

## Thunderbolt and Lightfoot: The American Creation of Irish Outlaw Folk Heroes



In the summer of 1821, on a road near Medford, Massachusetts, a highwayman named Michael Martin stopped and robbed a private chaise driven by Major John Bray and his wife. Within days of this crime, Martin was captured, tried, convicted, and sentenced. The Massachusetts legislature had recently reinstated the death penalty for highway robbery, and Martin had the misfortune to be the first to merit that punishment under the new law. While awaiting execution, Martin, an Irish immigrant, offered an autobiographical confession which he related to a Boston newspaperman and lawyer named Francis W. Waldo. In those interviews, Martin claimed that he had been "Captain Lightfoot," the partner of John Doherty, aka "Captain Thunderbolt," and that the two of them had been infamous highwaymen in Ireland and (briefly) in Scotland between 1816 and 1819.



Figure 1: Captain Lightfoot Robbing Major Bray of Medford in *Captain Lightfoot: The Last of the New England Highwaymen* (1926), [frontispiece](#). Courtesy of the Internet Archive.

Martin's confession detailed his experiences growing up in Ireland and his struggles in America during the previous two years, dating from his arrival in Salem, Massachusetts, in May of 1819 through to his Medford highway robbery and apprehension. The facts he offered about his life in America can all be independently verified. However, the bulk of the stories he told to Waldo concerned the various adventures of Captains Thunderbolt and Lightfoot in Ireland and Scotland, where they gained infamy as daring, clever outlaws, outwitting authorities and robbing wealthy English landowners. Martin related these picaresque episodes in lively, good-natured, but barely credible detail. Several of the exploits strain belief: the duo trick wealthy sisters and all their estate servants into entering a room, lock the door, and then plunder the house; Captain Lightfoot (Martin) attends a wedding in drag so that they can rob party attendees; Martin confronts the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in his garden and robs him; Martin woos the widow MacBriar while posing as a rich member of the gentry; Captain Thunderbolt impersonates a physician for weeks, etc.



Figure 2: Medford, Mass.: the Road from the South in *Captain Lightfoot: The Last of the New England Highwaymen* (1926), [127](#). Courtesy of the Internet Archive.

Francis W. Waldo published Martin's confession in long pamphlet form a few weeks after Martin's execution in December 1821. The publication was widely circulated and proved to be immensely popular. Ungrounded speculation arose among its many readers that Martin's mentor and partner John Doherty still lived and was secretly residing in New England—though Martin's confession never placed Doherty in America. Indeed, Martin stated that he had last heard of "Thunderbolt" through a letter sent by him from the West Indies.



Figure 3: The Execution at Letchmere Point, Cambridge in *Captain Lightfoot: The Last of the New England Highwaymen* (1926), [151](#). Courtesy of the Internet Archive.

In 1823, a Portland, Maine, barber named Richard Relhan went on criminal spree under the alias "John Johnson" and created a flurry of excitement that he was "Captain Thunderbolt." Relhan was chased by a posse across the Canadian border, causing a minor international incident, and was returned to Portland to stand trial for stealing a horse. At that point, Relhan's real name was revealed, as was his history as a former resident of Philadelphia since 1809—predating the adventures of Lightfoot and Thunderbolt in Ireland. He reformed and later lived

many years as an upstanding Portland businessman.

Many years later, in 1847, when long-time local physician Dr. John Wilson died in Brattleboro, Vermont, a publisher there put out a pamphlet claiming that Wilson was Captain Thunderbolt. The claim was based on Wilson's Scottish heritage, his physical similarities to Martin's description, and on Wilson's allegedly suspicious behavior—all of which was highly circumstantial. These allegations can easily be explained or refuted, as Wilson's friends and family unsuccessfully attempted. Many in Southern Vermont still believe Dr. Wilson was Captain Thunderbolt.



Figure 4: Cover from *An Authentic Account of Thunderbolt and Lightfoot, Two Notorious Highwaymen: Their Bold and Daring Robberies, and Hair-Breadth Escapes* (Boston: All the Booksellers, 1847), digital image, [Google Books](#).

Over the decades, the legend of Thunderbolt and Lightfoot took on a life of its own in popular culture through stage dramas and embellished, romanticized fictions by such writers as Emerson Bennett and W. R. Burnett. Burnett's novel *Captain Lightfoot* presented the pair as heroic Irish rebel outlaws. It was immediately made into a 1955 movie of the same name directed by Douglas Sirk, starring Rock Hudson and Barbara Rush. Martin's confession also inspired a 1974 movie *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, written and directed by the quirky Michael Cimino, that re-imagined a tale of a veteran criminal abetted by a young partner set in the contemporary American West, starring Clint Eastwood and Jeff Bridges. In many respects, Cimino's retelling was more faithful to the source material than the efforts of Burnett and Sirk.

Although the tales of Thunderbolt and Lightfoot reached folklore status in the United States, there was no commentary to be found in Irish, Scottish, or English sources to confirm that their exploits were known there. Indeed, when Douglas Sirk was filming *Captain Lightfoot* on location in Ireland (the landscape is one of the stars of the movie), no mentions were made in the Irish or British press that the movie was based on an allegedly true account. It appears that it was taken for granted that Hollywood's Irish outlaws were a scriptwriter's fiction, though many elements of the story would have been recognized.



