

Barnet Connolly – c1820 – c1874

Preface

It is difficult to imagine what your ancestor might or might not have felt emotionally, or what they did on a day-to-day basis. In the following story some elements are portrayed by the author, using facts and anecdotes from the historical era, to enhance what would otherwise be a dry repetition of historical fact.

Imagine...

...Connolly lay awake listening to his wife's laboured breathing. A lit candle illuminated areas of the small room, including the hearth where a large empty pot sat. The chimney hole above it, where the woody smoke could escape, was black, and the single wooden door, made from timber scraps, the last protection the family had from the elements, lit only occasionally by the flickering candle.

Rising awkwardly from under her worn blanket, she moved to the hearth and kneeling down, blew gently on the fireplace cinders, praying for a glowing ember before placing some small pieces of turf and peat alongside the smouldering ash. She thought of food but worried that the one shilling rent was due. There was some oatmeal and bread which would have to feed them both, but there was little milk. Well into her ninth month of pregnancy, their child was due at any time.

He could smell the midden or dung heap as he went outside to toilet. His thoughts drifted between the labour his wife was about to go through and his day ahead on the farm, where he worked a gruelling ten-hour shift...



A famine scene in Connaught in the west of Ireland c1820 -1850, Courtesy Connaught Telegraph

Barnet's father was an Agricultural Labourer and along with the majority of the population in Ireland, relied on farm work for a livelihood. Small-scale subsistence farming was common and many Irish families living in rural areas worked the land to grow crops and raise livestock. Strangely, in Ireland, unlike the remainder of the United Kingdom, most of the economic activity centred on agriculture. Industrialisation was yet to make a difference.

Much of Irish agriculture operated under a system of tenant farming, where farmers rented land from wealthy landlords, many of whom were in the East or Ireland and Ulster serving as 'absentee' landlords. It is not yet known whether the Connolly's fitted into this category. The conditions and terms of these leases could vary widely, and many farmers struggled to keep food on the table and a roof over their family's heads.

In the 1820's, the diet of poor people in Ireland was quite limited and often heavily reliant on basic, inexpensive and locally available food. The Irish diet, especially for those living in rural areas, was largely determined by agricultural practices and the economic conditions of the time:

The potato was the most important food in the Irish diet and was relatively easy to cultivate as well as providing a reliable source of nutrition. Poor households often subsisted primarily on potatoes. However, this heavy dependence on a single crop would later prove disastrous during the Great Hunger (1845-1852) when the potato crop failed due to a blight, resulting in widespread suffering and death. As well as potatoes, other vegetables like turnips and cabbage were part of the diet, especially in the colder months. Oatmeal was another staple, especially in the form of porridge. It was a nutritious and affordable source of sustenance but dairy products, such as milk and butter, were only usually consumed by those who had access to cows.

Although bread made from wheat was less common among the poor, traditional Irish soda bread made from a mixture of wheat and other grains, such as barley and oats, was more prevalent. In coastal areas, people had access to fish, such as mackerel and herring, which were important sources of protein, as was meat, although meat consumption was relatively limited for the poor due to its cost. When meat was consumed, it was often in the form of pork or bacon, as pigs were easier to raise in small, subsistence farms.



Image Courtesy of Family Tree magazine – The circle shows where Connolly DNA is most prevalent

Elsewhere in the world there were revolutions taking place in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece. The Argentine Confederation [Argentina], which had declared its independence from Spain four years previously, formally claimed the Falkland Islands. George IV of the United Kingdom ascended the throne in January 1820 and in Ireland there was much political unrest and agitation for reform. The United Irishmen's Rebellion in 1798 and the Act of Union in 1801, which merged the Irish Kingdom with the British Kingdom to form the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, were significant historical events that influenced the political landscape of the early nineteenth century. The period ultimately set the stage for the significant events of the Great Famine and the broader Irish struggle for independence from Britain in the decades that would follow. Ireland was also experiencing a population boom, which put additional pressure on the land and contributed to rural poverty.

