched in an ideology which stated that they were acting “for the protection of the salmon from illegal means of destruction, and for the increase of the fish in our rivers for legitimate sport and profit” (*Kilkenny Moderator*, October 21, 1863). The labourers, in turn, were concerned with challenging the gentry’s encroachment on their rights, in common law, to fish as they wished.¹³ Equally important was that the labourers who fished were fighting for access to the extensive profits to be made from fishing. In 1874, salmon sold for 1s. 8d. per pound (*Kilkenny Moderator*, February 24, 1874) while the weekly wage for the average mill worker was 8s. 4d.

Because this conflict involved the landed classes and led to numerous cases in the Petty and Quarter Sessions, the newspapers from the early 1860s on provide a wealth of historical detail on the non-agricultural labourers in their roles as fishermen.

For example, on April 10, 1869, the *Kilkenny Moderator* reported that Richard Donnelly was summonsed for fishing with a snap net at night, but “when before the court, wilfully insulted the Justices in such a manner that . . . he was sent to the county gaol for seven days”. Donnelly was a casual worker in Grenan mill and farm. At the same session, “William Dunphy . . . was also imprisoned in the bridewell until the magistrates rose, for contempt of court, and wilfully insulting the Justices”.

Most fishing cases were not as conflictual. For the most part, the fishermen put on disguises, fished illegally at night, sold the fish to complicit shopkeepers, hired solicitors

to defend them when caught, and paid the fines or spent time in jail when found guilty. However, the nature of this poaching, and the reports of it, provide us with information on the nature of class consciousness amongst those non-agricultural labourers who also fished.

First, it is important to recognise that Thomastown's poachers did not see themselves as breaking the law. Rather, they disagreed with the regulations set out by the various Fishing Acts and they also disputed the right of the gentry to make the regulations in the first instance. Therefore, the fishermen used whatever laws were relevant, whenever possible, to support their interests. For example, on June 8, 1878, the *Kilkenny Moderator* reported that:

"The feud of water bailiffs against cotmen is in a new stage of development. Cotmen had been netting the pond just above the Thomastown bridge when bailiffs Reilly and Malone arrived and called them to the bank for identification (at 2 am). The cotmen jeered and the bailiffs threw stones. One bailiff fired his revolver over their heads which brought the cotmen to the bank, armed with paddles and threatening present and future vengeance. The bailiffs retired to the police barracks and brought back the police. The cotmen ran off. Two of the poachers were identified and will be summoned. The cotmen talk of a summons for firing a weapon with intent to kill".

As in several such recorded cases against the bailiffs, the cotmen won in law.

Second, the cot fishermen could mobilise extensive numbers from all along the inland fishery area. They were not individuals acting alone. For example, on July 13, 1876, the *Kilkenny Moderator* reported that "a memorial signed by upwards of 100 fishermen was sent to Colonel Tighe urging him to discontinue his sweep net fishing below Inistioge as it impeded the progress of salmon up the river".

Third, not only did fishermen use the law or combine as a group, but they also were able to organise to successfully challenge the legitimacy of gentry actions. Such a situation occurred during a two year period between 1875 and 1877. According to the *Kilkenny Moderator*, March 12, 1875), a fishery inquiry was held because a petition from landowners

complained about the effect of cotmen's nets on the declining stocks. The inquiry was attended by both gentry and fishermen. Members of the gentry gave numerous examples as to the amount of poaching and its infringement on private property. A year later, according to the *Kilkenny Moderator* of November 22, 1876, the gentry succeeded in having

"the inspectors of Irish Fisheries pass a bye law prohibiting the use of nets . . . on the River Nore. . . . We learn from Thomastown where the main strength of the netting interest lie, that a petition is being organised to the Lord Lieutenant embodying the ideas of the cotmen as to the hardships and injustice of the measure. It is intended . . . to invite Mr. P. Martin, M.P., to fight, on behalf of the fishermen's interests, this measure."

Five months later, according to the *Kilkenny Moderator* of April 21, 1877,

"a meeting of cot fishermen from Thomastown and Bennettsbridge and farmers with ground on river banks was held at Bennettsbridge. A vote of thanks was passed to all those around who had supported the cot men in their successful action against the bye law prohibiting net fishing."

