

"The Donnellys Must Die!"

John Leeder

On the night of February 3-4, 1880, a mass murder was committed near the village of Lucan, in the township of Biddulph, northwest of London, Ontario. Five members of one family were killed, at two different locations. Both the murders and subsequent trials, in which no one was ever convicted even though the identities of at least some of the killers were well known, received sensationalistic publicity. Some observers were merely shocked or titillated by the scandal, some pondered the questions of vigilante justice and the rule of law raised by the story, but few at the time realized that its roots lay deeper in Canadian and Irish history.

Most townships of Upper Canada, which became Canada West in 1841 and the province of Ontario in 1867, were settled piecemeal, on a first-come-first-served basis, and were initially culturally heterogeneous. English, Irish, Scots, French, Germans, Dutch, Americans, Italians (all being among my ancestors) and many more became neighbours, and evolved ways of living together.

However, certain areas were settled by the Canada Land and Emigration Company. The Company would buy entire townships from the government, then would recruit settlers in Europe, charge them a fee, look after all the details of their emigration, and presumably make a profit on the deal. Usually the Company would recruit settlers for a given township in a given region of Europe. As a result, that township would become an enclave of immigrants from that European region, and culturally homogeneous, at least at first.

For Biddulph township, the Company recruited in County Tipperary, Ireland. This had the unintended consequence of transplanting the Irish conflicts of the time into Canada.

At that time in Ireland, the resistance to English colonial overlordship was simmering under the surface. Secret societies with names like Whiteboys and Ribbon Societies were opposed to English rule, but were not strong enough to oppose it openly. They therefore targeted those of their neighbours who were seen to be collaborators. While the conflict had sectarian, class, and ethnic overtones, it manifested itself on the ground as hardliners versus moderates. Oddly, open murder was not a common tactic; beatings and economic terrorism (barn burnings, cattle mutilation and the like) were more usual.

It is probable that some of the emigrants recruited by the Company were deeply involved in the con-

flicts, and took advantage of the opportunity to escape and make a fresh start in Canada. There are hints (but no conclusive evidence) that James ("Jim") Donnelly was one of these. He and his wife Johannah, with their son James, left Ireland about 1842 and arrived in Biddulph by 1847. They settled on a piece of land on a road called the Roman Line because most of the settlers were Catholic. They squatted on the land, neglecting to pay the Company for it, and ownership was later disputed; a court eventually awarded them half the land by virtue of their work in clearing and improving it. It is alleged that this land dispute was the beginning of unpleasantness with other residents. Meanwhile, the family grew to seven sons and a daughter.

In 1857 Jim Donnelly killed a man in a drunken fight at a barn-raising – the same man who had been his adversary in the land dispute. He eluded capture for over a year – it is believed that he hid out in the woods, and visited his family periodically disguised as a neighbour woman. He finally gave himself up, was tried and convicted of murder, and spent seven years in the penitentiary. During his absence, violence escalated in the township, and the Donnelly boys were implicated as they grew to manhood with no fatherly influence. When Jim returned from his sentence, he found conditions, if anything, worse than he had left in Ireland. The Donnelly family and their allies were involved in a full-blown feud.

The forces arrayed against the Donnellys included a constable and the local Roman Catholic priest, who later gave the authorities a list of over 30 conspirators (not all of whom would have taken part in the murders). A litany of offences on both sides over the years culminated in the massacre in 1880. A group of people invaded Jim Donnelly's farm and brutally killed the parents, a niece (who had recently arrived from Ireland, and presumably was uninvolved in the feud) and one son, Tom. They set fire to the house, then moved on to a nearby farm belonging to Will, the second-oldest son. By chance, a younger son, John, was staying with his brother. He opened the door and was killed by a shotgun blast presumably intended for Will.

At Jim Donnelly's farm, a 13-year-old neighbour boy, Johnny O'Connor, was staying overnight after helping out with chores. He hid under a bed, recognized some of the murderers by their voices and shoes, and was able to get away after the vigilantes had left but before the fire took hold.

At two subsequent criminal trials, one ended in a hung jury, one in acquittal. The judge's charge to the jury was so blatantly biased, one might think he was part of the conspiracy. Johnny O'Connor's evidence was discounted because of his youth, but that evidence is on the record and can be studied today.

Afterward, most of the remaining Donnelly family drifted away to other locales, although Will stayed on his farm and toughed it out during his lifetime. Many of the perpetrators also moved away, but some stayed in the community and felt a need to justify their deeds, so they maintained that the law had failed and vigilante action was their only recourse. They painted the family blacker than black. Some of the Donnellys' known crimes were embellished, and new stories were invented.