...Barnet's mother went into labour during the cold of the day, with the light wind carrying her pain away as if it had never existed. Whether it was a first child or not was immaterial, there was still pain, the kind her man didn't understand. She eventually gave birth on their

makeshift bed, with the help of a neighbour who comforted her and cleaned the child before disposing of the bloodied rags and afterbirth. It was a boy...

Barnet Connolly was born, sometime around 1820 although the exact date is vague. The surname is the anglicised form of the Old Gaelic O'Conghaile, which means "fierce as a hound or wolf". He was born in an area in North Connacht, in particular, the area around North-East Mayo and North West Sligo perhaps near Ballina and Lough Conn, as outlined on the map, but detail is difficult to substantiate.

Baby Barnet, probably an adaption of his father's name, may have had a small wooden cradle bed to lie in, although furniture, of any sort, was scarce.

Young Barnet's early life was spent for the most part with his mother until of an age where he would benefit from education. Ireland was predominantly a Catholic country, with a minority Protestant population and the family was Catholic too. This would have an effect on any schooling in the 1820's because the religion was being suppressed by the English crown. The anti-Catholic laws in place during that period were largely designed to protect the political and economic status quo and prevent the possibility of a catholic monarch; hence the oath of allegiance, which Catholics could not take as it involved swearing loyalty to the crown and the Church of England. In fact, it was illegal to send Catholic children to school and Catholics could not become teachers. By sending the children to Protestant schools it was hoped they would learn to be loyal to the crown of England, would learn the English language and would adopt the Protestant faith. Barnet's own language was most likely Irish (Gaelic), the same as almost 80% of Connaught people spoke, according, retrospectively, to the 1881 census¹.

Hedge School



Whilst the parents struggled to keep a roof over the family's heads and food on their plates, Barnet may have been introduced to education through a 'Hedge' school. These secret schools were set up for Catholic and other "non-conforming" children. These were called 'scoileanna scairte' in Irish.

The family avoided the cholera epidemic² of 1832 which, having spread from India to Russia in 1817, had reached Germany by 1830 and England in 1831. Even in rural Ireland the public were kept informed by the many local newspapers. The 'threatened calamity' appeared in January 1832, first at Belfast, then Dublin, then Cork. Typically, the disease struck first at the major ports but soon spread to almost every corner of the country, eventually claiming almost fifty-thousand lives from the country's population of 6.8 million, 5 million of which were Catholic.

Almost all were enduring hardship and the Connolly's would be no exception. Begging was an unescapable feature of life in pre-Famine Ireland. Accounts³ of social conditions in the country consistently refer to the frequency of homeless persons or beggars, while travellers' descriptions inevitably present accounts of the colourful and menacing beggars they came upon. Urban streets and country roads were frequently described as being 'infested with swarms of beggars', who relied chiefly or exclusively on alms to survive. Indeed, beggary was seen as a threat to society on a number of fronts and yet the practices of begging and alms-giving were also seen as a Christian obligation.

Housing conditions for the poor in Ireland during this time were marked by overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and a general absence of any comforts. Poverty and inadequate housing were widespread and many families struggled to provide shelter for themselves, so the addition of cholera meant almost inconceivable hardship.

Barnet was probably schooled then worked on the land like his father before him. Through work, or the social life he had, at some point he met Bridget Ward and the couple became friends.

As older teenagers their love blossomed and they were married about 1840, although how and exactly when and where has yet to be unearthed.

Men and women planning to marry in Ireland, right up to 1844, could choose from a complex selection of formal and informal services. Church authorities, including the Catholic church of which they were both members, supervised the implementation of their marriage through regulation. The marriage definition;

'...before they [the betrothed] contract marriage, or at least three days before its consummation, they carefully confess their sins and approach devoutly the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist',

which had been introduced by the Council of Trent many years before.

