

## **From Kilkenny to the Sea – By River, Canal, Tram or Rail? The Politics of Transport in the Early Nineteenth Century**

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### **The Trade and Transport Route: From Kilkenny City through Thomastown to Waterford and New Ross**

From the Norman invasion in the twelfth century until the early nineteenth, the navigable River Nore provided the means by which much of the produce of southern County Kilkenny (eg. corn, butter, hides, livestock) was exported whilst goods from other parts of the world (eg. wine, tobacco, coal, spices) were imported. Kilkenny city, on the upper reaches of the Nore, became a centre of manufacturing and trade. By the nineteenth century, the city was a service and marketing centre for an extensive inland region.

From medieval times also, and until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the town of Thomastown, at the head of navigation on the Nore, was the port for bulky goods being transported between Kilkenny and New Ross or Waterford. Together, near the mouth of the Nore, New Ross and Waterford had been amongst the most important ports of medieval Ireland. Both had subsequently experienced a gradual and drastic decline but, in the mid-eighteenth century, Waterford began to recover as part of a dramatic expansion of Ireland's overseas commerce.

### **Transport along the Kilkenny-Waterford Trade Route in the Eighteenth Century**

The increase in overseas trade from the mid-eighteenth century was associated with improvements in inland transport, both on water and on land. First, canal and river transport was improved by new funds from the state. In 1755, for example, a petition from the merchants of Kilkenny

resulted in work on the Nore north of Thomastown and, in the 1760s and 1770s, over £20,000 was spent on works on the River Barrow.

Second, there were roads. As Dr. L.M. Cullen noted, the second quarter of the eighteenth century was a period of rapid road building in Ireland. Many of the new roads were turnpikes built by private enterprise which collected tolls from the traffic using them. Although none were built between the 1730s and 1760s in the area served by the port of Waterford because river transport was adequate, other roads - and later, postal roads particularly - were built and maintained by local government bodies (grand juries) of that time.

By the late eighteenth century, then, Waterford's trade was served by wheeled vehicles on the roads and boats on the rivers. The River Nore, via Thomastown, took Kilkenny's trade goods to the sea and beyond. However, in 1802, William F. Tighe (landlord, Woodstock) expressed an old Kilkenny concern: "The direct communication with the sea is the object to be desired, either for the city of Kilkenny, or the collieries, as well as for the corn trade of the country." In the decades after Tighe wrote, this concern never changed. What did change were opinions as to *how* the "direct communication" should be realised. Because people then acted on these opinions, water transport (river navigation and canals) was displaced by land transport whilst, on the land, railways became more important than roads. Moreover, Kilkenny city's link to Waterford was weakened as its tie to Dublin was strengthened. These changes occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century, amidst complicated local and county politics which involved shopkeepers, industrialists and the landed gentry.

### **The Changing Transport Net: Declining Navigation on the Nore, 1791-1833**

Underlying these changes was the decline of navigation on the Nore. This was a gradual process caused by new technology, natural conditions and political decisions. An early change was the building of the bridge at Waterford in 1794, accompanied by the introduction of Scotch cars with

iron axles. This meant that roads could enter into serious competition with river transport. More important at the time, however, were the road improvements which linked newly-built canals with inland points. This meant that new inland trade routes emerged which by-passed older places and routes, such as Thomastown and the River Nore. For example, works on the River Barrow in the 1750s and later had allowed heavy goods to be transported downriver to New Ross and from there, by sea, to other Irish ports. In 1791, work on the Grand Canal provided a new link between Dublin and the Barrow. In 1807, Parcel Boats were advertised as running between Leighlinbridge, on the Barrow, and Dublin once a week. It took four days and cost 20s. a ton. The service also moved goods from Dublin to Kilkenny or Thomastown. That took "six days by careful carmen from Leighlinbridge" and cost 30s. a ton. It also was possible, of course, to send goods from Dublin to New Ross or to Waterford using this new route. This took eight days and cost 35s. a ton.

These new links between roads and canals lessened the usefulness of transport along the Nore via Thomastown. However, people and light goods still went overland on the old Kilkenny-Thomastown-Waterford route. By 1810, a regular stagecoach service, three times a week, went from Kilkenny to Waterford via Thomastown. It took seven hours. In May of that year, a day coach began to run between Dublin and Waterford with a feeder line from Thomastown to Kilkenny. Although the owner went bankrupt soon after, the need for such a connection clearly remained because, a month later, an application was made to parliament to build a turnpike road from Waterford City to Shankill, County Kilkenny - passing through Thomastown and Gowran. The turnpike then was to connect with the road to Dublin. Three years later, when the trustees auctioned the rights to the tolls, the road was operating. In 1814, the fare on the jaunting car from Kilkenny to Dublin was "reduced" to 12 shillings. It left Kilkenny at 5 a.m. and arrived in Dublin at 7 p.m..

In 1815, a traveller described Thomastown and the dual character of transport - roads and navigation - at the time.

