

*DUNFERMLINE RIOTS. From Reminiscences of Dunfermline by Alexander Stewart. Transcribed for clarity.*

DUNFERMLINE, which has been noted for its usually quiet and law-abiding disposition, would now and again become the scene of lawlessness, and display a riotous aspect. About a hundred years ago, there were in the town occasional outbursts in the shape of meal mobs, when the dreaded "dearths" occurred, and when meal, which was the main staple of life, rose to famine prices, but the riots that took place fifty or sixty years ago were usually caused by misunderstandings regarding the question of wages, and trade disputes. Doubtless, the leaders of such tumults considered that there was good cause for the action which they took; but at the same time the great bulk of the inhabitants were always on the side of law and order, and were much shocked at the tumultuous proceedings of the unruly depredators. In dull times, when severe depressions of trade took place, or when yarn rose to a high price, and when profits diminished, there was a strong inducement on the part of the manufacturers to reduce the scale or "table" of wages, not only of the hand-loom weavers, but also of the large number of women who were employed as bobbiners. On such occasions there was a natural outcry raised against those reductions, and much angry feeling was shown towards the employers, which on several occasions culminated in open riot. There was one that I remember, at which the dreaded *Netherton weicht* or drum was brought out, to warn all those concerned that *something was up*. A noisy mob soon collected, and as an onlooker at a distance, I saw the proceedings, The crowd gradually increased, and soon had a very threatening aspect; but I observed a well-known and much-respected Magistrate, followed by one or two other persons, go boldly into the very heart of the furious mob, and implore the ringleaders to quietly disperse. After a deal of trouble and opposition, he was at last successful, the *weicht* quietly disappeared to its dark hiding-place in an obscure garret, and the gathering thereafter melted away. It was a most daring thing to do; but, thanks to his extraordinary tact and force of persuasion, he accomplished his object- the mob slunk away, and peace was secured.

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apparent, when the damage done to property had to be paid for at the expense of the public.

The question may be asked-Where were the police? The answer is, that those affairs were usually so secretly planned and so expeditiously carried out that the police were not aware of them till after all was nearly over. At that time there would be only one policeman (Or town-keeper, as he was called) and an assistant, and what could they have been able to do in the face of a body of violent rioters, the most of them strong, active young men? The town-keeper had no costly staff of assistants, as such a thing was rarely required, and he was deemed quite a sufficient "terror to evil-doers" in those times. I think it is Novalis who has said. "Two things strike me dumb - the starry heavens, and the sense of right and wrong implanted into the heart of man." If there were no such sense implanted within us, where would we be in the midst of the large number of the evil-disposed, if there could be anything approaching to unanimity amongst them? After the rioters had nearly finished their work, a cry was raised, "There's the constables," and in a short space of time the mob took to their heels, and dispersed as hurriedly as if a troop of armed dragoons had made their appearance.

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In the case of one mob, which was on its way to commit mischief, they passed a man called Barrowman, who asked some of the rioters what was the meaning of such a noisy crowd, and he was informed that it was a *collier's waddin*! He quietly remarked that it was the biggest and queerest "*waddin*" he had ever seen. In several cases such hardship was inflicted upon those who were entirely innocent of anything which could cause offence or be injurious to any human being.

In some instances, when the magistrates were apprehensive of riots, large numbers of special constables were sworn in and presented with official batons, and they were ordered to hold themselves in readiness to act when required. On two or three occasions I remember seeing troops of dragoons brought to the town to restore order, and give the evil-disposed security against lawlessness. The Riot Act was also read in several instances when it was considered necessary, and when matters had assumed a dangerous aspect, and there was a fear of destruction of property, or of personal violence being offered.

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leave a certain locality. Those orgies commence with a drinking spree, and often end in blood-shed or loss of life. This disturbance commenced on a Saturday, about eleven o'clock at night, when the public-houses were emptied, and soon large crowds collected around the navvies to see the fun. For a while the north side of the town quite resembled a Donnybrook Fair. A sham fight first commenced amongst themselves, then after that, the belligerents began to strike every person they could lay their hands on, and much personal damage was done.

On Sunday morning no disposition was shown by any party to renew hostilities, everything looked peaceful and calm and the tempest seemed to have passed away; but on Monday morning outrages were committed on two Irishmen who were employed hoeing a field of potatoes on Urquhart Farm. The poor men had agreed to hoe at a rate greatly below what women in the locality had been previously getting. A crowd rushed upon one of them, and threw him over a dyke. A rush was made upon the other; he tried to escape by getting into a drain, but was pulled out by the legs and handled roughly. In the course of the day a plan was concocted to compel all Irishmen to leave the town forthwith. Had the parties chiefly connected with the getting up of the plot been content to wreak their vengeance only against the navvies who had first caused the disturbance, there would have been some sort of excuse for the subsequent proceedings. The scheme of expulsion embraced the whole of the Irishmen in the town, some of whom had been residents there for many years, and had conducted themselves in an exemplary manner. They had at once to quit their work-shops, their dwellings, their wives and children. Amongst those expelled was one named Frederick Lennis, who had resided in the town for twelve years, and was generally well liked. The mob succeeded in compelling about forty persons to leave their work, and they drove them on like a flock of sheep. When some of the band entered the shop where Fred was quietly working, unconscious of what was about to befall him, they immediately ordered him to quit work and come off his loom. "What for "said Fred?" For being an Irishman; all Irishmen are to quit their work and leave the town at once, said they. "Och, thin ye need not be in so great a hurry; allow me to work my cut out and get my pay, and thin, sure, I'll go paceably." As he appeared to be in no hurry to go, they proceeded to assist him in an unceremonious way. He then asked to be allowed to go home and see his wife, and get a clean shirt and decent clothes, but no time was given for that, and Fred had to go along with the flock of countrymen waiting at the door. As the band of Irishmen were marched down by Bothwell Haugh, he was hailed by an old acquaintance who asked, "What are you seeking here, Frederick?" "Faith, I don't know!" "And what were you doing?" "In troth, I was doing nothing else but working at my loom." "And where are they taking you to?" "By jabbers! an' that I cannot tell. Had they been driving me the other way, I might have thought they were sending me home to the ould country, but this is the wrong road for that." Some of Fred's friends interceded for him, and he was allowed to go back. The mob having learned that an Irishman was at work in Mr.

