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The Impact of Agrarian Radicalism on Land Reform in Scotland and Ireland, 1879–1903

Brian Casey

In Ireland and Scotland, land reform became a way by which political leaders could gain access to their audiences and resulted in evocative and successful campaigns being organised within the 'Celtic fringe' of the United Kingdom. Embracing the language of an earlier generation of English agrarian radicals, Scottish Highland and Irish agrarian radicals of the late-Victorian period enumerated the dangers of unfettered exercise of property rights that they felt to have been going on since the Cromwellian upheavals in seventeenth-century Ireland and the series of Highland clearances since the eighteenth century.[1] Globally, grass-roots political leaders were seen to be 'Missionaries of "great traditions"', and attributable to their success was how they managed to find a poignant dilemma to carry to their audiences. If the message and the bearer were accepted they were then 'assimilated into an existing set of meanings, symbols, and practices'.[2] Like religious creeds, political creeds are usually percolated and elaborated in urban centres and then brought to the countryside as ideas trickle down from the intellectual architects and then 'lose their original features and take on the coloration of the local social environment [as] efforts to close the cognitive gap were to no avail'.[3] James C. Scott remarked that this distinctly vernacular perspective was 'more than simply a parochial version of cosmopolitan forms and values' as ideas transferred from elites to non-elites, from the city to the countryside, and from the core to the periphery with ideas as the

[1] See Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism, 1775–1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 2010); Clive Dewey, 'Celtic Agrarian Legislation and the Celtic Revival: Historicist Implications of Gladstone's Irish and Scottish Land Acts 1870–1886', *Past and Present*, 64 (August 1974), pp. 30–70.

[2] James C. Scott, *Decoding Subaltern Politics: Ideology, Disguised, and Resistance in Agrarian Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 7–8.

[3] Scott, *Decoding Subaltern Politics*, pp. 7–8

mass of people did not get involved or embrace abstract ideals.[4] This essay examines aspects of agrarian radicalism in both regions between 1879 and 1891, using the foundation of the Irish National Land League and the Parnell split as the two points in which to explore the similarities and differences in terms of collection action, political engagement and historicist claims to land.

Highlanders were perceived as a warrior people that had been tamed following their losses at Culloden in 1746 and the Highland Clearances oversaw a significant transformation and destruction of an ancient way of life; yet people appeared to have remained passive, which perplexed contemporary observers. During the nineteenth century, it had become common to juxtapose the truculence of Irish violence and 'their bitter struggle against an alien landlord class with the passive stoicism of the Scottish Gaels'. This is an oversimplification as fifty-five sets of disturbances between 1780 and 1855 challenge the notion of a docile Highlands. Despite this, the majority of clearances took place with little resistance because most Highlanders were devoid of power as they did not own land and had insecure tenure; some had no rights at all as landlords had full legal control over their properties.[5]

The integration of the Scottish Highlands and Lowlands into the United Kingdom was achieved by military subjugation, a scorched earth policy and an anti-Jacobite *kulturkampf* after 1745. The resulting clearances were carried out by Anglicised clan leaders that were determined to maximise their profits with little regard for human cost. Alvin Jackson argues that the significance of this assimilation in its own terms and in comparison with Ireland was quite striking:

> in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Highlands were simultaneously defined as the ultimate locus of Scottishness and effectively (if forcefully) embraced by the union state. By way of contrast, the far west of Ireland, in particular the western islands, were being defined at the same time as the *fons et origo* both of Irish national identity and (with the birth of the Irish National Land League) of the revolution against the union[6]

Jackson believes that the spread of uncivilised agrarian unrest emerged from the west of Ireland and travelled to the Scottish Highlands by the 1870s.

[4] Ibid., pp. 10–12.

[5] T. M. Devine, *Clanship to Crofters War: The Social Transformation of the Scottish Highlands* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 209–14.

[6] Alvin Jackson, *The Two Unions: Ireland, Scotland, and the Survival of the United Kingdom, 1707–2007* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 149–50.