He said that Thomastown was "a place of some trade. Public coaches from Dublin to Kilkenny (en route to Waterford) pass through this town, while to the sea port of New Ross, the main river offers a convenient passage by water." Indeed, in 1812, a newspaper advertisement to sell the timber of Desart demesne stated that the demesne was located ten miles from Thomastown "from which there is water carriage to Waterford".

Thus, by 1815, the traffic along the Kilkenny-Thomastown-Waterford route had changed. River traffic, and the traffic in heavy goods (lime, grain and coal, for example), favoured the Barrow with its canal and road links. However, the slow improvement in other roads - that is, those which did not simply link canals but which allowed for the movement of people, the post and light goods - still followed the old route, albeit overland. The River Nore, as well, still handled some traffic, although greatly reduced, and Thomastown retained some function as the head of Nore navigation, particularly for heavy commodities which were closer to the Nore than the Barrow system.

However, progressive silting of the Nore was itself affecting commerce by making water carriage unreliable and seasonal. The silting could be seen in the increasing flood damage during this period: in 1763, a flood "threw down" the bridges in Kilkenny and Thomastown; Thomastown bridge again "fell" in a 1788 flood; in 1797, the bridge was nearly destroyed; and in 1799 and 1800 "damage" also was done. The problem was seen by people at the time. In 1802, Tighe wrote that "the average load down the river was 13 or 14 tons, while in *favourable conditions* 10 could be carried up river, but only three or four tons when the water was low". In 1833, when local witnesses appeared before a Parliamentary Inquiry, they complained about crop losses caused by "sudden floods" and that "no efforts (had) been made to improve the course of the river".

This lack of effort was because County Kilkenny's grand jury, dominated by gentry, preferred to spend its money on road works. In part this was because of the massive and very expensive failure of the earlier effort to build a canal from Kilkenny to the tide water at Inistioge. Between 1755 and

1767, the Irish Parliament had granted £25,250 for the project but (as an engineer wrote to the *Kilkenny Moderator* in 1838):

“the greater portion of it (was) injudiciously expended. ..Sums were entrusted to various individuals who either expended the money incautiously, or applied the greater portion of it to their own advantage. ...Considerable sums had also been given to ... contractors for portions of (the) works ... and said contractors never completed their obligations, nor even accounted for the public money .... entrusted to their care. This ill-projected navigation was then abandoned, the money not accounted for and the works fell into decay”.

Since several of the allegedly shady contractors were land agents for respectable landlords at the time, and since the descendants of both were on the Kilkenny Grand Jury several decades later, it is likely that decisions about navigation works in the early nineteenth century were coloured by both suspicion and cynicism.

Also, the use of public funds for river improvements (requiring greater planning and heavy expenditure) was thought to be less advantageous than building or upgrading bits of roads for relatively small sums. Moreover, the gentry who comprised the grand juries were drawn from different parts of the county. The decisions of the juries on transport, therefore, were usually a compromise amongst the various members, each of whom wanted to enhance his demesne, increase the rentability of his lands and improve his own access to his main city (whether New Ross, Waterford, Kilkenny or Dublin). Road-building allowed more trade-offs amongst the members: it also received state funding. So, for example, when the County Kilkenny Grand Jury in 1816 approved a “new road between Thomastown and Mullinavat, by which the ascents .. along .. the Walsh mountains will be avoided,” the state advanced the entire sum of £376.13.5 - much to the approval of the editor of the *Kilkenny Moderator*:

“Waterford is the natural port of this city and county. .. Deficient in water carriage, good roads are our only resource and these, connected with .. growing improvements in .. wheel carriages supercede in a material degree the necessity

and expense of forming an artificial water communication, even if that were practicable”.

Clearly the grand jury at the time favoured roads over rivers and saw Waterford as the county's means of communicating with the sea.

Meanwhile, transport on the Barrow was becoming cheaper as the Grand Canal Company, in 1816, reduced its tolls and rates between Bagenalstown and Dublin. That same year, the Nore again flooded because of heavy rain and caused “much damage”. An advertisement for the sale of coal announced that Inistioge - not Thomastown - was “at the head of navigation”.

By the 1820s, then, transport along the Nore had deteriorated and declined. However, the Waterford-Thomastown-Kilkenny land route remained important for the post, light goods and people. In 1820, the postmaster-general called for tenders to convey the post between Kilkenny and Waterford through Thomastown in a coach which was to be “drawn by 4 horses, carrying 4 inside and 3 outside passengers”. In 1824, the Dublin mail coach left Thomastown at 6 a.m. for Waterford and at 8 p.m. for Dublin.

A decade later, witnesses at the 1833 Parliamentary Inquiry reported:

“Not only have no efforts been made to improve the course of the river (Nore), but it has been allowed to fill up so much for the last 15 or 20 years that the navigation which formerly existed between this town (Thomastown) and Inistioge has been entirely lost, and what was formerly carried for 4s by water is now charged 10s for by land”.

The town's apothecary spoke of “the time when craft of 50 tons went freely to and fro between Thomastown and Dublin” whilst other Thomastown witnesses asked for the navigation to be restored. They claimed that it would lower the cost of transport and hence of local exports, such as lime; it would make passage to Dublin efficient “because it is all downstream from here”; and it would “afford employment to the superabundant labourers” in the locality.