The Council of Trent was the 19th ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church, held in three parts from 1545 to 1563. Prompted by the Reformation, the Council of Trent responded emphatically to the issues at hand and enacted the formal Roman Catholic reply to the doctrinal challenges of the Protestants. It thus represents the official adjudication of many questions about which there had been continuing ambiguity

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In 1841 the first thorough census of Ireland was completed and the population calculated to be just under 8.2 million was added to by the birth the year before of Barnet's son, Bernard, whose story is told separately in 'Bernard Connolly – Immigrant'.

commencement of disease, 37; total deaths, 12.

THE CHOLERA OFFICIAL REPORT.
CENTRAL BOARD OF HEALTH FOR IRELAND.
Council Office, Dublin Castle, August 29, 1832.

Places.	New Cases.	Died.	Recovered.
Dublin, Aug. 29,	61	21	39
Howth	1	0	0
Rush	13	6	8
Kingstown	3	0	0
Kilkenny	9	8	4
Waterford	2	0	4
Youghal	4	1	2
Clonmel	1	2	2
Cashel	9	9	0
Cloyne	0	1	0
Fermoy	2	0	0
Listowel	0	0	1
Kitrush	3	0	0
Castlebar	3	2	3
Newportpratt	4	1	5
Galway	9	5	2
Headford	2	1	1
Sligo	20	16	13
Ballisodere	12	1	1
Strabane	2	0	0
Enniskillen	4	4	3
Ennis	7	0	6
Newmarket on Fergus	1	0	0
Boyle	1	1	0
Athlone	1	0	0
Nenagh	8	1	6
Stradbally	0	0	3
Coleraine	26	10	9
Druminal	2	0	2
Donaghadee	2	0	1
Bangor	1	2	1
Belfast	23	4	32
Lurgan	0	0	1
Armagh	3	0	2
Dundalk	1	2	0
Callon	0	1	0
Dublin—Total cases, 10,208.		Total deaths, 2,912	

(Signed) FRANCIS BARKER, M.D. Sec.

ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND.
LONDON, Aug. 27.—The disease is making frightful ravages throughout the country, particularly in Bristol, Liverpool, Exeter, and Plymouth. The general official Report received to-day gives 1747 new cases; 636 deaths; and 978 recoveries.
TUESDAY, Aug. 28.—This day's return, 518 new cases; 219 deaths; 330 recoveries; and 1946 remaining.—Total Cases

*The Constitution or, Cork Advertiser Saturday
1st September 1832 – From British Newspaper*

Ireland's tenant farmers, as a class, especially in the west of Ireland where Barnet, now aged about twenty, and his father farmed, struggled both to provide for themselves and to supply the British market with cereal crops.

The families' close relatives, most probably lived nearby, or perhaps even shared the single dwelling, further overcrowding the living space. Poor families lived in small, one or two room cottages, typically made of stone or mud walls with thatched roofs but some of the poorest families lived in mud dwellings, which were essentially small huts made of wattle and daub, a type of traditional construction. These huts were often very basic and provided limited protection from the elements.

People were virtually at a subsistence level. The potato, which had become a staple crop in Ireland by the 18th century, was not only appealing in that it was hardy, nutritious food and relatively easy to grow in the Irish soil but also high in vitamin C and helped prevented scurvy. Introduced from the Peruvian Andes where it had been cultivated since around 6000B.C, most of the rural communities had come to depend almost exclusively on the potato for their diet.

When the crops began to fail in 1845, as a result of infection, Irish leaders in Dublin petitioned Queen Victoria and Parliament to act and, initially, they did, repealing the so-called 'Corn Laws' and their tariffs on grain, which made food such as corn and bread prohibitively expensive.

When in June 1846, the Conservative Government fell, Charles, later Lord Trevelyan, took full control of the Liberals Famine Policy⁴ and ordered the closing of the food depots in Ireland that had been selling Prime Minister Peel's Indian corn. He believed the Irish should look after themselves.

With many tenant farmers unable to produce sufficient food for their own consumption, and the costs of other supplies rising, thousands died from starvation and hundreds of thousands more from disease caused by malnutrition.

Irish tenant farmers often permitted landless labourers known as cottiers, to live and work on their farms, as well as to keep their own potato plots. A typical cottier family consumed about eight pounds of potatoes per person per day, an amount that probably provided about 80 percent or more of all the calories they consumed. The rest of the population also consumed large quantities of potatoes.