RISING EXPECTATIONS AND AGITATION, 1850–1880

During the 1850s and 1860s, greater economic sophistication emerged in the west of Ireland which facilitated a changing relationship between town and country, and which was symptomatic of the 'revolution of rising expectations' that preceded the Land War.[7] Shopkeepers were now more visible as the country became an interconnected economic network. The rural population was now coming to terms with money more easily and railways changed people's idea of distance and place meaning that they were becoming less insular in outlook. Nevertheless, Ireland could remain a place where quite short distances could separate the consciousness of men, 'indeed ties between Connemara and Boston were probably closer than between Connemara and Donegal'.[8] The agricultural changes of the late eighteenth century, the reorganisation of husbandry in Scotland as well as the emergence of enclosure and capitalist farming, changed the previous system of rural life that consisted of the hamlet *fermtoun* in Lowland and the *baile* in the Highlands as clearances, the squaring of farms and assisted emigration schemes in both regions were carried out in the name of progress. This rationalisation of farming was used by agrarian radicals in both regions to portray a dispossessed people, with historicist assertions over the illegality of clearances, emigration and eviction becoming an evocative trope during both the Land War and Crofters War.[9] There was relative peace in the crofting areas after 1850, though crofters were seen to be living in fear and engaged in ingratiating deference in order to court favour with their landowner or his staff. They were viewed as people who were unwilling to complain because 'memories of the clearances, imprinted deep in the minds of the crofters, left them cowed and submissive; and on some estates the factors, wielding the threat of eviction to exact obedience, ruled as petty tyrants'.[10]

Serious congestion and subdivision remained despite the numerous

[7] J. S. Donnelly, Jr, *The Land and the People of Nineteenth-Century Cork: The Rural Economy and the Irish Land Question* (London and Boston, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 250–2.

[8] K. T. Hoppen, *Elections, Politics and Society in Ireland, 1832–1887* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 462.

[9] T. C. Smout, 'The landowner and the planned village in Scotland, 1730–1830' in N. T. Phillipson and Rosaline Mitchison, *Scotland in the Age of Improvement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970, 1996), pp. 73–9.

[10] I. M. M. MacPhail, 'Prelude to the Crofters' War, 1870–80' in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, vol. XLIX (Inverness 1974–6), pp. 159–61.

clearances and the squaring of holdings which meant that there were still many grievances in crofting areas, even as crofter fishermen of the north and west saw a rise in living standards during the 1870s. The same period saw an increase in the number of newspapers and journals that were interested in the crofter problem. Through their pages, absentee landlords were subject to criticism for neglecting their estates as was the rationalisation of the rural economy in the name of 'improvement'.[11] Local newspapers allow for a more effective assessment of the local experience during this period than the national press. For example, in Ireland, they also reported on affairs beyond the confines of the local communities and this was important in the modernisation of west of Ireland society. Reporting on events beyond the immediate district allowed western Irish nationalism to develop a more cosmopolitan hue as speeches had inflections of Enlightenment and Chartist thought.[12] The leadership for crofters did not come from within communities initially, rather it was generally in the hands of exiled Highlanders in towns and cities.[13] During the 1860s and 1870s, Highland societies began to emerge in several large towns. Primarily a social outlet, they also provided charity to impoverished Highland brethren and developed an interest in crofters' problems.[14] In Ireland, leadership consisted generally of townsmen, shopkeepers, teachers, and priests, part of the 'challenging collectivity', which, according to Samuel Clark, consisted of 'combinations formed by and claiming to represent the interests of tenant farmers [that] became the predominant type of agrarian collective action in the post-Famine period'.[15]

Until the 1870s, protest was reactionary in Ireland and Scotland. It tended to be localised with a lack of leadership inhibiting its effectiveness and it was generally a response to immediate local concerns. However, it became more robustly organised after 1880 and was aimed at recovering land that protestors believed to be illegally appropriated.[16]

[11] Ibid., pp. 169–70, 183.

[12] Brian Casey, *Class and Community in Provincial Ireland, 1851–1914* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 4.

[13] MacPhail, 'Prelude to the Crofters' War, 1870–80', p. 161; Eric Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in Labouring History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), p. 272.

[14] MacPhail, 'Prelude to the Crofters' War, 1870–80', pp. 169–70, 183.

[15] Samuel Clark, *Social Origins of the Irish Land War* (Princeton: Princeton Legacy Library, 1979), p. 211.

[16] Iain J. M. Robertson, *Landscapes of Protest in the Scottish Highlands After 1914: The Later Highland Wars* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), p. 29.

The 'Great Awakening' of English agricultural labourers was led by Joseph Arch in 1874 as he began to organise them into a trade union in order to more robustly campaign for improvements in their working conditions.[17] Irish and Scottish radicals were further inspired by the coherent critiques of Irish and Highland landlordism emerging under the Irish National Land League and the Highland Land Law Reform Association during the 1880s, with meetings, lectures and pamphlets all playing an important role in highlighting the grievances felt. This became part of an effort to mobilise crofters to demand fairer access to land and challenge the increased stratification of Highland society brought about by sheep parks and sporting estates. Methods of protest were more effective after 1880, focusing their attention on recovering land that protestors claimed to be illegally appropriated.[18] In addition, a series of land reform associations emerged in the Highlands during the nineteenth century with one – the Scottish Land Reform Alliance – inspired by the Chartist Land Plan.[19] A more assertive Highland identity began to emerge. Through the use of trauma-inflected rhetoric, leaders instilled a sense of dispossession and moral entitlement for land which acknowledged the breach of unwritten codes and the evocative pathos of clearances. A similar rhetoric was used during various public meetings in the three phases of the Irish Land War between 1879 and 1909.[20]