**The Question of Trade and Transport in the 1820s and 1830s**  
Thomastown's residents never obtained funding to revive

their navigation. There were several reasons. First, their concern was seen as narrow and local and it failed to capture any outside support. For although people in other localities were, of course, interested in trade and transport routes, their concerns could be met, by the early nineteenth century, without any reference to navigation on the Nore. Second, Thomastown's most influential people, its landlords, formed an alliance with landlords from other localities and with powerful foreign interests. Together, they allocated large amounts of capital in ways which ignored navigation on the Nore. This, in turn, illustrated that the town's larger shopkeepers and industrialists were powerless to affect events in the wider region.

The wider region had become important because, by the late 1820s, it was railways which had begun to capture the interest of those who controlled large amounts of capital. This was associated with several changes which were occurring at the time. Ireland's agricultural and exportable production had increased during the first quarter of the century and there was a rising demand for these goods on the export market. It seemed, at the time, that the road network could not handle the increased traffic. Also, state subsidies for public works had increased and there was, as well, a surplus of private capital looking for profitable investment. In 1826, the Limerick & Waterford Railway became the first Irish line to obtain parliamentary approval and, in 1831, a parliamentary act authorised the construction of the Dublin-Kingstown Railway. In that latter year, an editorial in the *Kilkenny Journal* suggested a line between Kilkenny and Waterford because a "parliamentary grant would, among other things, give immediate employment for a number of idle hands". It also was suggested that a railroad "would put Kilkenny on a par with other ports and also be advantageous to other inland areas, and would enhance the estates of the landed proprietors".

Within a few months, as evidenced in the county newspapers, a complex pattern of political interests and alliances arose which brought members of different classes together, or apart, in numerous places simultaneously - in Thomastown and in other such rural localities; in several

cities of Ireland, including Kilkenny, New Ross and Waterford; and in London. The political interests and alliances revolved around five issues. First, if railways were to be built, where should they run? This generated competition from all parts of Ireland. Second, those whose interest lay within County Kilkenny assumed that Kilkenny City was the natural hub of any transport system and that it required an "outlet to the sea". But to where should the spokes be laid? South? But if south, to Waterford or to New Ross? Or should the spokes be laid north, to Dublin? By what route? Third, should Kilkenny City in fact be linked by rail at all or should it be connected by another means? By land or by water: by rail, tram, road, canal, river - or by a combination of several of these? Fourth, different opinions existed about the purpose of investing in transport and these affected interests in the other issues. Was the investment to create local employment for "idle hands", to increase trade, to enhance the properties of landlords or to provide profits for investors? Fifth, from where was the capital to come for this expansion of the transport net: the state, private investors or both?

Out of the lengthy debate and complicated politics which ensued, it was a railway network which finally was fashioned and it followed the old Kilkenny-Thomastown-Waterford trade route. The debate and the politics, however, reflected much about County Kilkenny society at the time. They reflected the fact that private and foreign capital was extremely important, particularly because County Kilkenny landlords not only colluded with foreigners but also because they were able to hold a county-wide coalition together despite the local loyalties of many. The debate and the politics also reflected the influence which industrialists and professionals could sometimes wield in favour of the particular localities in which they lived. Finally, the debate and the politics reflected the powerlessness of the county's shopkeepers and commercial classes because they did not control large amounts of investment capital, because they were unable to enter the decision-making process and because they competed amongst themselves according to their allegiances to the particular localities in which they



lived.

### **Divergent Interests and The Politics of Transport, 1831-1848**

The earliest political fervour occurred in 1831 when it was reported that several New Ross businessmen had arrived in Kilkenny City to discuss a railway with the "most extensive traders and influential persons". However, "these traders would not commit themselves to anything except to have the proposed routes to Waterford and Ross examined by surveyors". A month later, though, it became clear that the idea was being taken seriously. A petition signed by about 80 Kilkenny City businessmen asked that the £500,000 "lately granted by parliament for the use of this country may be advanced to petitioners to facilitate a communication by railroad between the city and the sea". "County gentlemen" also held a "railroad meeting" shortly after. It was attended by Sydenham Davis, Thomastown's sovereign (head of the town corporation), and by other landlords from estates along the Kilkenny-Thomastown-Waterford route (including Power of Kilfane, Langrishe of Knocktopher, Bayley of Norelands and Flood of Flood Hall). They framed a petition which extolled "the immense .. resources of the county and city of Kilkenny" and their "uselessness at present for want of a cheap and expeditious means of transport". They described the "manifold advantages" to be derived, from the "labourer hungry for want of employment to the great landed proprietor whose property would be doubled in value, by a railroad communication between Kilkenny and the sea". A surveyor produced a map and a costing of the proposed line at the same meeting - £65,220 plus £1,200 for two steam engines - making it clear that the county gentry had wasted little time in getting organised. Indeed, three weeks later, the Earl of Ormonde presented a petition to the House of Lords "from the inhabitants of the city and county" requesting "that a railway .. be made at the public expense".

