

# The Vandeleur Ram

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The continued uncovering of long-unseen photographs of evictions on the Vandeleur estate is a boon for those interested in the depiction of evictions in the late Victorian era. In recent years a dozen or so Vandeleur eviction photographs have come to light, the majority of which feature the iconic battering ram. With recent finds the inventory of these eviction photographs numbers about forty, of an uncounted number taken. While the factors contributing to this historical photographic achievement are still uncertain, what is certain is that the photographs being found are advancing our understanding of these evictions in ways not previously imagined.

This article will introduce three recently uncovered photographs, each featuring the battering ram and will add to a story only partially told. For, when comparing these newly uncovered photographs to all known Irish battering ram photographs, it struck the author that every late Victorian Irish photograph of a battering ram is a photograph of the same battering ram. Furthermore, each photograph of that singular ram can be placed to a scene on one estate only, the Vandeleur estate. It may be time to state, in general terms, that if we are looking at a photograph of a battering ram at a late Victorian Irish eviction, we are looking at a photograph of the Vandeleur Ram.

The Vandeleur evictions took place during the Land War years, a contest of wills between the Crown's heavy-handed administration and the National League. By the late 1880s, successive years of depressed crop prices had added to strained relationships between tenant farmers and their Ascendancy landlords. Rents owed on many estates were several years in arrears. In October 1886 the National League implemented the Plan of Campaign with intent to improve the tenants' bargaining position with a landlord by leveraging a 'combination' in negotiating rent abatements. A majority of landlords did negotiate a degree of debt forgiveness with their tenants. But some were disinclined to do so, and among them was Captain Hector S. Vandeleur. When the Vandeleur tenants' final offer was rejected, the tenants committed to the Plan of Campaign. The die was cast for confrontation.

As the Vandeleur tenants prepared for the evictions that were sure to follow they had to consider the latest tool in use by those intent on enforcing the will of the landlords, the battering ram. We first read of the intended use of a battering ram during evictions on Lord Clanricarde's estate in County Galway in August 1886. There the eviction officials encountered a house so stoutly defended that they 'arrived at the conclusion that the only way to get possession of the house, without getting any of the bailiffs or policemen wounded,

would be to get a battering ram from Birr to batter the house, and horses were accordingly dispatched to get the machine.'<sup>1</sup>

The ram was not used at this eviction only because quick thinking citizens cut the bridges to the eviction sites, but the reasons for having a battering ram on location are made clear. Within a year battering rams were in use across Ireland. As much a tactical tool to physically break a defence, battering rams were also seen by their employers as a strategic tool, to morally break the spirit of resistance. On the Vandeleur estate, the former expectation was achieved, but the latter expectation was not.

The Vandeleur ram made its appearance at Ennis, County Clare, in early July 1888. Under the title 'The Forthcoming Evictions on the Vandeleur Estate', the *Freeman's Journal* stated in its 3 July issue 'that a new battering ram has been delivered to the sheriff and that it is intended to demolish the tenants' houses at any risk'.<sup>2</sup> How it happened that the battering ram was delivered to the sub-sheriff went unsaid, but it is clear that some person or party had planned ahead.<sup>3</sup> The evictions would begin on 18 July, so the Vandeleur ram was in the hands of the sub-sheriff at least a fortnight in advance of need.

The man who received the new battering ram was Captain Edward William Dunlo Croker, who had been sub-sheriff for Clare since the Bodyke evictions the previous year when the incumbent James McMahon suffered an epileptic seizure, requiring his immediate replacement. Captain Croker, a man whose military experience included prison administration and who was also 'an emissary of the Clare Defence Union', was the replacement.<sup>4</sup> While Captain Croker experienced eviction operations at Bodyke he did not experience the use of a battering ram, as one was not present at Bodyke. So when a new ram was delivered to him in Ennis he immediately set about to familiarize himself, and others, with it. A *Clare Journal* correspondent, sent to investigate the arrival of the ram, reported in its issue of 5 July that Captain Croker had assembled 'a battering ram for operating on the houses doomed for eviction. It is there to be seen in his yard at the rere of Bindon Street'. The reporter concluded his reporting with the hope that Captain Vandeleur would see his way to a negotiated settlement and 'befriend' his tenants to 'avert the wholesale desolation that must follow in case the evictions are carried out'.<sup>5</sup> The expressed hope was not to be.

