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978-0-521-46683-7 - Land and Popular Politics in Ireland: County Mayo from the
Plantation to the Land War

Donald E. Jordan

Excerpt

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Introduction

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century Ireland was convulsed by three periods of agrarian agitation, which together form one of the most important protest movements in recent European history. The first phase began in 1879, when economic crisis brought on by a confluence of bad weather, meager harvests and low prices undermined the post-Famine prosperity of larger farmers while devastating the fragile economies of the smaller farmers. The Land War quickly spread from the West of Ireland, where it began, into the East and South, until by the winter of 1880–1 the Irish National Land League could boast of hundreds of branches comprising over 200,000 members.¹ At its head was Charles Stewart Parnell, who managed to harness the agitation into the service of a revitalized Irish parliamentary party, in the process propelling himself into the leadership of the party at Westminster. An active party in parliament, supported by a massive agitation in Ireland, forced the Liberal government of William Ewart Gladstone to act on the Irish land question. Although the resulting Land Bill of 1881 fell far short of abolishing landlordism in Ireland, the ultimate goal of the land movement, it corrected some of the most glaring abuses of landlord power, established land courts to arbitrate rent disputes, and laid the foundation for the transfer of land ownership from landlords to working farmers.

The Land War marked a decisive stage in the emergence of agrarian capitalism in Ireland. By 1879 production for a cash economy was firmly established in the country, shaping political and social relationships. However, the continuing presence of landlordism prevented land from becoming a commodity that could be bought and sold, and meant that

¹ M. Davitt to J. Devoy, 16 Dec. 1880, in W. O'Brien and D. Ryan (eds.), *Devoy's Post Bag, 1871–1928*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1948), II, p. 24.

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rent levels would be arbitrarily set rather than fixed in accordance with price movements. While cattle prices rose rapidly during the first few decades following the Great Famine most Mayo farmers were able to pay their rents, which in many instances were not rising as rapidly as the prices they could fetch for their farm products. However, the fall in prices that came during the economic crisis of 1877–80 reduced the farmers' income and in many instances transformed rents from being a tolerable to an intolerable burden, bringing into question the rights of landlords to arbitrarily set rent levels in an era of free trade. Parnell summed up the feelings of many tenant farmers when he told an American reporter that the land agitation did "not attach so much importance . . . to mere reduction of rent," but sought to create a "natural state of affairs" in which land would become a commodity traded on the open market. Rents, where they remained, would be based on the "maxim that rent is merely a fair share of the profits of the land, and that when there are no profits there is no rent."² To many farmers, especially those with large holdings, the Land War was a struggle against an anachronistic land system that prevented their full participation in the free market economy. Led by former Fenians, ambitious parliamentarians and local politicians, the tenant farmers fought their landlords for control of the land in an open agitation, supplemented on occasion by bursts of nocturnal violence. While failing in the short run to establish themselves as landowners, the farmers succeeded in banishing from Ireland age-old habits of deference towards landlords, initiating an agrarian revolution that was completed in 1921, when the compulsory sale by landlords of tenanted land was enforced by the new Irish Free State government.

Until the 1970s, historians of the Land War concentrated their attention on its relationship to the larger national struggle for Irish self-government. This is not surprising, given the intimate connections between the land and national struggles, but it often meant that analyses of the land movement were tangential to analyses of the nationalist movement and its leaders. However, during the past two decades this partiality towards national political history has been offset by the publication of a series of monographs on the agricultural and social transformation that occurred in post-Famine Ireland, and the resultant changes in landlord–tenant relations. The earliest of these studies, most

² Interview with Albert Chester Ives, *New York Herald*, 2 Jan. 1880, reprinted in *Special Commission Act, 1888: Report of the Proceedings Before the Commissioners Appointed By the Act, Reprinted from The Times*, 4 vols. (London, 1890), I, pp. 187–8.

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notably those by S. H. Cousens, James Donnelly, Jr., Joseph Lee, Cormac O'Gráda, Barbara Solow, and William Vaughan, paved the way for two conflicting interpretations of the social origins of the Land War and of the exercise of political power within the land movement. Samuel Clark, in his *Social Origins of the Irish Land War*,³ argues that social and class antagonisms lessened in post-Famine Ireland, creating an environment in which a united peasantry could be mobilized against landlordism. In contrast, Paul Bew, in his *Land and the National Question in Ireland 1858–82*,⁴ maintains that discord, not unity, characterized the land movement that was, at best, founded upon a fragile “class alliance” between large and small farmers rather than upon the rural solidarity found by Clark.