Although it is unclear whether the gentry wanted the railroad or part of parliament's £500,000 grant, it is clear that they saw the southern route to the sea (that is, Kilkenny to New Ross/Waterford) as natural. Local committees soon were formed along this southern route. In Thomastown, New

Ross and Waterford, businessmen met and resolved“ to recommend to merchants and traders of Waterford, Ross and Thomastown to appoint committees to collect subscriptions and enter into any arrangements deemed necessary, and to communicate with the Kilkenny committee”.

Whilst businessmen organised each other, the county's landlords continued to move more widely and to forge, thereby, yet another link amongst the various localities. For example, George Bryan, M.P. for Kilkenny County, presented the gentry's petition (now called the “Kilkenny Railroad Committee”) to the Lord Lieutenant. As well, “the measures recommended by the Kilkenny Railroad Committee were adopted by the New Ross committee” and the latter attended a Kilkenny City meeting. At that meeting, several non-city residents were added to the committee: the chair of the New Ross committee; Thomastown's sovereign and landlord, Sydenham Davis; and a Thomastown miller. The committee now was composed of county gentry, Kilkenny City and New Ross businessmen and two of Thomastown's notables.

Alongside such organisational activity which linked classes and localities, other modes of transport continued to be developed at the time. Thomastown's apothecary was treasurer of the Turnpike Trust which planned to open “a new line at Jerpoint” whilst continuing the Shankill-Waterford (via Thomastown) turnpike. Even navigation along the River Nore still was possible: a newspaper advertisement to let Bennettsbridge Mills in 1831 stated that it was three miles from Thomastown “from which the river is navigable to Waterford”. Finally, a canal link between Kilkenny and Inistioge - from where the Nore was tidal and navigable - was a persisting idea. In 1831, an unknown, interested party applied to parliament for “a Bill for making and maintaining a navigable canal, beginning at Woodstock (through Thomastown) to terminate in the Liberties of Kilkenny”.

It most likely was the new availability of state funds which created the flurry of activity across the county. Yet, through that flurry, diverse and diverging interests already were being voiced and organised. At a meeting in Thomastown in late 1831, for example, it was stated that “because of an

increase in trade, new transport facilities (were) necessary". These could be either a railway to Waterford or a canal to Inistioge and thence New Ross. This particular meeting favoured the rail link because "it would bring Kilkenny closer to Waterford" and would not "suffer from weather changes". It also "would be useful to passengers". Therefore, although the case for both was cited as good, the meeting supported the rail link to Waterford.

This elicited an immediate counter-response from Sydenham Davis, Thomastown's sovereign. He published a notice that an application would -

"be made to parliament .. to bring in a bill to improve the present navigation of the River Nore from Thomastown to the low water mark at Inistioge and from said Thomastown to continue a communication by a canal or railroad to Kilkenny from Woodstock through Grenan, Thomastown (etc.) .. ending at the Liberties of Kilkenny".

However, on the same day, the *Kilkenny Journal* reported that, at a meeting at Davis' house in Thomastown to discuss the canal and railroad, the Earl of Carrick (Mount Juliet) had stated that he was "determined to give every opposition in his power to the canal". He said that he had the support of other gentlemen and that "no matter what benefit might result to the merchants or people of Kilkenny", they would oppose any canal which would "encroach on any portion of a nobleman's or gentleman's demesne".

The next day, an editorial in the *Journal* berated Carrick for objecting to the canal because it would pass through his demesne. Was not Thomastown -

"one of the most ruined, beggarly, pauperised human-boroughs that ever under the name of town or village stood; an object of reproach and shame, within view of the mansion-house windows of an Irish peer? It is such an assemblage of motionless old mills, dirty cabins and idle whiskey shops as an Englishman could not form an idea of".

The news reached Waterford. The *Journal* quoted the *Waterford Chronicle*:

"And so the merchants and traders of Kilkenny and Thomastown are to be prevented from increasing their commerce, the poor to be left unemployed and the country

unimproved lest my Lord Carrick's demesne .. be disfigured by a canal; and the interests of one hundred thousand people, the inhabitants of Kilkenny, Ross and all the neighbouring counties set at nought and sacrificed, in order to please some three or four nobles in the county of Kilkenny".

The decision amongst the possibilities of river navigation, canal or railway remained open. However, what apparently was clear to participants at the time was that the existing road network was no longer sufficient for the traffic in goods and that Kilkenny City had to be connected to Waterford in some other way. Also clear was that Thomastown's interests, as articulated by Davis, would best be served by a navigation link but that the effort to make the Nore navigable was largely the concern only of Davis and of Thomastown. The county gentry and Kilkenny city traders never seemed to consider navigation on the Nore from Thomastown as an option. Instead, the gentry had begun to push for a railway from Kilkenny to Waterford, largely because they opposed a canal to Inistioge and were persuaded of the advantages of the new, though as yet untried, type of transport. Meanwhile, the Kilkenny City traders seemed to favour whatever would come their way.

