

JOSEPH WHITE AND 'THE NATIONAL CAP'

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The aims of Daniel O'Connell's Repeal movement of the 1840's are best expressed in a resolution passed at one of his 'monster' meetings held at Mullaghmast, Co. Kildare, on 01 October 1843, namely:

'...That therefore we petition parliament for a Repeal of the Legislative Union between England and Ireland, and for the restoration to Ireland of her native parliament, and that the petition be presented to the Commons House of Parliament the next session by a Repeal member¹.'

At the same meeting O'Connell was presented with 'The Irish National Cap', which, amid great solemnity, was placed on his head. The Cap was an 'article of domestic manufacture, intended to combine the glorious recollections of former nationality, with utility, comfort, variety and cheapness.²' It was designed by the artists **John Hogan** and **Henry MacManus**, in the form of an old 'Milesian crown', purportedly based on an ancient Milesian gold crown found at Bonnanelly (or the Devil's Bit), County Tipperary, in 1692, but removed to France by its dispossessed Irish landholder, **Joseph Comerford**, afterwards Marquis of Agulare in Champagne, France. The Cap was described as having a wreath of shamrocks, interwoven with a white band 'thus rendering it national, and therefore, peculiarly adapted to meet the present feelings of the Irish people³'. It was made from rich green Irish velvet, lined and turned up with blue velvet and ornamented with narrow gold band to give it the resemblance of a crown. It was claimed that the Cap was manufactured by Joseph White, 57 Thomas-street, Dublin.

The idea of 'The National Cap' was first posed by **Charles Gavan Duffy**, the editor of *The Nation*. At a meeting of the Repeal Board of Trade on 06 August 1843, a resolution was put forward 'to adopt the national cap of which he (C.G. Duffy) has received a design⁴'. The resolution was seconded by **Mr. John Cosgrave** and passed amid acclamation. It was decided that the cap would be made of wool, meaning that it would be within the means of most Irishmen to wear this 'Cap of Liberty'. The meeting ended with three cheers for the Queen, O'Connell, and Repeal.

¹ *The Nation*, 07 October 1843, page 830

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid, 12 August 1843, page 693

On 07 October 1843, two notices appeared in *The Nation*⁵ concerning The National Cap. The first was placed there by **John Cosgrave**, Tailor, (late foreman to George Jones & Son, and presumably the same man who seconded the Repeal Board of Trade motion the previous day), 10 Aungier-street, Dublin, announcing that orders for The National Cap, in plain or figured Tabinet⁶, silk, velvet or other fabrics of Irish manufacture, would be attended to with punctuality. Cosgrave also emphasised that he had actually made the cap that had been presented to the Liberator at Mullaghmast. It appears from his advertisement that he concentrated on the luxury end of the market when it came to the manufacture of the Cap.

Another notice, placed by Joseph White, announced that the Irish National Cap was available wholesale from his company and that it should be adopted by all Repealers. He also added that persons selling imitations of this Cap would incur a fine of £5 for each offence and any person giving details of counterfeit would be handsomely rewarded.

A week later the Repeal Board of Trade issued a notice condemning an advertisement, concerning The National Cap, that had appeared in the 'Liberal' papers and signed by people 'calling themselves Repealers', as utterly unfounded, malicious and untrue. It further confirmed Joseph White as the person appointed by the Board as Agent for the Woollen National Cap, for 'his patriotism and untiring perseverance in promoting the cause of Irish Manufacture'.

The notice to which the Board referred had been placed in *The Freeman's Journal*⁷ by a group of businessmen, all of whom would appear to have been in the woollen-manufacture or cloth cap business⁸. The majority of them had warehouses in the city. They were: **John M'Evoy**, **Richard Coffey**, **Maurice Coffey**, **John O'Flaherty**, **John Molloy**, **Patrick Gayner**, and **John Dewer**, with addresses at Meetinghouse-yard, Dublin; **Michael Morrisson**, 5 Wormwood-gate, Dublin; **Patrick Leavy**, 32 Merchants-quay, Dublin and **Jeremiah Dickenson**, 15 Corn-market, Dublin. Their notice stated that in the previous week 100,000 caps had been imported into the country from England and were to be had for nine shillings per dozen or nine pennies each. 'The undersigned are Repealers who give employment to hundreds of Irish females, who will be deprived of that employment by the use of that spurious English impostor, ridiculously called a National Cap'. It went on to advise people not

⁵ Page 817

⁶ Also spelled 'Tabbinet': A fabric resembling poplin, made of silk and wool and usually given a watered finish.

⁷ 30 September 1843

⁸ *The Dublin Almanac 1843*, Dublin 1843 (on open shelves in the National Library of Ireland)

to be duped into buying one. Clearly the businessmen were not happy with the monopoly granted to White and were attempting to undermine the product.