The features of the Vandeleur ram are well known from the many photographs taken of

it. Three long timbers were bolted together to form the apex of a tripod, the legs splayed out to provide a stable platform, and staked into the ground. The battering ram itself was suspended from the apex by use of hooks and a chain, its payload end was sheathed in iron and rope secured along the sides of the ram, allowing the crew to take hold and man it. The crew consisted of eight to ten Emergency Men, a much-despised group of down-on-their-luck individuals often described as 'Protestants from the North', 'broken down soldiers', and worse.<sup>6</sup> When assembled the apex of the tripod was as high as the ridgeline of a tenant's roof, towering above the diminutive figures gathered around it. When disassembled the ram was packed and transported in a very maneuverable two-wheeled cart.

Photographs taken at eviction sites depict the assembly and disassembly of the ram, a sequence requiring practice and physical effort. The tripod was erected first, with one end of the swing chain bolted in place at the apex. Two wooden supports were then positioned beneath the tripod upon which to rest the battering ram. The swing chain was secured to an iron collar mid-way along the ram and the supports removed.

To assemble the ram in his back lot Captain Croker needed assistance, which it is reasonable to suspect he sought from the Clare Defence Union, a Property Defence Association (P.D.A.). Captain Croker was referred to as an emissary from the Clare Defence Union when he was appointed to the position of sub-sheriff, perhaps nominated by his brother Henry Stanley Croker, also living in Ennis, who was

then Secretary of that organization.<sup>7</sup> By the time of the Vandeleur estate evictions Captain Croker had replaced his brother as secretary of this P.D.A. and, if *United Ireland* reporting can be trusted, Emergency Men recruited by the P.D.A.s worked at the beck and call of the sub-sheriffs.<sup>8</sup> From subsequent reporting we learn that Emergency Men were soon to be in Ennis, if not already there at the time of the correspondent's report.

As Captain Croker was training with the battering ram in Ennis an eviction force was organizing on the grounds of Kilrush House. Members of the Royal Irish Constabulary were ordered from stations across Limerick and Clare and numbered some 120 persons when assembled, infantry contingents a further 120 or so, and a contingent of cavalry, about fifty. Various officials representing the Crown's civil and military administration also gathered here, and the Kilrush House encampment took on the form of a forward operating base.

In the midst of operational preparations, the battering ram arrived. On 12 July the *Clare Journal* reported that the Emergency Men arrived at Kilrush House bringing with them 'the large battering ram which has been obtained by the sub-sheriff'.<sup>9</sup> We know that the battering ram was transported from Kilrush House to the eviction sites on a two-wheeled cart, and we may conclude that the cart which transported the ram from Ennis to the Kilrush House was the same one. We may conclude this from the owner's surname visible on the right side of the cart in a William Lawrence photograph entitled 'On the Road to Eviction', where, though partly obstructed by a structural feature, we can make



Erecting the ram at Tom Considine's eviction. Number 3 pole is positioned while Sergeant Maddox holds the swing chain. Two wooden supports seen on the left will soon be placed under the tripod. Lawrence Collection, courtesy National Library of Ireland.



The ram remains in the cart, awaiting its turn in the assembly sequence. The name painted on its side suggests it belongs to one of the Croker brothers, possibly Henry Croker, formerly secretary of the Clare Defence Union. Lawrence Collection courtesy National Library of Ireland.

out '...(C)roker, Esq.' Captain Croker, formerly of the 91st Highlanders, carried his military title proudly.<sup>10</sup> He would have had little use for a civilian title of Esquire. We might therefore conclude that the cart belonged to his civilian brother, the aforementioned Henry Croker. The battering ram was now placed with the eviction force, one week in advance of need.

Of the twenty-five tenants on the sub-sheriff's list for eviction not all would resist eviction with

equal conviction, and several homes visited by the eviction force were done so in error.<sup>11</sup> The battering ram, though present throughout, was not used at every home site visited. The decision to use the battering ram was made in response to the level of resistance encountered, and those tenants who most stubbornly resisted saw their homes demolished by the ram.<sup>12</sup>

There are forty photographs identified to the Vandeleur estate evictions. Twenty-