Prior to the Land War, the conservative, anti-agrarian nature of nationalist politics in Ireland isolated it from a large proportion of the population; quests for self-determination were concentrated in the towns and cities of Leinster and Munster. While there had been periods of unrest during previous economic downturns, 'the speed at which economic adversity renewed hostilities indicates that, underlying the apparent harmony that prevailed during most of the 1860s and 1870s, there remained a basic weakness in the Irish landlord–tenant relationship'.[21] The social base of the Land League was wider than anything that preceded it. Yet, motions passed at meetings focused upon the grievances of farmers to the neglect of labourers. This nascent, loose and supposedly pragmatic alliance soon came to dominate Land League

[17] See Pamela Horn, *Joseph Arch 1826–1919: the Farm Workers' Leader* (Warwick: The Roundwood Press, 1971).

[18] Robertson, *Landscapes of Protest*, p. 29.

[19] Andy Wightman, *The Poor Had No Lawyers: Who Owns Scotland* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2011), p. 80.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Clark, *The Social Origins of the Irish Land War*, pp. 153–7.

ideology as stronger farmers succeeded in asserting their hegemony and became responsible for many of the periods of unrest.[22]

Violent inflections in speeches, coupled with significant increases in recorded agrarian crime, saw the Land League being proclaimed an illegal organisation on 20 October 1881. While the authorities hoped this would spell the end of agitation, the creation of the Irish National League frustrated efforts to pacify the Irish countryside and there was a revival of meetings in November and December 1882 with twenty-five recorded to have taken place, mostly in large market towns. Special Resident Magistrates were created to assist in offering a more robust response to agrarian agitation and theirs was frequently a rigid and simplistic interpretation.[23] Special Resident Magistrate Clifford Lloyd was concerned that there would be a revival by August 1883 in the west of Ireland. He further noted the more pronounced disagreements amongst nationalists as a more obvious urban–rural division began to emerge.

> There are now in [provincial] Ireland, two parties, one the farming class and other respectable people who wish to take advantage of late legislation and to enjoy its fruits, the other the village members of the late Land League who 'toil not' but are rather anxious to continue to live upon what they can extort from others and to enjoy the local influence which they possess as the recognised commanders of the 'moonlighters' of their districts.[24]

Demonstrations were an evocative representation of farmer strength, while also being an effective way of intimidating opponents of the Land League to either conform to their demands or face consequences, which was generally manifested through social ostracism within and from the local community. Once the agitation spread beyond Connaught and into Leinster and Munster towards the end of 1880, the Land League's nascent radicalism was dampened as stronger farmers became more demanding in seeking directly beneficial reforms to the neglect of the smaller farmers. The government initially ignored the Land League's meetings because they thought that they were merely Fenians seeking catharsis and would not gain any significant support. This was because previous movements, such as the Tenant League, were short-lived

[22] L. P. Curtis, Jr, 'On class and class conflict in the Land War' in *Irish Economic and Social History*, p. viii (1981), p. 87.

[23] Stephen Ball, 'Policing the Irish Land War: Official responses to political protest and agrarian crime in Ireland, 1879–91', PhD thesis (University of London, 2000), p. 163.

[24] National Archives of Ireland, Chief Secretary's Office, Registered Papers, CSORP/1883/20404.

and generally unsuccessful, and while tenant defence associations and farmers clubs had their activities reported on extensively in the local press during the 1870s, neither landlords nor the authorities saw them as a threat. Between the first Land League meeting in Irishtown, County Mayo, in April 1879 and the following September, twenty-two meetings were held; between September and December the same year there were 140 meetings discussing rent and land tenure. Ideas put forward were idealistic but displayed sophistication and awareness of previous land reform movements. Much to the government's annoyance, there was nothing in the speeches that initially amounted to criminality so it was difficult to effectively halt the Land League's progress.[25] The Land League had branches in twenty-three counties by December 1880 and its leaders wanted it to eventually have a branch in every county as they campaigned for fair rent, fixity of tenure and freedom of sale – the three Fs. They eventually called for peasant proprietorship as a panacea to problems in the countryside. Their hopes were evidently ambitious, especially as the success of each branch was down to the effectiveness of local leadership. Some local leaders failed to control agrarian crime which was becoming increasingly common. This limited the Land League's ability to develop a veneer of legitimacy and resulted in Michael Davitt, former Fenian and founder of the Land League who was born in Mayo but grew up in Lancashire, calling for stronger leaders.