A heavy reliance on just one or two high-yielding types of potatoes greatly reduced the genetic variety that ordinarily prevents the decimation of an entire crop by disease, and thus the Irish became vulnerable to famine.

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Complicating matters further, historians have since concluded that Ireland continued to export large quantities of food, primarily to Great Britain, during the blight. In cases such as livestock and butter, research suggests that exports from Ireland actually increased⁵ during the Potato Famine.

The Irish Potato Famine, more commonly referred to as the Great Hunger, began in 1845 when a mould known as *Phytophthora infestans* (or *P. infestans*) caused a destructive plant disease that spread rapidly throughout Ireland. The infestation ruined up to one-half of the potato crop that year, and about three-quarters of the crop over the next seven years. Because the tenant farmers of Ireland, then ruled as a colony of Great Britain, relied heavily on the potato as a source of food, the infestation had a catastrophic impact on Ireland and its population. Before it ended in 1852, the Potato Famine resulted in the death of roughly one

million Irish from starvation and related causes, with at least another million forced to leave their homeland as refugees.

The impact of the pre-famine economic⁶ changes was felt differently around the country. The residents of Connaught, where the Connolly's lived, grew poor as absentee landowners became reluctant to invest and innovate. This led, in turn, to low levels of literacy, labour productivity, incomes, and savings and, thereafter, to a widespread subsistence crisis. Hundreds of thousands of rural and semiurban workers, especially women, were left impoverished. Connaught was worst hit. Bernard and his father worried.

In the years 1848 to 1849, the worst years of the famine; over 1 million people died and over 1 million more left Ireland.

There were fewer people working the land now⁷. Many had left during the famine and many more left each day. There was always work, sometimes too much because there was no one left to fill the gaps. Pay had increased from almost 8d a day to 1/- and during harvest this generally went up to 2/6 per day, but this was irregular and the price of everything had gone up too. Land owners spoke of improvements to housing but then speaking about it is one thing..

Shortly after 12th July 1849, Barnet and the family heard about the 'Battle of Dolly's Brae', almost one hundred and fifty miles East, when at least 30 Catholics had been killed in clashes between 'Ribbonmen' and 'Orangemen'. Orangemen were considered 'knights of the true faith' for their devotion to Protestantism and the Orange Order.

Small insurrections led by farm labourers had started to develop before 1849, including those led by 'Ribbonmen', a popular movement of poor Catholics in Ireland, and one of many secret societies supporting the tenant and labourer's rights. Much of Ulster, north Leinster and north Connacht came to be organised by Ribbon networks during the 1815-45 period.

Ribbonism⁸, whose supporters were usually called Ribbonmen, was a 19th-century popular movement of poor Catholics in Ireland. The movement was also known as Ribandism. The Ribbonmen were active against landlords and their agents, and opposed "Orangeism", the ideology of the Protestant Orange Order.

The Ribbon Society was principally an agrarian secret society, whose members consisted of rural Irish Catholics. The society was formed in response to the miserable conditions in which the vast majority of tenant farmers and rural workers lived in the early 19th century in Ireland. Its objective was to prevent landlords from changing or evicting their tenants. Ribbonmen also attacked tithe and process servers, and later evolved the policy of Tenants' Rights. The existence of "ribandmen" was recorded as early as 1817. The name is derived from a green ribbon worn as a badge in a button-hole by the members.

The "Battle of Dolly's Brae" took place between Rathfriland and Castlewellan, County Down on 12th July 1849. Fourteen hundred Orangemen marched from Rathfriland to Tollymore Park near Castlewellan and one thousand Ribbonmen gathered, with rocks, which were thrown at the Orange parade. Subsequently Catholic homes in the surrounding area were burned and 80 Catholics were killed.