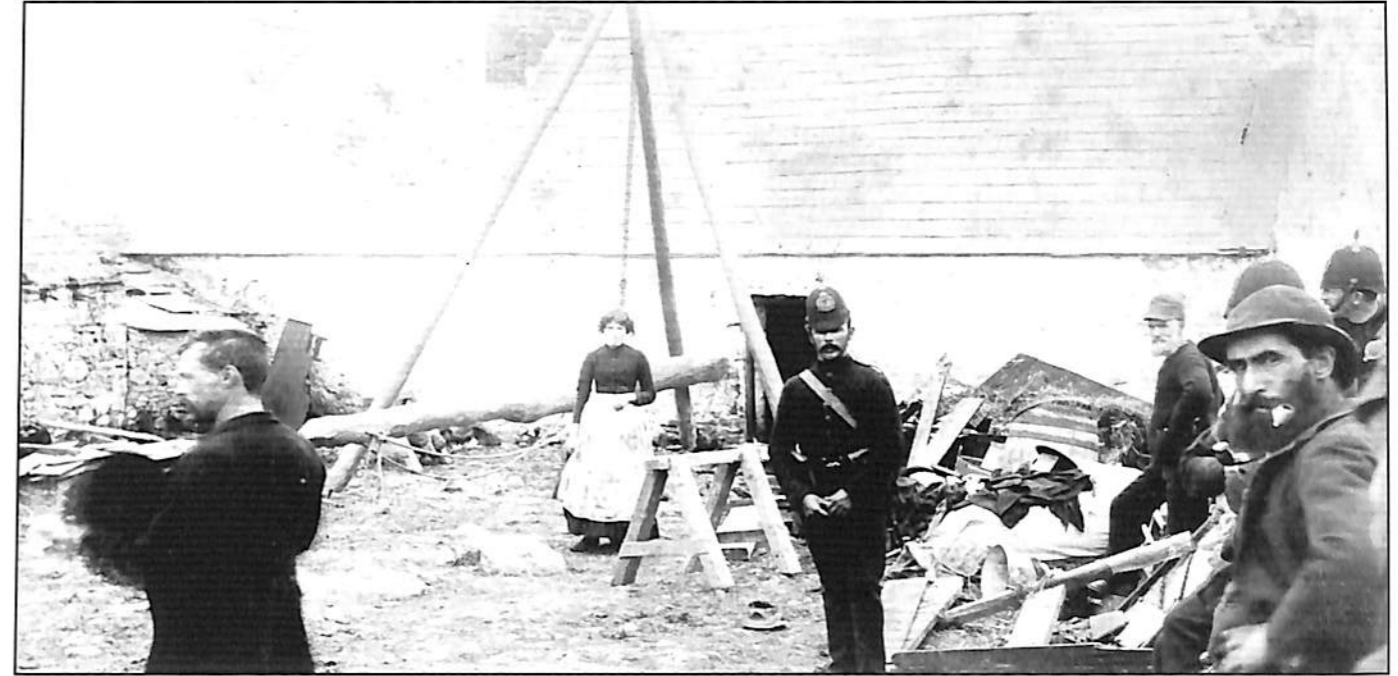


Emergency Men struggle to carry the ram back to the cart at Tom Birmingham's eviction. Here we get a sense of its length and weight. Wilson Collection courtesy Sheffield Library.

two of the forty photographs are held in the William Lawrence Collection at the National Library of Ireland. Lawrence's photographs are numbered 1760 to 1780, and 4918. Almost as many photographs exist elsewhere; in private collections, various archives and in early nineteenth century publications. Many of the photographs that are not part of the Lawrence Collection can be attributed to Timothy

O'Connor of Limerick, the only photographer documented as present.<sup>13</sup> O'Connor's eviction photographs may start with number 368 and continue to at least 400. Many in O'Connor's series are currently missing, or missing identifiers to be securely matched to a sequence in the series.

From newspaper accounts we know the identities of sixteen families who experienced



Spellacy house after the ram burst through the door. The Emergency Men are standing by awaiting further instructions. O'Connor photograph from Wilson Collection courtesy Sheffield Library.

