

## Labour lives no. 3

### William Upton

William Upton (1845-1925), carpenter, fenian, novelist, poet, and rural labourers' leader was born on 27 August 1845 in the village of Ardagh, Co. Limerick, one of eight children born to Frank Upton (1799-1881) and Catherine Nolan (? - 1854). Frank, a carpenter, and Catherine had married locally in 1829. The Uptons were artisans and Roman Catholics but their forebears, just a few generations back, had been Protestant landholders. It is unclear precisely why or how William Upton's line became tradesmen but it is probable that the marriage of his Protestant grandfather, Edward (born 1742), to a Catholic named Mary Dunsworthy led to familial exclusion.<sup>1</sup>

William became a carpenter and cabinetmaker, and in common with many young nationalist artisans he joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood during the mid 1860s.

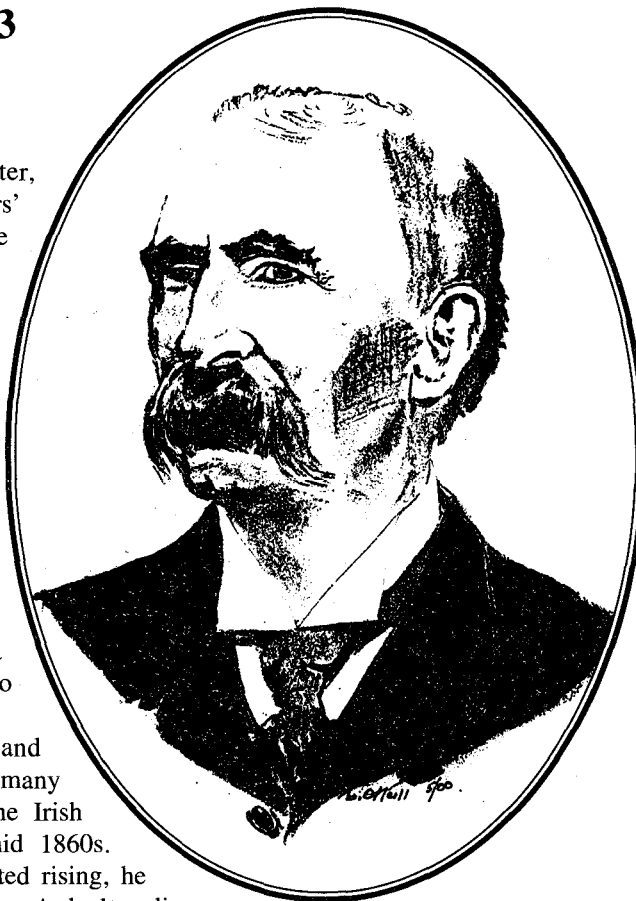
On 5 March 1867, as part of the ill-fated rising, he joined Limerick fenians in an attack on Ardagh police barracks. Police reports identified him as one of the leaders and as

having organised efforts to burn out the barracks when the frontal assault failed. Following the failure of the rising, Upton went on the run, travelling to Roscommon and using the pseudonym William Cleary - he later incorporated 'Cleary' into his name, becoming William C. Upton from the 1870s. He was arrested as a 'suspect' under his false name and spent a month in jail but was released without his true identity being discovered.<sup>2</sup> A reward was offered for his arrest and a description published in *Hue and Cry* on 4 June 1867:

Upton - 23 years old, 5 ft. 10 inches, stout make, fair complexion, round face, blue eyes, regular nose, fair hair, small fair whiskers, wore a dark tweed coat, cord trousers, light tweed vest, very good looking, walks very erect, is a carpenter by trade.

Upton escaped to the US where he remained for more than two years, returning to Ardagh in late September 1869. Local police immediately requested permission to arrest him but, although they were instructed to 'keep a close watch on his movements', he was never charged with involvement in the 1867 rising, apparently because the informer who was to give evidence had already left the country.<sup>3</sup> On 1 November 1874 he married Mary Barrett (1854-1913) of Knockfinisk, Athea, and built a house in Ardagh village where he established himself as a small-scale building contractor.

Upton remained active in local fenianism throughout the 1870s and joined the Land League on its emergence. He was particularly concerned with the plight of rural labourers and from at least 1880



spoke out on their behalf. In October 1880 he was the central figure behind the formation of the Ardagh Labour League, which demanded a cottage, an acre, and fixity of tenure for rural labourers. The Ardagh league was one of many formed throughout Munster during the 'land war', and Upton was a close friend of P.F. Johnson, the Kanturk-based rural labourers' advocate, and Daniel Hishon, a tenant-farmer from Shanagolden and leading figure in the rural labour movement. Upton was one of the key activists behind the founding of the Munster Labour League in May 1881, and the following month he was part of a labourers' delegation to London to lobby the chief secretary for Ireland. In September he attended the Land League national convention in Dublin, representing rural workers, although he was later very critical of the Land League's neglect of the labourers.

Upton's greatest and most innovative contribution to the agitation came with the publication of *Uncle Pat's Cabin or Life among the Labourers of Ireland* (Gill and Son, Dublin, 1882), probably the first Irish social-realist novel written by a worker. The book depicts the life and conditions of a labourer called Pat McMahon. A review in the *Nation* described it as a work of 'angry discontent':

We cannot for a moment doubt that he gives voice to the feelings and ideas of at least the labourers of his own district; and we must perforce conclude that the most bitter discontent, not only with the conditions of their lives, but with the mass of farmers around them, fiercely seethes amongst them. Their language is nearly always the language of complaint or denunciation, or of resolve to tolerate no longer the hardships and humiliations that beset them.<sup>4</sup>

It was not particularly well-written (Upton later admitted to writing it in six weeks) and was penned primarily as a piece of social agitation. In general, it was well received and in 1887 Gill and Son published another book by Upton, *Cuchulain: The Story of his Combats at the Ford: A Dramatic Poem*. Upton had written poetry and songs during the 1870s and continued to do so throughout his life.

In the late 1880s the Upton family emigrated to the US, and settled in New York, where William lived until his death on 8 January 1925. He and Mary had ten children (Francis, Hannah, Edward, James, Kathleen, Minnie, Lillian, William, John and Robert) and there are now many descendents in America. In 1914 he published a revised version of *Uncle Pat's Cabin* in New York, adding a preface that claimed implausibly that the novel had impelled the enactment of the 1883 Labourers' Act. Nonetheless, and despite its literary weaknesses, Upton's forgotten novel remains an important early example of working-class literature in the cause of social reform.

**Fintan Lane**

### Notes

1. I wish to thank Johnny Upton, Knockane, Newcastle West, Co. Limerick (a descendent of W.C. Upton's uncle William), for information on the family background, and Brendan O'Neill (retired official, SIPTU, Cork) for his sketch of Upton which is based on an original photograph.
2. Maighread McGrath, 'His [Upton's] book helped free the Irish slaves', *Irish Independent*, 3 May 1965; Desmond Shanid, 'William Upton: the forgotten literary fenian of Ardagh', *Limerick Leader*, 3 November 1956.
3. National Archives, Fenian files, police report from Rathkeale, Co. Limerick, 3 October 1869, 4696R.
4. *Nation*, 7 October 1882.