'The fact that members of the County Down Orange Order had stated their intention to march from Rathfriland to the Earl of Roden's Estate at Tollymore Park, County Down on the Twelfth had greatly alarmed government authorities. The proposed route of the parade would pass through the almost total Catholic townland of Magheramayo. This, it was feared, would provoke the Catholic Ribbonmen. In order to make sure that things stayed quiet, a body of troops and police and two magistrates was sent to the area. Early on the morning of July 12, 1849, the soldiers took up their positions at near Castlewellan, where there had been trouble

the previous year. Shortly after, a force of several hundred Ribbonmen arrived and finding the pass occupied, they waited nearby.

The parade of over one thousand Orange Men "all armed to the teeth" left Rathfriland led by a number of bands and a company of dragoons. Meanwhile, the numbers of Ribbonmen at Dolly's Brae had grown to over a thousand, all armed with pitchforks, pikes and muskets. They appeared to enjoy themselves with shooting practice - but no breach of the peace occurred.'

Irishidentity.com

Ireland has probably had more secret societies⁹ than any country in Europe except Russia. They have existed there from the late eighteenth century to the present time and include; the Orange Order - Protestant, the United Irishmen - Presbyterian, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, often referred to as the Fenians, the Irish Republican Army and the Ribbonmen – Catholic. Many of these organised, oath-bound peasant defence societies were formed to protect against eviction threats by landlords who had little sympathy with the plight of the people and were responsible for local law. Maybe Barnet and his father wore the Ribbonmens' identifying green ribbon tucked into their front pockets.

By 1850, most of the financial relief provided for the starving peasants, which was being paid by the Irish landowners through poor relief, had run out. Because those at subsistence levels were unable to pay their rents, the landlords also eventually ran out of their own funds which they had supported them with, and the result was that hundreds of thousands of Irish tenant farmers and labourers were evicted during the years of the crisis. Whether our key characters were in this, or an 'as-near-as' position, is unimportant. Most of Ireland was in similar circumstances.

There was talk of emigration, and Barnet and Bridget discussed it at length with their parents. Emigration was not uncommon in Ireland, even in the years preceding the Famine. Between 1815 and 1845, Ireland traditionally was the major provider of overseas labour to Great Britain and North America. However, emigration reached a peak during the famine, particularly in the years 1846–1855.

In July 1857, ten days of serious rioting in Belfast following clashes surrounding the Orange Order parades on 12th July. Then in 1858, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, also known as the Fenians, was founded as a secret society dedicated to armed rebellion against the British. The IRB was a secret oath-bound fraternal organisation dedicated to the establishment of an "independent democratic republic" in Ireland between 1858 and 1924.

rived in this city to induce disembodied militiamen to join the Papal army.—*Saunders's Correspondent.*

ARREST OF ELEVEN RIBBONMEN IN DUNDALK.
ON Saturday afternoon, between four and five o'clock, Sub-Inspector Supple, assisted by Head-Constable Reilly and a body of police, arrested four men in a public-house kept by John Adair, on George's Quay, on the charge of belonging to an illegal secret society. The arrests were carried out in the most prompt and dexterous manner, the officers coming upon the parties while in the act of cogitating on their mysterious designs. The men were safely lodged in the police barrack, and afterwards several other arrests were made in various parts of the town, and another on Monday, all belonging to the same order, who, we understand, have been for some time in the habit of making Adair's and other public-houses in the town the rendezvous for their illegal meetings. Eleven men, in all, are in custody, and we believe the autho-

Belfast News-Letter - Thursday 31 May 1860

Barnet was now almost forty, as was his wife, Bridget. Their son Bernard, at twenty was unmarried and although the young man worked hard, Barnet could see his disillusionment.

What future lay ahead for them?

Endnote There are no records found so far that indicate that Barnet and Bridget ever emigrated, although their son Bernard did. Bernard made his way to the East coast of Scotland where he became an ironstone labourer. He married Jane McDade from Donegal in 1864, in Edinburgh, and they had four children. Both their marriage signatures were with an X. His working life is described in ‘Bernard Connolly – Furnaceman’.

There was no sign of Barnet or Bridget at their son’s wedding, and no mention of them ever leaving Ireland. Both Barnet and Bridget died before 1874.

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