By December 1879, Michael Davitt realised that the Scottish Highlands could potentially be an area for agitation, though there was little desire for such a campaign at the time. Angus Sutherland, a Highland-born land radical, established the Skye Vigilance Committee in 1881 and argued that that every Highlander was a born agitator because they had suffered either directly or indirectly from landlordism.[26] Davitt concluded that land nationalisation as advocated by Henry George was the best solution to the crisis as he became disgusted with the influence of larger farmers in the movement in Ireland.[27] According to Moody it was a doctrine of national ownership and taxation of lands to rid Ireland of a 'foul, pestiferous social rinderpest' landlordism and the idea of the national ownership of land became a cherished principle

[25] Casey, *Class and Community in Provincial Ireland*, chapters 5 and 6.

[26] Andrew G. Newby, *The Life and Times of Edward McHugh (1853–1915): Land Reformer, Trade Unionist and Labour Activist* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), pp. 74–82.

[27] Paul Bew, *Land and the National Question in Ireland, 1858–82* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978), pp. 26–7, 53.

of Davitt's.[28] This was his reinterpretation of the cry 'the land for the people'. George's ideas were viewed with great suspicion in Ireland. They were seen to be communistic and potentially damaging to the cause of Irish nationalism and Davitt became increasingly isolated from mainstream Irish nationalism.[29] There had been conflict within the Land League, primarily between western small farmers on one hand and eastern and southern graziers and large farmers on the other, much like tensions between crofters and Highland sheep farmers. In a letter to the *Freeman's Journal* of 21 June 1882 an intellectual confidante of Davitt, Matt Harris, stated that land nationalisation was harmful and threatened to foster disunion, stating: 'where there is practical work to be done, common sense requires that men should remain steadily at that work and not be changing with every wind that blows' and also that Davitt's advocacy of land nationalisation was causing disunion.[30] Harris was concerned that 'the nationalisation of the land means the denationalisation of the country' and that farmers would become apathetic if they thought it was a solution to the land question.[31]

At a meeting in Glasgow in October 1883, Davitt argued that land nationalisation could be adopted as a social remedy to the poverty and despair being experienced in the Highlands. He encouraged Highlanders to challenge the power of landlords to claim absolute ownership of land as they sought to assert their 'privileged idleness', while decreeing that clearances, famine and emigration were part of the Malthusian political economy that was used to explain the poverty that existed in the Highlands.[32] Henry George visited the Highlands when he discussed land nationalisation and this was overseen by Edward McHugh. Despite a mixed response to the idea, it was better received in Scotland than Ireland.[33]

[28] T. W. Moody, *Davitt and Irish Revolution 1846–82* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 519, 521–2.

[29] Laurence Marley, *Michael Davitt: Freeland Radical and Frondeur* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), p. 167.

[30] *Freeman's Journal*, 21 June 1882.

[31] Ibid.

[32] *Speech of Michael Davitt at the meeting in favour of land nationalisation held at St. James Hall 30 October 1883* (London, 1883).

[33] Newby, *The Life and Times of Edward McHugh*, pp. 72–4.

THE LAND WARS AND RESPONSES

On 15 December 1879, *The Times* reported that there were more frequent discussions around land laws taking place in Scotland as their reform was increasingly seen as a pressing concern and question. The Free Church minister John MacMillan had written to the press in the summer and autumn of 1880 highlighting the fact that at Leckmelm in Wester Ross crofters were now becoming day labourers; the local landowner, Pirie, was determined to commandeer croft lands for his own farm. MacMillan accused Pirie of behaving egregiously, maintaining that the crofter was a peaceful sort, especially when juxtaposed with the small farmer of the west of Ireland, who had encouraged the holding of peaceful meetings throughout 1880 to highlight the problems that crofters were facing.[34]

While Angus Sutherland had preached land restoration prior to the Crofters Bill in 1885, the *Oban Times* warned against expecting too much. Napier's 1884 proposal entailed longer-term economic planning while what became the Act was a response to a particular set of circumstances, much in the same vein as the Land Law (Ireland) Act 1881. Scotland was now facing land and national questions as Davitt began talking about the rise of popular democracy in Glasgow in 1886, convinced of Gladstone's integrity regarding Irish Home Rule and land reform.[35] Angus Sutherland was elected to parliament and, being a disciple of Henry George, he assured voters that securing land reform was his main priority as the *Highland News* kept the Georgite gospel alive.

The politicisation of poverty by Fenians in the west of Ireland and Highland campaigners gave agitation a greater coherence. In the Highlands, 'protest was more organised and aimed at recovering land previously expropriated (so protestors believed) under the drive to agricultural improvement or deer forest'.[36] Following the success of Irish MPs and agrarian radicals in agitating for the creation of the Bessborough Commission, which investigated the Landlord and Tenant (Ireland) Act 1870, and following the passing of the Land Act 1881 after a period of sustained agitation, Highland MPs demanded something similar, which

[34] Allan W. MacColl, *Land, Faith and the Crofting Community: Christianity and Social Criticism in the Highlands of Scotland, 1843–1893* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 96–8.