Sydenham Davis continued to plump for Thomastown as head of a revived navigation on the Nore. He tried to obtain gentry support by linking Thomastown's navigation to a railroad. In a letter to the *Moderator*, he informed readers that he had employed a surveyor to examine both a railroad link to Waterford and a "canal to the tide waters at Inistioge". Soon after, he provided the rather unsurprising results of these surveys which allowed him to scuttle the canal link as "attended with too much difficulty" and too great an expense. He supported instead a Kilkenny-Thomastown rail link combined with a revived Nore navigation from Thomastown. In this way, and seeking the favour of the landlords, he noted -

"we will not deprive any resident gentlemen of the benefit of his demesne; and, as my Lord Carrick very kindly offered, at the meeting which was held here Monday last, to allow it to go through any part of his property (with the exception of his demesne), we may expect his support as well as that of all

other resident landlords of the country”.

He called for individuals to subscribe to shares in order to raise £20,000 “as I think the government will give the remainder”. He added that he had “already taken the opinion of the inhabitants of Thomastown and its vicinity, and .. they fully approve of this plan”.

The debate continued as did the scramble for public funds. The canal interest gained momentum during 1833. The government engineer, Richard Griffith, came out in favour of a canal whilst a petition sent to the House of Commons sought support for a canal to Inistioge out of the “£500,000 advanced for the promotion of Public Works in Ireland”. The canal was touted as likely to provide extensive “employment for the area when it is underway” and a public meeting in Kilkenny City, allegedly of 1800 people, supported its building. The *Journal* provided figures on the projected profits from a canal: one year’s income from the sale of limestone alone was to be £100,000! It also was suggested “the employment provided would be a cure for Whitefootism” and rural unrest. A prospectus for a proposed company to build and run the Kilkenny-Inistioge canal (19.5 miles) was soon produced: £100 shares were to be sold in order to raise the necessary £100,000 which, it was said, would yield £7475.4s.2d on the investment. The shares were advertised in 1833 by the directors of the Provincial Bank in Kilkenny City and by a New Ross merchant. It then was discovered that the Board of Works had the power to provide the entire amount. The *Journal* announced that “news of the canal” was being followed by Tipperary, Waterford and Dublin newspapers and that these were optimistic that the canal would be approved and the money obtained from the Board of Works. Notice was given “that an application will be made to the next Parliamentary session for leave to bring in a bill for making and maintaining a canal, or still-water navigation, between Kilkenny City and the tide-water in the river Nore, below Inistioge”.

A few weeks later, it was reported that the Board of Works would advance only one-third of the sum required for the canal. The *Journal* deplored the fact that two-thirds could not be raised locally and attacked the landlords’

unwillingness to subscribe. A canal to Goresbridge, on the River Barrow (instead of Inistioge on the Nore), was then suggested. The Earl of Carrick again was admonished for his lack of support for this canal along with his "insurmountable objection" to a canal going through his demesne. Several months later the *Journal's* editor was still campaigning: "The government or Board of Works must know little or care less about the wants and sufferings of the people" when a canal would increase trade, capital, industry and revenue - "everything but an increase of misery and a consequent increase of crime". A deputation for the canal was set up. It comprised the M.P.'s for Wexford (county and town), Kilkenny (county and town) and New Ross.

The New Ross committee then balked. It applied for a parliamentary bill to make and maintain either a canal or railroad between Kilkenny City and the River Barrow at Goresbridge and, from there, to build a railroad to New Ross". In other words, the New Ross interest had deserted the Kilkenny-Inistioge canal in the hopes of salvaging New Ross' position in any new transport system. Meanwhile, the River Nore navigation plan - to Thomastown, as suggested by Davis - had fallen on deaf ears.

The most powerful of such ears had other plans. By 1835, a survey for the "Great Leinster Railway between Dublin and Kilkenny" had been completed. It had the support of the Earl of Ormonde and "influential gentlemen". At a meeting in Kilkenny City, in 1835, they agreed that the "trade and commerce of the city would be materially benefitted by the railway" and that this would defray increasing unemployment which was "mainly attributable to this city's not having those facilities of communication either by Railway or Water carriage which have been extended to other portions of the Empire". Moreover, a railway was even more essential because Kilkenny City was a key centre for all of Munster. A county-based committee was set up to co-operate with the General Committee which was located in London. It was to allocate shares and adopt "all necessary steps for the immediate formation of a company". The "noblemen and gentlemen" who were "requested to act on the committee" included the Earl of Carrick, Pierce Butler (M.P., County

Kilkenny), several Kilkenny City entrepreneurs and numerous landlords, all of whom "offered to give up, without remuneration, that portion of their lands which might be required for the projected railway". Also on the county committee was Thomastown's sovereign, Sydenham Davis.

All this activity signified five basic shifts. First, Kilkenny eyes had begun to turn northwards, to Dublin and the midlands - away from Waterford and New Ross to the south. Second, they were turning toward the railway and away from water carriage - whether by canal or river. Third, despite pressure from popular and commercial interests in Kilkenny City, New Ross and Thomastown, it was the interests of the landlords which had the upper hand, largely because they had strong, common concerns as well as outside links to private capital in London. Fourth, the water navigation/canal coalition was weak. It was factionalised according to particular local interests. In contrast, the railway interest was county-wide and cohesive. Finally, Thomastown's lone voice, Sydenham Davis, had been co-opted away from supporting a canal. He aligned himself with other landlords as they turned towards English capital, a rail line and Dublin.