Clearly, the fishermen had organised large numbers of followers, they had tapped support from an area far wider than Thomastown, and they had mobilised sympathisers from other, non-labouring classes of society. In so doing, they successfully challenged the legal efforts of the landlords themselves.

Finally, other rural classes saw the fishermen as a legitimate group engaged in the more general struggle against the regime. The involvement of farmers in the effort to remove the netting restriction, as noted above, is an example. Another is from the *Kilkenny Journal*, October 18, 1893, which noted that "continual enforcement" of the bye laws "framed by the Irish Fishery Board . . . is an oppression as great as the operation of the most insidious land laws".

Thus, through their use of the law in defence of their interests, their ability to organise beyond a local area, their successful challenges to authority, and the way they were viewed by others — all this makes it abundantly clear that in

the case of the fishermen, we are dealing with a part of the labouring class which had a distinct consciousness and which acted in terms of it.

At the same time, it is important not to glorify the idea of class by presenting a picture of class solidarity which is too simplified. For it is clear from written and oral reports that there were divisions amongst the fishermen. Otherwise, for example, the gentry could not have hired water bailiffs. As another example, contemporary informants recollect cliques amongst the fishermen based on common kinship ties. They also remember that there was a hierarchy amongst fishermen according to whether a man was a netman or a paddler and based on whether or not a man owned his own cot. Labourers as fishermen, therefore, had a dual character. On the one hand, there was a unity of interests. On the other hand, there was hierarchy and division. This duality was recognised at the time. The following extract is from the *Kilkenny Moderator*, June 28, 1876.

“Accounts from Thomastown, that paradise of poachers, show an unusual state of things. It seems that a feud has arisen among the poachers which has led to a spate of informing to the police and bailiffs which will probably result in an amount of fishing cases at next Petty Sessions. If advantage of this feud is to be taken, it must be done quickly for it will not last, and the poachers will renew friendship and turn against the common enemy, that is, water bailiffs, police, etc., once again.”

Despite this dual character, however, it is clear that the non-agricultural labourers — as fishermen — had a social and political awareness of their common interests. At the same time, the fishermen were a part of a larger group of non-agricultural labourers. Not all labourers were fishermen although all fishermen were non-agricultural labourers — either full or part-time. These non-agricultural labourers were a basic part of Thomastown society; and those who also became fishermen clearly developed a consciousness of their common class interests.

The Growth of Working Class Consciousness in Thomastown.

As to the ideology of the non-agricultural labourers in general, however, the documentation on class consciousness, until the twentieth century is very limited.

There is, first, the previously noted Parliamentary Commission report of 1836 which pointed out two self-help associations in Thomastown parish. Second, and somewhat later, the newspapers occasionally reported on what appears to be class-like behaviour. On September 3, 1870, for example, the *Kilkenny Moderator* reported there was a “riotous demonstration” related to the seeming success which the French were having in their war against Germany. “There was a tar-barrel burning at the bridge . . . and the breaking of Dr. Sterling’s windows.” While the gentry and shopkeepers of the parish subsequently contributed to a relief fund for the wounded of both sides (*Kilkenny Moderator*, September 10, 1870), the labourers were charged with “illegal assembly” — twelve of them out of “a crowd of 400” led through the streets by the Thomastown Band to celebrate what was thought to be a French victory. As one witness said, according to the *Kilkenny Moderator* of September 21, 1870: “Sure, we’d all be Frenchmen if we could”. The case was tried at the Quarter Sessions. According to the *Kilkenny Moderator* report of October 15, 1870, the twelve were all “quiet young men in respectable employment” and therefore they were simply bound over to keep the peace.

Apart from such isolated references to class-like behaviour, the historian also can use data from other locales in the south-east. For example, in 1884, a Parliamentary Commission investigated agricultural labour once again. The clerk of the Wexford Poor Law Union digressed somewhat in giving his evidence to point out that in his Union, labourers were employed in the local iron works and quarries as well as in agriculture. He also stated that: “There are a very large number of (them) in our union and they are as a rule a very intelligent body. There are some labourers’ organisations in the district and those men will become a tremendous power . . . when they have the franchise. They will, in fact, have the representation of the

county of Wexford in their hand . . . if they are organised".¹⁴

It is not correct to generalise conditions from another Poor Law union to Thomastown. However, it is apparent from the above evidence that by the late nineteenth century, there was a growing recognition of non-agricultural labour as a class; that the existence of labourers' organisations was becoming notable; and that this new awareness of their importance probably was tied to the extension of the franchise.