[35] Andrew G. Newby, *Ireland, Radicalism and the Scottish Highlands, c.1870–1912* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 138–9.

[36] Robertson, *Landscapes of Protest*, p. 29.

led to the establishment of the Napier Commission in 1883. While the Napier Commission is now a remarkable historical document in its own right, it did not attract much support for its recommendations when it first came out.[37]

The Crofters Commission was legislated for under section 17 of the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act 1886 and its early movements suggested that it had a policing as well as a judicial role.[38] The government hoped that it would be a calming influence on the Highlands and while it pacified the area in the long-term, the Crofters Commission's movement around the various communities fuelled agitation because of competing claims for its attention, thus becoming a cause for concern in places.[39] Its activities also attracted displeasure from one quarter or another at any point in time as every landowner believed that his cause was the most pressing.[40] They feared their property rights would be usurped and they would not be entitled to recoup arrears, especially as the Commission had the power to cancel debts if it saw fit. On the other hand, it gave crofters the false hope that their arrears could be struck off as they then drew inspiration from the Land League's controversial 'No Rent Manifesto', meaning that there were crofters determined not to pay anything until the Commission decided upon their rents.[41] The 'No Rent Manifesto' was issued by imprisoned members of the Land League that called for small farmers to withhold rents in order to obtain large rent abatements under the 1881 Land Act and to put the Act to the test in order to provide evidence of the limitations of fair rent, fixity of tenure and freedom of sale to solve the land question for farmers. It was condemned by Archbishop Croke and other priests in the *Freeman's Journal* – the mainstream nationalist organ – as they argued that it was too impracticable to implement.[42] An amending Act was passed in Scotland in 1887 whereby proceedings could be paused while a landlord sought to recover arrears.[43]

The Crofters Commission hoped the settling of rents would lead to negotiated settlements elsewhere. When this did not happen a new

[37] Ibid., pp. 31–2.

[38] Ewen A. Cameron, *Land for the People? The British Government and the Scottish Highlands, c.1880–1925* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1996), pp. 40–1.

[39] Ibid., pp. 40–1.

[40] Ibid., pp. 43, 45.

[41] Ibid., pp. 42–5.

[42] See Walter Walsh, *Kilkenny: The Struggle for the Land, 1850–1882* (Kilkenny: Walsh Books, 2008), p. 377.

[43] Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act 1887; Cameron, *Land for the People?*, p. 48.

cleavage emerged in the Highlands between those with judicially fixed rents and those without. It failed to appease crofters as the more radical element did not think that it went far enough in affecting reform. For example, South Uist crofters believed that the Secretary for Scotland and the Commission were using the legislation to engender a new form of landlord tyranny because of the Secretary's power to fix the sittings of the Commission. The Commission eventually became a component of public policy and the Conservatives saw it as a useful way of keeping the peace and stifling overzealous crofter demands.[44] This had strong overtones with Constructive Unionism in Ireland, which emerged to tame the more radical elements of Irish agrarian radicalism and became known by the moniker 'Killing Home Rule by Kindness'. Land purchase became the cornerstone of this policy and J. J. Lee remarked: 'moral force unionism was based on the assumption that every native has his price'.[45]

Alexander MacDonald acted for many proprietors in the Highlands and was of the opinion that many crofters could pay rent but chose not to in the hope of achieving further reductions. He also argued that there were many magnanimous landowners that accepted the decisions made by the commissioners.[46] Lord Stafford, son and heir of the largest landowner in Scotland, was cultivating his image as a champion of the crofters and he was treated with a degree of suspicion because of this. The 8th duke of Argyll felt that Stafford betrayed his class with his actions. However, most of the odium towards Stafford came from crofters led by Angus Sutherland, who believed that he was using the question, cynically, to get elected. In addition to this, because he was so far removed from them in terms of social class, there was a belief that he could not fully understand their plight, despite what he said.[47]

The Crofters War saw an intense revival of interest in Highland history of the previous century. The Sutherland estate and ducal family starred as the top villain in various narratives being constructed with very public attacks on the family taking place. It also saw an explosion of public and private correspondence that criticised the Sutherlands and other landlords across the Highlands.[48] Highland estates underwent

[44] Ibid., pp. 44–6.

[45] Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland*, p. 406; J. J. Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society 1848–1918* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1971), p. 127.

[46] Cameron, *Land for the People?*, p. 50.

[47] Annie Tindley, *The Sutherland Estate, 1850–1920* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 81–2.