In the 1950s, an author named Thomas P. Kelley seized on the Donnelly story and produced several sensationalistic books. He embellished the embellishments and made up still more stories. He may have coined the term "The Black Donnellys" (or the name may have come from the fact that they opposed the Whiteboys). "However successful the books were, they were denounced as grossly inaccurate," is Wikipedia's succinct comment (not that Wikipedia is all that authoritative itself). Kelley's first book was structured around an unnamed "old song" whose verses he used as chapter headings. He wrote the song himself – it was later published in *Sing Out!*

magazine under the title "The Black Donnelly Feud", with words and music credited to him.

A book by Orlo Miller first appeared in 1962 redressing the balance somewhat, and placing the Donnelly story in its historical context. I had read my parents' copy, so I was aware of some of the overtones when I was asked to perform at the launch of a website designed by two Mount Royal College (now University) history professors as part of the *Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History* educational site. I found no contemporaneous songs dealing with the event, and found that most modern songs on the subject (Stompin' Tom Connors' is the best-known) wholly buy into the Kelley mythology, so I ended up writing a song of my own based on the Miller book. It has since been vetted by Dr. Jennifer Pettit, one of the website researchers, to ensure that it contains no historical inaccuracies. Dr. Pettit also read this article and offered some valuable suggestions, especially pointing out some further inaccuracies in my sources.

Perhaps unknowingly influenced by Stompin' Tom, I used more alliteration, as opposed to pure rhymes, than I usually do. Also, I became aware later that the melody of the first two lines owes a debt to "Ghost Riders in the Sky".

This article is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather a brief overview to help readers understand the song. The sources below, and others, can provide further background for those who are interested.

"The Donnellys Must Die!"

John Leeder (SOCAN)

In County Tipperary, on Ireland's bloody ground,
The Ribbonmen and Whiteboys fought the landlords and the Crown;
There many bloody deeds were done and many forced to flee;
Among them was a couple whose name was Donnelly.

Jim Donnelly and his wife, Johannah, with their baby son,
They crossed the stormy ocean, to Canada for to come;
The typhus and privation they'd taken in their stride;
The violence and the burnings they thought they'd left behind.

They never thought that they would live to hear the dreadful cry,
"The Donnellys must die, the Donnellys must die!"

The Donnellys must die, the Donnellys must die,
Raise the shout on high, the Donnellys must die!

A village known as Lucan, Biddulph Township, Canada West;
A plot of land on the Roman Line was where they came to rest;
They cleared the soil and spent their toil to make themselves a home;
To seven sons and a daughter dear, their family had grown.

But the troubles of old Ireland they had not left behind;
They were Tipperary Catholics along the Roman Line,
While Tipperary Whiteboys in the township they were strong;
On another tide of violence the Donnellys swept along.

The Donnellys must die, the Donnellys must die,
Raise the shout on high, the Donnellys must die!

The seven sons grew tall and strong, their father lacked no heart;
In burnings and maraudings they were known to play a part;
Atrocities abounded, it was a shameful time,
The law in Biddulph Township could not stem the reign of crime.

A Vigilance Committee was formed in Lucan there;
They vowed to stop the Donnellys, by foul means or by fair;
James Carroll, one of their number, a Constable became;
For every crime in Lucan, the Donnellys were blamed.

The Donnellys must die, the Donnellys must die,
Raise the shout on high, the Donnellys must die!

On a winter's night in eighteen-eighty, fearful deeds were done;
A band of vigilantes descended on their home;
Five victims fell before them, a niece, two sons and more:
Jim Donnelly and Johanna, far from old Ireland's shore.

A neighbour's boy in hiding observed their murderous spree;
The house was burned but he escaped to tell of what he'd seen;
There were trials, lawsuits, perjuries, the murderers walked free,
And countless lurid legends rose of the Black Donnellys.

The Donnellys must die, the Donnellys must die,
Raise the shout on high, the Donnellys must die!

The Donnellys must die, the Donnellys must die,
Raise the shout on high, the Donnellys must die!

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The Donnellys Must Die!

Verse 1: In Coun - ty Tip - pe - ra - ry, on Ire - land's bloo - dy ground, The
 Verse 2: Jim Don - nelly and his wife Johan - nah, with Their ba - by son, They

Rib - bon - men and White - boys fought the land - lords and the Crown, There
 crossed the stor - my o - cean, to Cana - da for to come; The

ma - ny bloo - dy deeds were done and ma - ny forced to flee; A -
 Ty - phus and pri - va - tion they'd tak - en in their stride; The

mong them was a cou - ple whose name was Don - nel - ly.
 vio - lence and the burn - ings They thought they'd left be - hind.

They ne - ver thought that they would live to hear the dread - ful cry, "The
 Don - nel - lys must die, the Don - nel - lys must die, the
 Don - nel - lys must die, the Don - nel - lys must die,
 Raise the shout on high, the Don - nel - lys must die!