To a large extent these two interpretations, along with those presented in many of the studies that preceded them, are based upon analyses of social and economic change on the provincial or national levels. This approach, employing aggregated data, can illuminate major economic trends, but necessarily distorts economic and social organization at the local level, where the battle between landlords and their tenants was actually waged. Consequently, the questions regarding the political significance of rural class alignments raised by Bew's and Clark's studies can best be answered through an exposition of the complexities of local Irish society. Since the publication of these books, Irish social history has flourished to an unprecedented degree, resulting in numerous studies of local, county and regional history, including of late some that disregard the traditional administrative boundaries of provinces, counties, baronies or poor law unions in favor of complex spatial hierarchies based on the locations of urban centers, watersheds, railroads and a host of other variables.⁵

In many ways County Mayo is an ideal subject for a detailed study of the causes and the course of the Irish Land War. The agitation began

³ Samuel Clark, *Social Origins of the Irish Land War* (Princeton, 1979).

⁴ Paul Bew, *Land and the National Question in Ireland 1858–82* (Dublin, 1978).

⁵ For examples of these latter studies, see the recent studies of Leonard Hochberg and David Miller. For example: “Regional Boundaries and Urban Hierarchy in Prefamine Ireland: A Preliminary Assessment,” a paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Social Science History Association, Washington, DC, October 1989; “Ireland on the Eve of the Famine: A Geographic Perspective,” a paper presented at the National Center for Geographic Information and Analysis, Santa Barbara, California, March 1991; “Internal Colonialism in Geographic Perspective: The Case of Pre-Famine Ireland,” forthcoming in L. Hochberg and G. Earle, *The Geography of Social Change* (Stanford).

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there in April 1879, and Mayo remained an important center of the movement until 1881. As a result, the causes and organization of the rebellion must be sought first in Mayo. In consequence of its premier position, Mayo provides particularly rich documentation of the land agitation. Reporters, politicians and government investigators swarmed to the county, especially during the early stages of the agitation and again at the time of the celebrated “Boycott affair.” In addition, the county’s nationalist newspaper, *The Connaught Telegraph*, the voice of the land movement during its early stages, supplies a wealth of information on the political, social and economic situation in the county.

Mayo was an unlikely place for the Land War to begin. It was one of the most impoverished counties in Ireland and had a very limited history of agrarian protest prior to 1879. Over the previous 120 years agrarian protest movements in Ireland had been confined largely to the more prosperous counties of the eastern and central regions of the country, in which the social and economic convulsions associated with the developing market-oriented and cash-based economy had spawned frequent periods of agrarian violence. In County Mayo the conditions for a sustained and successful agitation were not in place prior to the Famine. In the seventeenth century Mayo experienced a significant transformation in landownership during which the Gaelic aristocracy was replaced on the land by Galway-based merchants, English “adventurers” and transplanted Irish, creating a host of grievances against the “usurpers” of the land and their descendants that fueled powerful oratory and fanned the flames of the agitation during the Land War. This transformation in landownership inaugurated the slow and uneven establishment of a market-based commercial economy in the county, which by the 1830s brought to Mayo the first signs of class divisions of the sort that had produced organized agrarian protest movements in central Ireland since the 1760s. These economic and political changes are the subject of Chapters 2 and 3.

During the three decades following the Great Famine of 1846–51, the pace of economic and political change in Mayo increased dramatically, bringing a livestock-based and capitalist economy along with a new farming and trading elite that by the 1870s was well positioned to structure political activity. These developments, detailed in Chapters 4 and 5, provide the immediate backdrop to and context for the Land War of 1879–81. Moreover, they provide an explanation for the clear geographic dimension of the agitation, which was not distributed equally throughout the county, but was concentrated in the rich plains and

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surrounding areas of south-central Mayo, where the livestock economy and its accompanying social and political changes were most evident.