Throughout the remainder of 1835, railway meetings were held, share-holders were added, a deputation was struck (headed by the Duke of Leinster) and a notice of application to parliament was published. Kilkenny City retailers were carried along in the process. Their powerless position was expressed by the mayor who was reported as saying that -

"as an individual he was free to confess that another public work - a canal - had heretofore met with more favour from him because he thought it would afford a better and more commodious conveyance for cumbersome articles; but the Grand Canal Co. and the Barrow Co. had neglected ... the local interests of Kilkenny, and therefore he now felt bound to encourage the promoters of the railway communication - it would afford a great deal of employment and ... would certainly rival a canal conveyance both in cheapness and expedition. ... Besides it would not be incompatible with a water carriage communication. ... Therefore, he thought no opposition need be apprehended from the Grand Canal or

Barrow Companies. ...Too much praise could not be given those gentlemen who had given permission for the railway to pass through their lands".

The *Journal* too had shifted its stand and was now an enthusiastic supporter: "the projection of a railway between this city and Dublin will be attended with the most brilliant prospects to our commercial interests". By March 1836, "applications for shares exceeded the capital required" and the High Sheriff, "in compliance with a requisition" signed by Davis and other county landlords, called a meeting which petitioned parliament in favour of the railroad. A resolution also was passed which denounced the Grand Canal Company for a petition which it had sent that had opposed the railway. The meeting stated: "Kilkenny-Dublin is a most suitable line...and Kilkenny is the hope of all inland towns which have no link to the sea". In July 1837, the Dublin & Kilkenny Railway Bill received royal assent.

However, interests which supported other modes of transport remained unconvinced. First, the commissioners who headed the 1833 Parliamentary Inquiry reported on "the urgent necessity for restoring the navigation of the river Nore, from Thomastown to Inistioge" given "the important advantages (which) it would produce", namely, its potential profitability and the impetus to local trade and employment. Second, the road network continued to improve. Grand juries of the various baronies in Kilkenny repaired the roads and expanded the system. The turnpike also continued to operate profitably: repairs were made, the bridges at Gowran and Thomastown were altered, the toll gates were rented out and tolls were paid in quarterly "at the Bank in Thomastown". The income from tolls in 1838 was £800 - "more than enough to keep up the road". Overall, road traffic was sufficiently profitable that a Thomastown shopkeeper established a "day car (2 horses)" to travel from his hotel in Thomastown to Kilkenny. It left Thomastown at 8 a.m., arrived in Kilkenny at 9.30 a.m., and returned at 3 p.m. in winter and 5 p.m. in summer. Finally, despite the railway bill, the idea of a canal to Inistioge was not dead. In 1838, it was revived by "men of New Ross who obtained the promise of support from 13 M.P.'s connected with Kilkenny". Reportedly, "Thomastown men



promised co-operation”.

These other options received a boost when, in mid-1838, it was announced that due to “railroad jobbing, Kilkenny is to be thrown overboard!” The line was now to go to Maryborough (Abbeyleix) rather than Kilkenny city. Why? Because the line now went through “the estate of the Marquess of Landsdowne”. Said the *Moderator*: “We must characterise it as a rank job...and hope all who feel an interest in the matter, will take immediate steps to check its progress”. Similarly, the proprietors of the Great Leinster & Munster Railway Company in London “protest(ed) against the...undue interference with private enterprise” and expressed “confidence that no such interference will receive the sanction of her Majesty’s Government”.

They were wrong. The railway went through Maryborough. This allowed the canal interest to revive once again. An engineer, J. Cotterell, probably in the pay of New Ross merchants, wrote several letters to the newspapers in an unabashed effort to secure a canal from “Kilkenny to the tide-water at Inistioge” by which “New Ross would become an Irish Liverpool and Kilkenny an Irish Manchester”. He cited the potentially “great traffic” in lime, timber and English coal. He argued that “higher prices would be obtained for agricultural commodities” and that “merchants could transmit goods through New Ross at an advantage of at least 10%” over Waterford. As Cotterell warmed to his cause, he cited the fraudulent use of canal-building funds (£25,250) between 1755 and 1767 and actually named the gentry (including those with resident descendants in 1838!) who had served as “contractors” and who had never accounted for the monies they had received. Cotterell’s prose suggests that there was a great deal of animosity between the railway and the canal faction, between the Kilkenny gentry and the New Ross merchants.

Meanwhile, with the collapse of the railway plans, a new contender emerged - a tram pulled by horses along tracks. Although the engineering study which suggested the tram favoured a south-bound route, it was to by-pass Thomastown. The report also was very careful to argue against a competitor - river navigation. It pointed out that “winter

floods" would "present serious obstacles to any mode of navigation" as would the "shallowness of the stream itself" between May and October. Moreover -

"assuming...that the natural river is improvable between Kilkenny and Thomastown, there must be a canal from Thomastown to Inistioge. The construction of such a work is of itself easy, but it...must pass through Mr. Tighe's grounds. ...Also the millers, who are anxious for a canal, at the same time oppose the slightest diversion of their present supply of water".