[48] Ibid., pp. 58–60.

various stages of retrenchment on the eve of the Crofters War, particularly between 1882 and 1886. The 3rd duke of Sutherland became increasingly absent from his estate, which became a cause of concern because of the changing political context in the Highlands during this period. Because Sutherland covered an entire crofting county, there were large-scale stresses and difficulties within landlord–tenant relations on the estate. Its management were exasperated and believed that crofters were a source of social and economic burden and this reflected a strain of thought among some landowners in Ireland and Scotland.[49] Like their heavily indebted Irish brethren, Scottish landowners were loath to offer any major concessions to crofters. The nature of landlord–tenant relations in both countries was changing and landowners struggled to comprehend this shift in attitudes.[50]

Catholic clergy in the west of Ireland and Free Church of Scotland clergy in the Highlands came to play important roles in defusing potentially dangerous situations by acting as mediators between the civil authorities and landlords. Defiance against the law became so unprecedented during the Crofters War and the Land War that clerical involvement became imperative in order to keep unrest to a minimum, especially when there was a fear that there could be loss of life.[51] The divide between Scottish landowners and their tenants was deepened owing to landlord membership and loyalty to the Established Church.[52] There were similar cultural distinctions in Ireland, which were further distinguished by the evangelical revival of the 1820s where landlords known as the 'Bible gentry' engaged in a 'Second Reformation' in an effort to gain converts to Protestantism.[53] While this was an overwhelming failure, memory left great rancour and was used as a propaganda tool during the Land War, with the clergy leading in delivering splenetic anti-landlord rhetoric. The clergy in both regions were expected to be vocal on behalf of their respective flocks but they were slow to do so, partially because of a fear of unnecessarily inflaming confrontation. In Ireland, the initial involvement of Fenians in the land campaign, especially in the establishment of the Ballinasloe Tenant Defence Association

[49] Ibid., pp. 58–60.
[50] Ibid., p. 64.
[51] MacColl, *Land, Faith and the Crofting Community*, pp. 102–4.
[52] MacPhail, 'Prelude to the Crofters' War', pp. 159–61.
[53] See Irene Whelan, 'The bible gentry: evangelical religion, aristocracy, and the new moral order in the early nineteenth century' in Crawford Gribben and Andrew R. Holmes (eds) *Protestant Millennialism, Evangelicalism and Irish Society, 1790–2005* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 52–82.

–the precursor to the Land League – made the clergy slow to become involved; coupled with Fenian hostility, the movement had greater freedom to posit radical solutions to the land question.[54]

POLITICAL REFORM AND LAND

As Irish MPs developed more clout and discipline in Westminster, they brought attention to the condition of the Highlands in Parliament which assisted in breaking down anti-Irish prejudices in the region.[55] The issuing of notices to quit led to a rent strike on Lord MacDonald's estate in Skye during April 1882. This tactic was similar to rent strikes in Ireland and increased violence coincided with Michael Davitt's visit to Skye. He helped to coordinate crofter resistance to the military force being dispatched.[56] He believed that the crofter cause was part of a pan-Celtic struggle and the common grievances amongst farmers in Ireland, Scotland and Wales were shared partially through knowledge of what was happening on the Celtic fringe.[57] Davitt hoped that a pan-Celtic fringe could become part of a wider scheme to forge an alliance with the democratic masses of Britain and Ireland though anti-Irish sentiment remained strong in Wales.[5859]

While the growth of democratic politics, assisted by Gladstonian liberalism, was now exciting previously voiceless actors in Britain and Ireland, the Irish Parliamentary Party was hesitant about running working-class candidates for election, with liberal caucuses in Britain also preferring to run bourgeois candidates instead of penniless and therefore expensive working men. Still, there were candidates that were successfully returned in Ireland as they agreed to 'sit, act and vote as one'.[60]

[54] See Casey, *Class and Community in Provincial Ireland*, chapter 5; Gerard Moran, 'Laying the Seeds for Agrarian Agitation: The Ballinasloe Tenant Defence Association, 1876–80' in Carla King and Conor McNamara (eds), *The West of Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), pp. 73–92.

[55] Andrew G. Newby, 'Landlordism is soon going Skye-High. Michael Davitt and Scotland, 1882–1887' in *History Scotland* (July/August 2003), p. 52.

[56] Marley, *Michael Davitt*, p. 168.

[57] David Howell, 'The land question in nineteenth-century Wales, Ireland and Scotland: A comparative study' in *Agricultural History Review*, 61:1 (June 2013), pp. 83–4, 88.

[58] Howell, 'The land question in nineteenth-century Wales, Ireland and Scotland', p. 177.

[59] Cit. in Marley, *Michael Davitt*, p. 180.