Then, seemingly suddenly, in 1891, we find that working class consciousness was highly developed in Thomastown. In that year, the newspapers began to report meetings of the Thomastown Trade and Labour League. At one such meeting reported by the *Kilkenny Moderator* on March 7, 1891, David Shea, a shoemaker, "made a speech urging the working class to unite against the capitalists".

Clearly such a viewpoint had to be a long time simmering. Yet the historical records provide no information on the process. Similarly, the subsequent success of the League must have been rooted in the experiences of a past history about which we know little.

The membership of the League came to consist of all segments of Thomastown's labouring class. There were mill workers, tannery workers, self-employed artisans, carters, etc. It included non-agricultural workers from all parts of the parish. In the centre of the village's commercial area, the League founded a Reading Room which became very popular with the workers for cards and billiards. The League also functioned as a burial society. The League, however, was far more than a benevolent society. As early as 1899, it ran candidates for the Thomastown Rural District Council—the body which replaced, in 1898, the Board of Guardians as the local government authority. In that first election, one of the two elected representatives from the Thomastown electoral area was a League member. Labour's interests were now represented in a legitimate, political forum. For example, the *Kilkenny Moderator* of July 20, 1901 reported that a motion was put forward at a Council meeting to contribute funds to the Board of Fisheries. The labour councillor objected. He stated that he "would be satisfied to put his hand in his pocket to contribute to getting the weirs . . . taken

away". Otherwise, he said, "it is not a benefit to the fishermen". For the money "would go to the bailiffs to stand on the bank and prosecute".

Conclusion

The history of Thomastown's non-agricultural, working class continued throughout the twentieth century until the present time.¹⁵ The historical records improved somewhat—largely because those who kept the records became concerned with this new political force. Equally important, the labourers began keeping their own records—as the minutes of their various organisations testify. In this way, the nineteenth century bias which "lost" this Thomastown class has been somewhat overcome. However, it remains a fact that historians tend to ignore this rural labouring class. This is because there is a bias towards analysing agriculture in rural areas and industry in cities; because nineteenth century perceptions and biases persist; and because it often is extremely difficult to find the information. However, such problems must be overcome so that we may better understand rural society and so that "the people without history" may step forward and take their place.

Notes

The research for this paper was financed by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC); the Faculty of Arts, York University, Toronto; and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, New York.

1. William Tighe, *Statistical Observations relative to the County of Kilkenny made in the Years 1800 & 1801*, Dublin, Graisberry & Campbell, 1802, page 141.

2. *First Report of Commissioners for Inquiring into the Conditions of the Poorer Classes in Ireland*. H. C. 1836, xxxiii, Supplement to Appendix (F), page 76.

3. *ibid.* page 73.

4. L. M. Cullen, *An Economic History of Ireland Since 1660*, London, B. T. Batsford, 1972, pages 124-5.

5. *First Report of Commissioners for Inquiring into the Conditions of the Poorer Classes in Ireland*. H. C. 1836, xxxi,

Supplement to Appendix (D), pages 73 and 76.

6. *ibid.* xxxiii, Supplement to Appendix (F), pages 73 and 76.

7. *ibid.* xxxii, Supplement to Appendix (E), page 73.

8. *ibid.* xxxiii, Appendix (F), page 91.

9. E.R.R. Green, "Industrial Decline in the Nineteenth Century", in L.M. Cullen (ed.), *The Formation of the Irish Economy*, Cork, Mercier Press, 1968, page 97.

10. Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982, page x.

11. For example, the date of 1865 is engraved in the stone arch over the door of the Little Mill, another local flour mill. This is the year the mill owner made major improvements.

12. Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Ireland, being the Eighth Report under the Local Government Board (Ireland) Act. H.C. 1880: xxviii, page 68.

13. This issue is discussed in Marilyn Silverman and P. H. Gulliver, *In the Valley of the Nore: A Social History of Thomastown, County Kilkenny, 1840-1983*, Dublin, Geography Publications, 1986, pages 213-216.

14. Report from the Select Committee on Agricultural Labourers (Ireland) together with the Proceedings of the Committee. Minutes of Evidence and Appendix, 1884.

15. This history is described in Marilyn Silverman and P. H. Gulliver, see note 13 above, pages 199-206.