In an attempt to understand this geographic dimension of the protest movement, I drew on the works of Michael Hechter, William Skinner and others to develop a core/periphery-based analysis of the social, economic and political development of County Mayo.⁶ Without question, structuring an analysis of economic development around an artificial construct like a county is fraught with peril. As was the case with many Irish counties, Mayo was created by Elizabethan administrators towards the end of the sixteenth century. Their goal was not to create viable economic units but to replace the fluid tribal boundaries of the Celtic aristocracy with tidy English ones and in the process complete the pacification of Ireland. However, as it turned out, County Mayo is divided topographically into a central core and a surrounding periphery that affected significantly its economic development and contributed to making it an economic entity. The core begins with a narrow corridor encompassing the land around Killala and Ballina in north Mayo, widens out in mid-Mayo to include the land between Castlebar and Westport, and then continues south and east to the Galway and Roscommon borders. This central corridor contains much of the best pasture and tillage land in Mayo and was the area of the county where a livestock economy developed most fully following the Famine. It was the region of Mayo that experienced the heaviest Famine depopulation, largely as a result of the actions of evicting landlords who, anxious to redistribute the county's best farm land into more profitable large holdings, ejected many small holders during and immediately following the Famine. As a consequence, at the time of the Land War Mayo's large and middle-sized farmers were clustered in the center of the county, participating in the livestock economy that they had helped to establish. Most of the county's major towns were located in the core region, linked together by roads and, beginning in 1860, by railroads. The importance of these towns as centers of commerce, banking, credit, politics and

⁶ Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975); Michael Hechter, "Internal Colonialism Revisited," in Edward Tiryakian and Ronald Rogowski (eds.), *New Nationalisms of the Developed West: Toward Explanation* (Boston, 1985), pp. 17–26; G. William Skinner, "Regional Urbanization in Nineteenth Century China" and "Cities and the Hierarchy of Local Systems," in G. William Skinner (ed.), *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, 1977), pp. 211–49, 275–351. Also see: Hochberg and Miller, "Ireland on the Eve of the Famine: A Geographic Perspective," and "Internal Colonialism in Geographic Perspective: The Case of Pre-Famine Ireland."

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administration, grew considerably following the Famine, as Mayo became more fully integrated into a market economy.

In contrast, the peripheral regions, consisting of mountainous, bog and poor quality land, sustained numerous small farmers living marginally in a family economy consisting of small-scale potato cultivation, rough grazing of a calf or two, the sale of a few cash crops, particularly eggs, and the wages from seasonal work in England or Scotland. Having witnessed relatively little Famine depopulation, the peripheral regions supported large populations that continued to subdivide the land into small holdings after such practices had been curtailed in the core areas. The periphery's towns, several of which were important market or ecclesiastical centers, provided many of the same services to the rural areas as did the towns of the core, but in a hierarchy of Mayo's towns, they would be of secondary importance by any measure.

It is important to stress that a core/periphery analysis does not expose the existence of two distinct farming cultures in Mayo, one "modern" or "modernizing" and one "pre-modern," locked in "tradition." Nor does it imply a strict territorial or economic division of the county. Mayo, like most western Irish counties, contains a patchwork of lowland pasture, cultivated land, bog, and mountain of varying degrees of agricultural potential. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, large and small holdings, and pasture and tillage land were scattered throughout the county. However, a core/periphery analysis does reveal differences in kinship structures, inheritance systems, and land use patterns between the two areas that suggest that the structural changes which Samuel Clark and others have identified as the social background for the Land War occurred more rapidly in central Mayo than they did along the western coastline or eastern boundaries of the county. The relationship that developed between the residents of the two zones was one characterized by a division of labor in which the periphery became an economic dependency of the core.

For a brief period during 1879 the interests of the various farming cultures in Mayo converged over the issue of rents. The nature of the post-Famine transformation of the county paved the way for this unity by establishing a farming class in which most members, regardless of farm size or tenure, were integrated into the commercial livestock economy and a shopkeeper class that was dependent upon the farmers' prosperity. Consequently, the fall in livestock prices after 1876, combined with a reduction in all other sources of farmers' income, drove the two groups together into an attack on rents paid to an increasingly

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alien and anachronistic landlord class. The leadership needed for an assault on rents came from a new political elite of farmers, shopkeepers, merchants, and professional men, all products of the post-Famine social, economic, and political transformation of Ireland. During the 1870s these emergent leaders, in a potent alliance with the county's Fenians, wrested a degree of political power in Mayo away from the gentry and the clergy. As examined in Chapters 6 and 7, in 1879 this locally based political alliance, strengthened by two years of economic crisis, supplied leadership in defiance of priests and landlords during the first heady months of the land agitation. Belatedly, the Catholic clergy joined the land agitation in an effort to retain their political influence in rural Ireland, but did so as auxiliaries to the movement's lay leadership. This redistribution of power in rural Ireland was the Land War's most significant contribution to Irish history, providing the base for political life in the Irish Free State after 1923.