[60] See Conor Mulvagh, *The Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

The Irish Parliamentary Party held the balance of power at Westminster following the 1885 election and British party politics eventually pivoted towards Irish Home Rule by the 1910s. While the Conservatives were keen to suppress land agitation, they were also aware of the importance of keeping Charles Stewart Parnell onside.[61] Irish MPs represented the single greatest internal threat to the stability of the Union at this time. Conor Mulvagh has argued that 'the Irish Parliamentary Party was not merely a momentary anomaly in the House of Commons. It constituted the most powerful third party in the history of British politics until the emergence of Scottish nationalism'.[62]

Crofters were slower than their Irish counterparts to engage actively in the burgeoning democratic framework following the Secret Ballot Act of 1872 and the extension of the franchise in 1884. Nevertheless, the 1885 election also offered great promise for crofters. For example, in Sutherland the county seat was going to be contested for the first time in over fifty years. The Irish Parliamentary Party had a strong machine in place in rural Ireland through the auspices of the Irish National League but the same level of organisation was not yet evident in the Highlands. Despite this lack of organisation, Angus Sutherland became one of the six crofter candidates that ran with the support of the Highland Land Law Reform Association. All six were single-issue candidates, whose campaigns focused upon land reform and a party that came under the umbrella of the Crofters Party emerged at this election. Sutherland was the most radical of these candidates and he was also a supporter of Irish Home Rule, believing that land nationalisation was the panacea to the woes caused by an unsatisfactory resolution of the land question.[63]

Even though Irish Home Rule was the issue at play in Westminster, land still excited the Irish countryside. The return of economic distress in Ireland during 1885 eventually saw the emergence of the Plan of Campaign in October 1886 which was a form of collective bargaining on estates. The intensity of this economic depression meant that smallholders in the west of Ireland would struggle to find work locally and coupled with a decreased demand for seasonal migration in Britain, this exacerbated their problems. Parnell distanced himself from the Plan with its energy drawn from the explicit support of the agrarian wing of the Irish National League. Irish national MPs were also strongly in

[61] Andrew Gailey, *Ireland and the Death of Kindness: The Experience of Constructive Unionism, 1890–1905* (Cork University Press, 1987), pp. 2–3.

[62] Mulvagh, *The Irish Parliamentary Party*, p. 2.

[63] Tindley, *The Sutherland Estate*, pp. 80–1.

favour of it, which shows how the agrarian wing still had great influence in the nationalist movement. Its promulgators maintained that it would only work effectively if every tenant on an estate signed up to it, which would then give tenants a strong negotiating hand, therefore it also pressured grudging support from reticent tenants.[64]

The Plan became part of a wider struggle for survival for both landlords and tenants and by January 1888, the police estimated that it was operating on thirty-eight estates. Laurence Geary stated that it took place on at least 203 properties with more than 70 per cent of them being in Munster and Connaught, magnifying the extent of the problem in the west of Ireland. There was a spike in the number of evictions taking place because of the Plan although evicted tenants received financial assistance, and were assured that their evictions would only be temporary. These promises proved to be hollow as the Plan's funds ran low and Parnell's lack of support limited their ability to effectively fundraise.

Nationalist MPs stumped for the Plan of Campaign on successive Sundays during the winter of 1886–7; the spectacle of processions, parades, speeches and banners all added to a sense of rural solidarity amongst tenant farmers in the face of landlord oppressors.[65] These meetings succeeded in hiding the inherent class divisions amongst the non-gentry classes in the countryside as nationalists sought to present a veneer of unity. Again, they were popular manifestations of nationalist fervour and spurred the agitation on as farmers were promised a brilliant future. Tenants were further told that not only were they fighting for their survival, they were also fighting for the nationhood of Ireland and many were ruthlessly exploited by nationalists in this as they were told that they should be prepared for imprisonment to further the agitation.

The Parnellite split of 1891 bitterly divided Irish nationalism and killed off any momentum that the agrarian movement may have had. William O'Brien attempted to revive it through the United Irish League (UIL) which held its first meeting in Westport on 23 January 1898.[66] It had clearly articulated political and agrarian purposes and had three overt objectives: to revive a popular grass-roots, extra-parliamentary movement in the hope of reinvigorating a decaying parliamentary

[64] See Laurence Geary, *The Plan of Campaign, 1886–1891* (Cork University Press, 1987), pp. 1–3.

[65] Ibid., p. 34.