Therefore, the report concluded, the only "practicable mode of improved communication" was a "tramway from Kilkenny to the tidewater at Inistioge. ...It would interfere with no mills or vested interests" and would "apply to the transmission of merchandise only". Cotterell, in representing the New Ross interest, was subverted by the "tram railroad" as "superior in every respect to water conveyance". The expense was estimated as one half that of the canal - using "four horses of ordinary strength...with appropriate wagons, to convey 120 tons of goods, at the rate of 5 miles an hour". A public meeting in Kilkenny, attended by city businessmen, approved "the proposed line of tramway between Kilkenny and Inistioge" and set up a committee to report on it. At the end of 1838, it was announced that the Board of Works was to recommend that the treasury advance £20,000.

Clearly, Kilkenny retailers and merchants wanted any connection to the sea and they were prepared to support whatever was going there. By December 1838, the tramway seemed the best bet. It also had the support of New Ross business. However, the Great Leinster & Munster Railway was not dead: there simply was competition over where it would run. Again its plan was to be submitted to Parliament amidst claims of crisis from Kilkenny City, as expressed in the *Kilkenny Journal*:

"For the want of a cheap and facile medium...enterprise is totally paralysed. ...We are... 'land-locked' within a few miles of the tide-water on one side, and of the Barrow navigation on the other. ...Our city has been retrograding".

A year later, the matter remained unresolved. So, yet another meeting of "freemen and inhabitants" of Kilkenny

City was held to "consider...the most eligible line and modes of conveyance for passenger and merchandise between Kilkenny and the sea". The meeting nominated a committee (i) to consider the three proposed methods of connection - canal, railroad or tram; (ii) to decide between Thomastown, Goresbridge, Inistioge or Waterford as a communication; and (iii) to investigate the finances. In the discussion which followed, opinion moved towards a communication through Goresbridge because it would then pass through Lord Clifden's property and his mother was sister to the Chief Secretary and could influence government finance!

Clearly, the merchants of Kilkenny were, by this time, as alienated from the decision-making process as were the shopkeepers and people of Thomastown. The decisions, or lack of them, lay elsewhere. In 1842, Thomastown's "merchants and traders" again revived the idea of opening navigation between Thomastown and Inistioge. Contributions for this "important public project" were collected although it was not stated how the funds would be used.

In Kilkenny City, meanwhile, and in the county, the landlords remained committed to the railway. By the time of an 1844 meeting, the issue had become how to obtain a branch line which would link the city and county to the main Dublin-Cashel line. Should it connect at Maryborough or at Carlow? The decision, as discussion showed, depended on whether Waterford or Wexford was seen as the natural port for Kilkenny. Maryborough finally was chosen - ostensibly because it would be less expensive, it provided a link to Dublin, Limerick and Cork, and it passed through Kilkenny's colliery district.

The Kilkenny Junction Railway Company resulted and shares were offered for sale at three banks. Then, Kilkenny City's mayor announced that he would call a meeting to discuss a rail link to Waterford. A week later, a meeting in Waterford "received a deputation...from London, authorised on the part of London Capitalists". A Waterford-Kilkenny Railway committee was formed. At this point, finally, the industrial segment of Thomastown responded. Members formed a local committee. Made up of Sydenham Davis, a

brewer and two flour millers, it held a public meeting at the courthouse "to prove to the Kilkenny-Waterford Railway Committee that a thoroughfare through Thomastown would be to their advantage". With other routes between Kilkenny and Waterford being mooted, the Thomastown committee was concerned to point out that "local subscriptions would amount to £10-15,000", that a line through Thomastown would cause no "interference with any gentleman's demesne", that Thomastown had "14 mills in the neighbourhood" and that it was "a fertile and productive locality" with "numerous resident proprietors and 30,000 tons of annual imports and exports (excluding stock and passengers)". It also noted that a line through Thomastown "would take in New Ross traffic which otherwise would go through Carlow" and the traffic from the Ennisnag area.

In stating all this, the committee was countering proposals for an alternate route: the Earl of Desart and Sir Richard Langrishe sought to have the southward line brought through Callan, Kells and Ennisnag - areas in which they had their estates. However, the Railway committee had counted traffic at the Thomastown-Waterford turnpike gates and had found that, over a two week period, 2,584 pigs and 2,633 carts had passed. It was also suggested that a million tons of lime were conveyed annually from Thomastown to Inistioge and that 50,000 tons of goods (mainly coal and flour) were handled by Thomastown's merchants. Thomastown was selected over Ennisnag.

In November 1844, the Waterford & Kilkenny Railway Company announced that it would apply for a parliamentary act to make and maintain a railway between Waterford and Kilkenny. Capital of £250,000 was to be raised by selling 12,000 shares at £20 each. The committee in Ireland was made up of the Earl of Ormonde as chair and numerous county landlords, including Thomastown's Sydenham Davis. A report from the Board of Trade noted:

"The promoters of the scheme are willing to enter into any arrangement...to connect their line with the Great Southern and Western Railway so as to give uninterrupted communication with Dublin. ...considering that the proposed scheme is the first step towards...a direct route through this

for Ireland's largest inland town, it had gained a place in an international railway network.