Day#	Sequence	Date	Family	Photograph(s)	Identifiers
Day 1	1	Wednesday, July 18	McInerary	No	
	2	"	Finucane	No	
	3	"	Cleary (ram used)	2	O'Connor 368(?), 369
Day 2	4	Thursday, July 19	Spellissy/Spellacy (ram used)	2	O'Connor 371, 372
Day 3	5	Friday, July 20	Connell, M.	2	Lawrence 1764, 1775
	6	"	Madigan, P (ram used)	1	O'Connor 375
	7	"	Madigan, J	No	
Eviction force marches along Frances St					
Saturday-Sunday July 21-22					
Day 4	8	Monday July 23	Higgins, P (ram used)	No	
	9	"	McMahon (ram used)	No	
	10	"	Higgins, Mrs. Michl (ram used)	1	O'Connor 383
	11	"	Madigan, Margaret (ram used)	No	
Tuesday, July 24					
No evictions. Evictions officials required to attend Kilrush Petty Courts sessions for trials of those arrested for resisting eviction.					
Day 5	12	Wednesday, July 25	Connell, Simon (ram used)	No	
	13	"	Connell, T. (ram used)	No	
	14	"	Leo, P. (ram used)	No	
	15	"	MacDonald, L. (ram used)	No	
Day 6	16	Thursday, July 26	Magrath, M. (ram used)	3	Lawrence 1779, 1780, O'Connor #?
	Friday, July 27				
No evictions. Operations suspended due to inclement weather.					
Saturday-Sunday July 28-29					
Day 7	17	Monday, July 30	Carrigg	1	Lawrence 1761
	18	"	Considine, T (ram used)	3	Lawrence 1766, 1767, 1768
	19	"	Flannigan	2	Lawrence 1762, O'Connor 385
	20	"	O'Dea, Mary, widow	2	Lawrence 1760?, 1765
	21	"	O'Dea, Johanna	No	
Day 8	22	Tuesday, July 31	Connell, John (ram present, not used)	2	Lawrence 1777, O'Connor #?
	23	"	Mack	No	
	24	"	Birmingham, T (ram used)	7	Lawrence 1770-1774, O'Connor 389 & #?
	25	"	Higgins, T (ram used)	?	Lawrence 1776?

the Vandeleur ram. The table above catalogues the photographs that can be mapped to these families at the time of eviction. We count here the existence of twenty-four photographs which capture the presence of the ram. Photographs not identified with a particular family eviction and photographs taken post-eviction are not listed, though they do exist.

Helpfully, O'Connor's numbering system tracks the sequence of evictions, and assuming his series was once complete, we may count some thirty photographs taken by him, including one of the demolished Cleary home and two of the demolished Magrath home, post-eviction. We note that the Lawrence Collection numbering system does not track the sequence of evictions. Furthermore, there is overlap between some O'Connor photographs and some in the Lawrence Collection making it possible that some of the missing O'Connor photographs are today part of the Lawrence Collection.<sup>14</sup>

Two photographs with uncertain identities, not included above, are presented below. We know both were taken at the Vandeleur estate evictions because we recognize many in the scenes. The photograph with the lieutenant's hands crossed before him is held in the Clare library's collection. It is recorded there as from the Lawrence Collection, but, curiously, it is not found in the Lawrence Collection at the N.L.I. The photograph of the lieutenant leaning against the gate was found among a number of O'Connor photographs in the Henry J. Wilson Collection at the Sheffield library. Mr. Wilson obtained it and others while visiting Kilrush in mid-August 1888.

The photograph from the Clare library has notes which state it refers to the Cleary family eviction. But a comparison of both photographs to two of the Cleary eviction taken by O'Connor (nos. 368(?) and 369), presents difficulty. Here the ram was used to stove in a barred door, then the ramming appears to have ceased. Resistance may have been short-lived, unlike the experience at the Cleary eviction. There are other dissimilarities to the two O'Connor photographs, making the identity of these photographs a work in progress.<sup>15</sup>



Lieutenant Crofton-Atkins, minutes later, at parade rest. Photo courtesy Wilson Collection, Sheffield Library.

The Vandeleur ram traveled with the eviction party each day of the eight-day operation. When the sub-sheriff's demand for possession was met with resistance, the call went out to comply with the demand or the ram would be brought up. Sometimes this threat alone proved sufficient to melt resistance. When moderate resistance was encountered, as was the case for most of these evictions, the ram was used, if we may say this, with moderation, to stove in a barred door or punch through a blocked window. When significant resistance was encountered, as was the case at the Cleary, Magrath, Simon Connell and Birmingham evictions, the ram was used to thoroughly wreck the home.

There are six photographs of demolished homes after eviction showing the devastation wrought by the Vandeleur ram. One photograph of the demolished Magrath home is found in the Lawrence Collection (W.L. 4918). Two others of the demolished Magrath home can be attributed to O'Connor. There are two photographs of the demolished Cleary home, one by O'Connor and one by an amateur photographer and sympathetic visitor, Henry J. Wilson, M.P., taken on 14 August 1888. A photograph of the demolished Simon Connell home was also taken by Wilson at this time. Far from terrifying the tenants into submission as was hoped, these demolished homes became pilgrimage sites for sympathetic visitors and a rallying point for Home Rulers.