Again the Board issued notices⁹ condemning the 'people of Meetinghouse-yard' and stating that what they were saying was entirely false and calumnious and again emphasising that White was the sole agent. This was followed by a description of the woollen Cap:

"The People are beginning to discover the usefulness of the "Cap" which, after all, ought to be the true end of every article of dress. The "National Cap" is a grey woollen cap, in which is interwoven a white band with a wreath of shamrocks. It may be put in the pocket – sat upon, and never loses anything by pressure – a light warm "travelling cap" – if soiled it can be washed with common hot water and soap. In a word, it is more simple and useful than any of the modern "caps" which in many instances costs more than double its amount, and "though last not least", it gives employment to many hundred females in knitting it'.

The sale of the Cap was obviously going well, judging by an advertisement placed by White, praising the men of Tipperary, Limerick, Cork and Waterford as well as 'the North', and saying the Cap had been taken up by Irishmen both in England and Scotland.¹⁰ He gave a list of the agents he had appointed throughout Ireland, those to whom he had entrusted the sale of the Cap. These were all Repeal Wardens, or those recommended by Roman Catholic clergy of their respective districts, all men of the 'highest respectability':

Pierce Byrne, Arklow
Patrick Donovan, Roscarbery
James Dwyer, Great George's-street, Cork
Michael Hanrahan, Tipperary
D. Malowney, Dundalk
J.J. Hughes, Ballybay
William Numan, Charleville
Joseph Brannan, Kilrush, Co. Clare
Richard Barnett Barry, Mallow
John O'Kane, Coleraine
Michael Brougham, Longford
Patrick Barret, Camphill
John M'Gowan, Ballyshannon
Messrs Sheehan, Dungarvan, Co. Waterford

⁹ *The Nation*, 21 October 1843, page 32 and 28 October 1843, page 33

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 18 November 1843, page 81

James Bradly, Buncrana
John O'Regan, Pallas-Kenry
Thomas Croker, Galway
John A. Crotty, Coolagh near Clashmore
John O'Brien, Youghal

But White was having problems with counterfeit caps:

'No woollen Caps can be otherwise than a spurious imposition on the public, if not coming through me or my Agents, to whom I will, in a few days, transfer qualifications for the sale of the Cap. Fellow countrymen, beware, as there are Tories intended to guil [*sic*] you, and have emissaries already employed to impose on you... If anyone besides me tells you he has a National Cap made of wool, tell him he is a hypocrite and impostor and his assertion is false and unfounded... Men of Ireland, I again conjure you to beware, and protect yourselves from the vile snares of mercenary impostors'.¹¹

A week later White provided the names of new Agents for the sale of the Cap:

William Doherty, Letterkenny
Michael Costelloe, Ballingarry
Richard Costelloe, Croom
William Doherty, Londonderry
Alex M'Caul, 64 Fleet-street, London
Thomas Hogan, O'Briens Bridge
John Delany, Maryborough
James Kavanagh, Benmahon, Kilmacthomas
Michael Conway, Buncrana

If White thought that he had a monopoly on the sale of The National Cap, others thought differently. **John Sargent** of 57 Thomas-street, Dublin, placed a notice in *The Nation*¹² proclaiming that he was the original and sole contractor for the sale of the Cap and offered it at considerable savings to the public. He also said that his cap was providing employment to hundreds of females (though noticeably he did not state 'Irish' females). White was obviously tipped off, as immediately below Sargent's notice was a long rant by White, preceded by a notice from the Repeal Board of Trade confirming his [White's] status as sole agent for the Cap. It would appear that Sargent had imported a large number of 'Scotch Caps', which included the shamrock design, and with the word 'Repeal' inscribed on the border. White warned:

¹¹ *ibid*, 25 November 1843, page 97

¹² 23 December 1843, page 176

'A certain individual, calling himself a Repealer, has become an emissary to a Tory of the deepest dye, and says he will advertise in his own name, in order to effect a sale for his master... Men of Ireland, I again conjure you to be on your guard, as he and other impostors are determined to upset Irish Manufacture, and be instrumental in introducing Scotch and foreign in its stead'.

The war of words between Sargent and White continued well into 1844. In March of that year Sargent stated that White was *his* agent. White countered that Sargent was 'anything but a lover of truth'.¹³

In the same month White introduced an elegant Cap, composed of Silk Tabinet, richly ornamented, for the Repeal Ladies of Ireland. He also introduced a new shape to the woollen cap, from a Milesian or Pagan Crown, to the form of Brian Boroihme's [Boru's] Crown!

But by this stage, the Repeal movement had lost much of its momentum. Daniel O'Connell had called off the 'monster' meeting at Clontarf on 08 October 1843, after it had been declared illegal. The State trials of O'Connell and others commenced in Dublin on 15 January 1844, culminating in a twelve-month prison sentence for O'Connell on 30 May. He was released the following September when the House of Lords overturned the sentence. For the remainder of his life (he died in Genoa on 15 May 1847 and was buried in Dublin the following August), it is said that O'Connell wore his Cap of Liberty with pride. It is not recorded if his followers were as emotionally attached to their woollen caps.

Bibliography

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¹³ *The Nation*, 16 March 1844, page 353