### **Conclusion: From Kilkenny to the Sea in the Early Nineteenth Century**

In all the time that it took to form public policy in transport and to carry it out, a complex political process was in motion. It was a political process in which members from all classes pursued particular interests and in which people from particular localities tried to enter the decision-making process. In looking back at this process from the late twentieth century, two features seem central. First, it appears that English interest and capital were key. Second, it seems unsurprising that a new transport system followed a trade route that already was at least 700 years old. However, neither English capital nor the weight of traditional communication lines created the Kilkenny-Waterford railway. Instead, essential parts of the process were provided by regional and local machinations within Ireland itself. By looking at these, it is possible to learn a good deal about Kilkenny society and politics in the mid-nineteenth century.

So-called county gentlemen, from early on, had been well-disposed to a rail link; but they had seen it as southward-facing and they had seen it as an alternative to an unwanted canal. In acting on these interests, they came to form a county-wide coalition and to adopt the interests of English capital. At the same time, the local commercial classes in southern County Kilkenny were politically weak. Neither from Kilkenny City nor from Thomastown or New Ross were traders able to halt the railway building. This was because the coalition amongst people from such places was fragile. If an option favouring a particular locality was mooted, a coalition partner bolted. In contrast, the landlords were able to maintain a united coalition - at least until the Marquess of Landsdowne ran off with Kilkenny City's railway. But then, the Kilkenny county gentry quickly re-grouped in order to obtain a link line for the county.

Important to this process was the availability of capital. At the time, private capital was of more consequence than state or public funding. Private English capital was greater than

what was, or probably could be, provided by the Board of Public Works. Moreover, the Irish who provided a large portion of the private capital were mainly the landed gentry; and they became committed to railroads. Thus, the coalition of gentry which held firm at the county level was better connected, more coherent and wealthier than was the coalition of commercial interests in southern Kilkenny. However, had state funding been more generous, Kilkenny City might have been connected to the sea by a canal!

Throughout the political process, however, it is important to recognise that when Irish landlords colluded with English capital, they did so not simply because of pressure from foreigners. They also did so because of pressure from below - from the threat of a canal "disfiguring" their demesnes, of irresponsible boatmen trooping through their gardens and of unemployed workers fomenting disruption. Thus, it was the workers of the county who provided some of the motivation underlying collusion: "idle hands" and rowdy boatmen were an incentive for those with capital to invest it in ways which counteracted the perceived economic and political danger which they presented.

Thus, although the new trade link followed the old route and although the town of Thomastown was sited along it, the town lost all hope of reviving its centuries-old role as the head of navigation on the Nore. The town failed largely because its most powerful residents - the landlords - were uninterested in river navigation and were strongly against a canal. Indeed, they were amongst the first to collude with English railway interests. In so doing, they left local concerns behind in favour of their own class and county interests. An important townsman, Sydenham Davis, also deserted the local navigation faction which he had earlier headed. However, he only left gradually, after each of his successive efforts had failed. Yet he was part of the coalition which secured whatever local advantages could be secured from the railway. Davis, in association with Thomastown's industrialists, successfully negotiated the routing of the Waterford-Kilkenny rail line through Thomastown and away from other adjacent localities, such as Ennisnag. Presumably too, in such negotiations, Thomastown's landlords made a

contribution - not the least of which was to offer their lands for free.

Conspicuous by their absence in the entire process were Thomastown's shopkeepers. More generally, this reflected the alienation of the county's commercial classes from the political process. For retailing is a locally-rooted occupation: shopkeepers aim to buy cheaply and to sell dear. Any transport system which helped this was acceptable. Therefore, after their failure to revive navigation, Thomastown's shopkeepers - along with those from Kilkenny City - were willing to support anything going.

An example of their outlook comes from a reported interchange between Thomastown's landlord and railway director, William Greene, and a retailer from Kilkenny City. The discussion took place at a public meeting in the city when it was being decided whether the Kilkenny line should go to Maryborough or Carlow. Greene "said that the existence of the Canal formed a great argument against the line to Carlow, for they would in great degree oppose each other, while there would be nothing to oppose the line to Abbeyleix". Mr. Sullivan, a Kilkenny alderman and merchant, responded: "the Canal was at present the only cheap mode of conveyance, but it was rather high; and if a line of railroad was run nearly parallel with it, it would be a means of producing competition, which would be most beneficial". Probably somewhat impatiently, Greene "observed that the competition would scarcely benefit the shareholders". Sullivan replied that "it would benefit the locality". It was out of these divergent views and interests that a new transport system was fashioned along a traditional trade route in the early nineteenth century.

### Notes

Unless stated otherwise in the text, all quotations are taken from *Finn's Leinster Journal*, *Kilkenny Moderator* and *Kilkenny Journal*. Full references and other sources of information used in this article can be obtained from the author: Dr. Marilyn Silverman, Department of Anthropology, York University, 4700 Keele Street, North York, Ontario M3J 1P3, Canada.

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