Present in Clare for a month, the Vandeleur ram is today immortalized in the historical tradition of County Clare. The existence of the photographs is the reason. The ram arrived in Ennis about 2 July, joined the eviction party at the Kilrush House about 12 July, and was put to use on 18 July and every day of evictions thereafter until 31 July. After that date the Vandeleur ram seemingly disappears. The eviction party decamped from the grounds of Kilrush House a week or so after the cessation of the evictions and returned to their home stations. Presumably the ram departed as well. Did it return to Ennis with its borrowed cart, or did it move directly to another place of operational need? We don't know. What we do know is that there are, currently, no photographs of a battering ram at any other eviction during



Lieutenant Crofton-Atkins slouched against gate. Photo courtesy Clare County Library.

the late Victorian period. If we are looking at a photograph of a ram at an eviction in the late Victorian era we are looking at the Vandeleur ram.



Cleary eviction. Lawrence Collection, courtesy National Library of Ireland.

#### Notes and References

1. *Dublin Daily News*, 25 August, 1886.
2. *Freeman's Journal*, 3 July 1888.
3. According to Perry Curtis Jr., *The Depiction of Eviction in Ireland 1845-1890* (Cork, 2011), p. 227, 'Colonel Turner contended that (Captain) Croker and not the RIC had obtained this contrivance. But who actually paid for the ram - Dublin Castle or the P.D.A. - remains a mystery'.
4. *United Ireland*, 4 June 1887.
5. *Clare Journal*, July 5, 1888.
6. These two epithets were used of Emergency Men by the author's great grandfather, Major O'Shaughnessy. The white-bearded leader of the Vandeleur battering ram crew was known as Sergeant Maddox.
7. On 30 May 1887, the *Manchester Courier & Lancashire General Advertiser*, reported the recent arrival of Henry Croker in Ennis to take up duty as secretary of the Clare Defence Union, a post that would pass to his brother in October, then sub-sheriff.
8. *United Ireland*, 1 January 1887.
9. *Clare Journal*, 12 July 1888.

10. Captain Croker had an interesting, though short, career. During the Egyptian campaign, he was seconded to the military governor of Cyprus, where he was involved in prison administration. He returned to Ireland in 1887, but died in Chicago in 1893 as a result of a fall from his horse while leading the British military contingent in activities for the World's Fair.

11. The Flannigan family was evicted by an administrative mistake. Their eviction notice was not properly filed. Seemingly unsure of their legal position, the officials ensured the Flannigan family's home and possessions were not damaged during their eviction, and the Flannigan home exists today looking much as it did in 1888. The eviction of Pat Leo was called off when it was ascertained that his aged father was too infirm to be moved. There was confusion over two Mary O'Deas of the same family, both widows, living in adjacent homes. Neither house was barricaded and the second house visited was done so apparently in a case of mistaken identity. Johanna O'Dea's visitation was regretted, for there the evictors found an elderly couple caring for a mentally retarded girl. The evictors left the house promptly.

12. The four families in order of eviction were Cleary, Simon Connell, Magrath and Birmingham.

13. It has been assumed that the photographs in the Lawrence Collection were taken by Robert French, the company's senior photographer. But there is no proof of this. Major E. J. O'Shaughnessy, an American witness, stated in published accounts that the photographer he saw take photographs of 'all the eviction scenes' was T. O'Connor of Limerick, *The True Witness and Catholic Chronicle*, 4 September, 9 October 1889.

14. Evidence of overlap was explored in my 'Photographing the Evictions on the Vandeleur Estate, Kilrush, July 1888', *The Other Clare*, vol. 39 (2015), pp. 41-52.

15. The first dissimilarity to note is the location of the gate and rock wall. These are not seen in the O'Connor photographs. Nor are the barrels, table, etc., placed to block the front door. The left chimney in this photograph is placed internally to the house. In the O'Connor photographs the left chimney is placed against the exterior wall. The lintel support also appears different. The most obvious similarity is the slate roof profile. The identified slate-roofed homes are Cleary, Flannigan and P. Higgins, and the latter had his front door broken by the ram.