Figure 5: Highwayman Holds Up a Coach. Edgar Alfred Holloway, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

A long tradition exists in Irish history, literature, and oral storytelling of the deeds of Irish outlaws active during the many decades of oppressive English rule. In the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, these outlaws were associated both with Catholic rebel groups and an allied Presbyterian organization, the United Irishmen. These outlaws were constituted

as localized cells, with the leaders of each cell taking on menacing-sounding titles of rank: Captain Stout, Captain Whack, Captain Hawk, Captain Dasher, Captain Fearnot, etc. In fact, there was a real “Captain Thunderbolt,” John Duggan, who was captured after a 1799 house raid led by his uncle resulted in a murder. Duggan was brutally executed that same year, about fifteen or sixteen years prior to the supposed fame of Michael Martin’s “Captain Thunderbolt.”

It seems likely that Michael Martin was familiar with some of the classic literature of Irish outlaws: *The Life and Adventures of James Freney* (1754); Cosgrave’s *A genuine history of the lives and actions of the most notorious Irish highwaymen, Tories and Rapparees* (1747); and *The Life and Adventures of Jeremiah Grant* (1816). The Grant title was in print just before Michael Martin departed for America. Though these sources might have inspired Michael Martin, he did not re-use any specific episodes found in these. Martin’s confession relates outlaw adventures that appear to be original. But were they real?



Figure 6: Michael Martin, *alias* Captain Lightfoot in *Captain Lightfoot: The Last of the New England Highwaymen* (1926), [34](#). Courtesy of the Internet Archive.

The names of Michael Martin, John Doherty, Captain Lightfoot and Captain Thunderbolt do not appear in any Irish or British newspaper accounts from 1814 through 1819. Nor do any accounts of outlaws in that period match their description. Martin portrays John Doherty (Thunderbolt) as a remarkable figure: tall and muscular, a master of disguise, able to romance any woman (and married five times under different names), a career thief who had never been captured, and well-versed in many disciplines, including medicine. Yet no other publications or commentators describe anyone matching Martin’s description of Doherty. At one point Martin asserts that in 1816 there was a reward of £500 on Doherty’s head. Only a few criminals accused of murder—or attacking uniformed officers, or arson, or heavy forgeries—had such a price put on their capture, and they were well-advertised. Yet no reward offers printed in newspapers of the time match Doherty.



Figure 7: John Doherty, *alias* Captain Thunderbolt in *Captain Lightfoot: The Last of the New England Highwaymen* (1926), [23](#). Courtesy of the Internet Archive.

Several of the names that Martin drops cannot be verified: the Martin family’s landlord, Sir William Morris; the widow MacBriar; Colonel Brierton; and the Wilbrook sisters. It is not obvious why he would want to hide the identity of his robbery victims, unless they were fictions. Similarly, Martin offers several clues about his family origins, but an Irish genealogist could not verify any of the information, even given that genealogical records of that period are now scarce.



Figure 8: The Widow Macbriar in *Captain Lightfoot: The Last of the New England Highwaymen* (1926), [63](#). Courtesy of the Internet Archive.

People today who have heard the stories of Captain Lightfoot and Captain Thunderbolt may be disappointed to learn that not only was “Captain Thunderbolt” never a resident of New England, but that he likely never existed at all, except in the fertile mind of Michael Martin. More amazing than the adventures of Thunderbolt and Lightfoot is the story of what Michael Martin, condemned to death, did in prison in October and November of 1821. Within these two months, Martin created a heroic narrative for himself, and placed it firmly in the tradition of Irish outlaw lore.

Moreover, during these same two months, Martin and his outside accomplices devised a prison escape attempt that was highly technical—and which nearly worked. Martin was secured within his cell by leg shackles chained to a ring in the center of the room. Somehow, he was supplied with a crude saw, which he used to file a gap through one of the links of the chain of his shackles. His shackles were inspected weekly, but he disguised the gaps by mixing ashes and wax to match the color of the chain. One day, when his jailor brought him his meal, he feigned weakness and asked the jailor to pick up something he had dropped. Martin then knocked the jailor over the head, slipped his shackles off the chain to the ring, and rushed out the open door. He pounded the locked outside gate until it burst open, and then ran across a field. However, there were still irons on his legs, and he was quickly chased down and subdued.

The sophistication of Michael Martin’s escape attempt suggests that he was very familiar with prison routines, yet there was no mention of any prior jailings in the account he gave to Francis Waldo. It can be conjectured that he had once been imprisoned in Ireland, where he had the time and access to collect or create tales of adventurous robberies, which he then offered to Waldo as the story of Captain Lightfoot and Captain Thunderbolt. As entertaining as those stories are, they hardly compare to the inventiveness and daring that Martin displayed in the space of two months, while waiting to be hanged. Michael Martin’s escape attempt failed, but his efforts to mythologize himself were a wild success.



Figure 9: Lightfoot Sets the Tavern on Fire in *An Authentic Account of Thunderbolt and Lightfoot, Two Notorious Highwaymen: Their Bold and Daring Robberies, and Hair-Breadth Escapes* (Boston: All the Booksellers, 1847), digital image, Google Books.

Martin was known as “the last of the New England highwaymen.” Highway robbery is a high-risk crime of opportunity, and in settled regions of the country, professional criminals found more reliable methods to target wealth. Prior to Martin, during the Revolutionary War, groups of roving loyalist Tories were described as highwaymen. After Martin’s time, banditti flourished in the

American frontier as it expanded westward—in Western Pennsylvania, in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys, and finally in the western territories. The highwayman as a folklore figure resurfaced in the tales of stagecoach holdups and outlaw gangs of the American West.

## Further Reading

For further reading on the investigation of Michael Martin's narrative and a closer look at several of the works of popular culture they inspired, check the author's [web site](#) on this project.

See also Ray Cashman, "The Heroic Outlaw in Irish Folklore and Popular Literature," *Folklore* 111, no. 2 (Oct. 2000): 191-215.

A full version of Michael Martin's confession is [available](#) via the Internet Archive, printed in 1926 by the Wayside Press.

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