Whitelaw's foundry, a portion of them entered the foundry, and the man was ordered to leave. Mr. Whitelaw strongly remonstrated with the crowd as to the unreasonableness and cruelty of their conduct; but it was in vain, and so the man, to save any further disturbance, voluntarily left his work and joined his countrymen. The mob next proceeded to the factory of Mr. Erskine Beveridge, as several Irishmen were employed there; but a powerful body of the workers protected their Irish shopmates, and prevented the rioters from getting within the premises. One poor Irishman was found by two persons secreted in a field at the north side of the town. He appeared to be lying on his face dead. They went up to him and shook him, when, finding that they were his friends, he cautiously looked up, and asked them if the wild mob was away yet! The Irishmen, as they were unhoused, were put in position in the centre of the crowd, and driven along. The number captured was now about forty-five; most of them were navvies, but some were Weavers, shoemakers, mason's labourers, &c. &c. When uncertain as to the nationality of the captured persons, they were told to pronounce the word *peas*; if they pronounced it *pays*, they were considered Irish! The intention of the rioters was to get their victims down to Queensferry, and to send them across to the other side of the Forth.

Provost Kinnis and Bailies Johnston and Ireland were now engaged swearing in special constables. The more well-to-do class came forward readily and in large numbers to enrol themselves, so that a sufficient force was soon collected, but not in time to overtake the rioters within the bounds of the burgh. The Sheriff-Substitute and Mr. McDonald, Procurator-Fiscal, hired a gig, and proceeded without delay to North Queensferry. They arrived before the mob, having gone by another road. By the time the rioters had reached Queensferry, they had dwindled down from two or three thousand persons to about four hundred. The Irishmen were ordered by the Sheriff-Substitute to march into the quarry, which they immediately did. The mob was then cautioned, at its peril, not to proceed further; and with this caution they ultimately deemed it advisable to comply, and in a short time they resolved to return to Dunfermline. Fearing that further outrages might occur, a messenger was despatched to Sheriff Monteith to request a detachment of the military, which was at once granted, and soon forty-five of the 13<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons arrived. As they came by the way of Queensferry, the Sheriff asked the unfortunate Irish people if they wished to return to Dunfermline; and as they all, with the exception of six or seven, expressed a desire to go back, the Sheriff, with the military, accompanied them back to the town. They were all kindly sheltered in the Town-house for the night, and at an early hour next morning they proceeded to their various places of abode.

A lawless disturbance similar to the above occurred at the same time at Townhill Colliery, where about sixty Irishmen were employed. Incited by what had taken place at Dunfermline, the colliers resolved to expel all the Irish people from the works, There had been a strike amongst the miners in Lanarkshire, and those at the Townhill were afraid that the Irishmen would work for any wage, however

small, and they would have no chance of success if they struck like the colliers of Lanarkshire. In the course of the Monday they expelled about thirty of the more obnoxious of the Irish people, and, with the assistance of about three hundred Dunfermline weavers, they would have expelled still more; but in this they were frustrated by the boldness and determination of the manager Mr. Mungall, who armed himself with a pair of pistols, and went straight up to the leader of the lawless mob and threatened to blow his brains out. At this juncture Bailie Johnston and Mr. Kilgour, the Town Clerk, appeared, and after some little time the disturbance was ultimately quelled.

Some of the ringleaders in this serious disturbance afterwards got terms of imprisonment and it is an extraordinary and a ludicrous circumstance that one of the young men convicted for his participation in the riot was the son of Irish parents! He was born in Dunfermline, however, but the inherent love of excitement, fun, and mischief was so strong within him that he could not resist joining in the fray.

**CORRECTION:** In his otherwise fine book based on his own experiences and some press reports, the author Alexander Stewart in his "*Reminiscences of Dunfermline*" is mistaken when he ends this piece on the 1850 riot by stating: "*Some of the ringleaders in this serious disturbance afterwards got terms of imprisonment, and it is an extraordinary and a ludicrous circumstance that one of the young men convicted for his participation in the riot was the son of Irish parents! He was born in Dunfermline, however, but the inherent love of excitement, fun, and mischief was so strong within him that he could not resist joining in the fray.*"

None of the 12 natives convicted at Perth for their part in the 1850 riot was born of Irish parents.

Perhaps the author is confusing this riot with the earlier one in 1842, when one young Irish weaver, Thomas Joyce, aged 15, was convicted of mobbing rioting and plundering and sentenced to ten months imprisonment at the High Court in Edinburgh on 13 January 1843.

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