The initial solidarity displayed by the land movement lends credence to Clark's thesis that structural changes within Ireland following the Famine succeeded in uniting farmers of differing classes with townsmen to form a "rural-urban coalition against a landed elite."⁷ However, as analyzed in Chapters 8 and 9, the coalition was short-lived. The intrusion of capitalism into the Irish countryside provided the foundation for deep divisions between the large grazing farmers who farmed substantial tracts of land without owning them, and small tillage farmers who found their farms threatened with inclusion into grazing tracts, and who saw their aspirations for an equitable redistribution of the land blocked by the graziers.

To a large extent, the class conflict that surfaced in County Mayo during the fall of 1879 was part of a larger struggle within the Land League leadership between representatives of the large graziers, located primarily in eastern and southern Ireland, and advocates of the small western farmers. During the early 1880s, in an effort to make the land agitation truly national in scope, the League's central executive sought to draw the large eastern and southern graziers into the land movement. The "rent at the point of a bayonet" strategy adopted by the League during the summer of 1880 symbolized its embrace of the large farmers and apparent abandonment of the interests of the small western farmers. The new policy also marked a victory for those within the League leadership who sought to centralize control over the direction of the land movement.

⁷ Clark, *Social Origins of the Irish Land War*, p. 263.

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Clark has noted that one of the characteristics of the Land War that distinguishes it from pre-Famine forms of collective action is its national scope. The locally based, communally organized movements of the pre-Famine period were replaced by a national, associational collectivity that sought to change central government policies in the interests of the tenant farmers of Ireland.⁸ This was indeed the case, but at least in the short run, the accomplishments of the Land League in wresting concessions from the government, such as the Land Bill of 1881, did not benefit all Irish tenant farmers equally. Moreover, the League's failure to defend the interests of the small farmers contributed markedly to their loss of faith in the small farm economy.

The experience of County Mayo makes it difficult to accept Clark's thesis that in the post-Famine period the "segment of the rural population that had been and remained comparatively insecure [the small farmers] became integrated at the national level into the same social group as a more secure segment [the larger farmers]. In this way the social basis was laid for an active collectivity that drew its support from both."⁹ There is little doubt that the land agitation in Mayo was supported by all sections of the farming community and that the agitation was most vital during the early months while the broadly based anti-landlord coalition remained intact. It is also apparent that the major social and economic changes that occurred in post-Famine Mayo produced a politically active elite that was capable of mobilizing large and small farmers around the shared goals of rent reduction and land reform. However, the transitory nature of the farmers' alliance brings into question the components of its foundation. In Mayo, the land movement broke up internally long before government-sponsored land reform and repression formally curtailed the agitation, a victim of the fracturing of the popular front of tenant farmers and their townsmen allies.

In effect, there were two simultaneous agrarian revolutions in Ireland between 1879 and 1882: one by large graziers who wanted to be free of rents and landlords so they could fully profit from the market, and one by small farmers who wanted protection from eviction and free, equitable access to the land.¹⁰ An open clash between these classes failed to materialize during the 1879–82 phase of the Land War, giving the

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 350–65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 364–5.

¹⁰ A similar interpretation for the role of peasants during the French Revolution is made by Barrington Moore, Jr. in *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, 1966), pp. 69–74.

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impression to most observers and many historians that rural Ireland had risen up in a united front against English landlordism. But tensions between them, compounded by disenchantment with the Land League, seriously weakened the land movement in County Mayo by the end of 1880. By then the small western farmers, whose plight had sparked the agitation, were forgotten by many members of the Land League's central executive and were virtually left out of the 1882 settlement between Parnell and the government, which officially closed the first phase of the Irish Land War. With their hopes to arrest the trend towards land consolidation dashed, vast numbers of Mayo's small farmers emigrated rather than remaining in Ireland to fight for land against the ascendant larger farmers, who were the true victors in the Land War.

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Part 1

County Mayo prior to the Famine