[66] Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland, 1891–1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 28.

nationalism; to make the Parnellite and anti-Parnellite divisions irrelevant through local unity; and to mount pressure to transfer ownership of land from landlords to tenant farmers through the redistribution of grazing to tillage in order to meet the needs of impoverished smallholders. Like the earlier Land League meetings, there was a strong anti-land grabbing element within the UIL. Land grabbing was the taking of the farm of an evicted neighbour. It evoked memories of Famine clearances and was deeply frowned upon. Meetings generally took place after Mass or on fair days as parades, bands and banners all added to the spectacle and brought their efforts to the attention of a wider audience. Police hubris returned once again as they doubted the vitality of the movement even as graziers expressed fear about potential outrages against them.[67]

The Parnellite split was a fissure through Irish nationalism. It split the movement and it struggled to recover, though the success of the United Irish League saw O'Brien organise a land conference with Captain John Shawe-Taylor, a little-known Galway landlord that culminated in the Wyndham Land Act 1903.[68] This Act offered landlords exceedingly generous terms to sell their estates, free themselves from heavy encumbrances and spelled the terminal decline of landlord presence in Ireland. Rural social relationships had been changing prior to the 1903 Act. This was particularly obvious in towns and the Act intensified such change, 'thus changing the basis for agrarian collection action in Ireland. Rather than agitating against the landlords (for land purchase), farmers began to agitate against each other (for land redistribution)'.[69] In an effort to incentivise landlords to sell, the terms of the Act were quite generous. The 12 per cent cash bonus on the final purchase price encouraged many landlords to avail of it, though it soon became obvious that it was going to be inadequate. There was also a question as to whether the land conference proposals would result in too high a price being paid to landlords.[70] Patrick Cosgrove and Terence Dooley have illustrated that the Wyndham Land Act was not the final solution to the land question and an attempt to find a solution to it was something that frustrated and stymied successive Free State governments.[71] Many smaller farmers

[67] See Paul Bew, *Conflict and Conciliation in Ireland, 1890–1910: Parnellites and the Radical Agrarians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[68] Land Purchase (Ireland) Act 1903.

[69] Campbell, *Land and Revolution*, p. 289.

[70] Philip Bull, 'The significance of the nationalist response to the Irish land act of 1903' in *Irish Historical Studies*, 28:111 (May 1993), pp. 283–98.

[71] For more, see Patrick John Cosgrove, 'The Wyndham Land Act, 1903: The final solution to the Irish Land Question?', PhD thesis (Maynooth University, 2009);

realised that even after purchasing their farms, more land was needed to make them remotely viable. Therefore, the large stock-rearing ranches of many estates became the most obvious source for additional land.[72]

CONCLUSIONS

What was the impact of agrarian radicalism and resistance on late nineteenth century land reforms being demanded in the west of Ireland and the Highlands? The Land League broke down the parochialism of the previous political system as all in the countryside thought they were part of a national movement that was going towards a definitive goal: peasant proprietorship and Home Rule. For this to have happened, the people needed to be convinced that what was happening in the wider entity was of importance to them. The success of the Land League came down to its ability to identify landlords as the cause of farmer woes. National issues like Home Rule could be used to fuel agrarian discontent into something more overtly political as its leaders succeeded in using poverty to unite the lower classes into collective action. Despite the later rhetoric of the Land League, it was the farmer and not the landlord that drove his children off the land.[73]

The Irish Parliamentary Party was comprehensively successful at the 1885 election which boded well for the crofter cause as Irish MPs ensured that the Highland question was on the agenda in Westminster by 1886. Gladstone now became a firm believer in trying to bring about some reforms for the Highlands, even after the disappointing conclusions of the Napier Commission. He introduced the Crofters Bill that eventually became the Crofters Act in 1886, hoping that it would have a calming effect in the Highlands despite a belief that it was a reward for lawlessness.[74]

Animosity towards landlords became more noticeable during the late 1880s as the impact of Napier Commission became more evident and coercion was introduced. Landlords expressed surprise at the end of their passivity as they feared that there would be serious damage done

Terence Dooley, '*The Land for the People*': *The Land Question in Independent Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2004).

[72] Patrick Cosgrove, *The Ranch War in Riverstown, Co. Sligo, 1908* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), p. 7.

[73] J. J. Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1848–1918* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973), pp. 9–11.

[74] See J. P. D. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), pp. 196–206; Marley, *Michael Davitt*, pp. 175–6.

to their precarious finances if the army was not brought in to assert control.[75] The Crofters Commission initially failed to find a middle ground as one side always felt aggrieved and this limited its effectiveness. It did learn from its mistakes as it became more technical and constructive, though its independence waned between 1895 and 1906. Nevertheless, its key initial success was achieving the trust of crofters, normally suspicious of government, doing much to quell agitation in the Highlands.[76] Highland landowners ruled with feudal might and were assisted by obsequious factors and staff in the management of their sometimes vast estates. While tenants achieved some legal rights following the assent of the Crofters Act in 1886 thanks to the efforts of Highland radicals, the increasingly centralised nature of land ownership remained unchallenged.[77]

[75] James Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2015), pp. 211–13.

[76] Cameron, *Land for the People?*, pp. 58–60.

[77] Wightman, *The Poor Had No Lawyers*, pp. 43–7.