

Land, Popular Politics and Agrarian Violence in Ireland: the Case of County Kerry, 1872–86

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The 1870s and 1880s were formative decades in the development of Irish nationalist identity. The land and national movements mobilized the countryside on a scale not seen since the days of Daniel O’Connell. Despite a significant corpus of work being produced between the 1970s and mid 1990s, scholarship on this significant period in modern Irish history has become stagnant in recent years. Therefore, Donnacha Seán Lucey’s *Land, popular politics and agrarian violence in Ireland: the case of county Kerry, 1872-86* is to be welcomed for reviving a debate that has become moribund. Regional studies such as this expose the anomalies present in national surveys, and Lucey’s extensive primary research and thorough engagement with the secondary literature, deepens our knowledge of the complexities of post-Famine Irish society.

The prosperity of Ireland in this period led to the expansion of a credit-based system, with shopkeepers extending credit to farmers. The precarious nature of the economy resulted in the Land War becoming ‘a bitter conflict between two sets of creditors’.⁽¹⁾ In Kerry, tensions were especially noticeable between the conservative Catholic middle-class that generally supported Home Rule and those from the lower classes that partook in agrarian violence. Lucey paints a vivid picture of the extensive intra-tenant strife that existed towards the end of this period of prosperity in Kerry; with little animosity being directed towards landlords, which supports Hoppen’s contention that: ‘well into the second half of the [nineteenth] century, bad landlords, not landlordism *per se*, constituted the main object of attack’ by tenants.⁽²⁾

The book is divided into seven chapters that combine a chronological and thematic approach. The first

chapter focuses upon the post-Famine economy of Kerry. Here, Lucey traces the growing influence of the Kerry middle class and their increasing politicisation, as Catholic merchants became a burgeoning power base. The diverse quality of land in the locality saw farming methods vary from region to region. As James S. Donnelly showed in 1971, demand for butter between the 1850s and 1870s was very high, and as the land in the southwest was suitable for dairying and was in reasonable proximity to the Cork Butter Market, farmers benefited immeasurably from the commercialization of farming. (3) The quality of land can be correlated with prosperity across the county. As the land was quite barren in the Caherciveen, Dingle and Kenmare unions, they were quite poor and the poorest farmers still relied upon migratory labour to survive, though the prosperity that came to Kerry in the post-Famine period did also benefit them. This prosperity brought an increase in the value of land in the county, though landlords faced resistance when they attempted to increase rents. The tenant-right market was quite vibrant in the 1870s, with farmers often selling it in an attempt to defraud creditors. As landlords failed to regulate it, they attempted to impose fines on tenants that sold tenant-right, in an attempt to derive some benefit from it.

Chapters two and three focus upon the emergence of the agricultural depression and the Land League agitation that soon followed. There were no contested elections in Kerry in the first two decades following the Famine, with the Kenmares and Herberts of Muckross dominating politics in the county. Lucey argues that the calm nature of landlord-tenant relations in the county played a significant role in maintaining a political equilibrium between these two liberal families. However, the emergence of the Home Government Association and Rowland Ponsonboy Blennerhasset's election in 1872 changed this dynamic. There was significant clerical resistance to Blennerhasset and his election was indicative of how the Catholic middle class were beginning to play an important role as power brokers in elections.

Lucey expands upon Samuel Clark's 'challenging collectivity' thesis, by examining the Kerry Tenant Defence Association, which was established as a response to the inadequacies of the 1870 Land Act, with analogous movements being established elsewhere in the country. Divisions soon emerged when The O'Donoghue attempted to impose himself its leader. This presented numerous difficulties as he did not support tenant-right, and his supporters were not in favour of Home Rule or Parnell. Such a multifarious structure supports Lucey's argument that 'In many ways, the KTDA reflected the disparate nature of non-landlord politics in the mid to late 1870s which was a combination of Liberal tenant-righters, home rulers and Fenians' (p. 41) While it was a direct challenge to landlord authority, it would be disingenuous to suggest that it was a united body.

The economic crisis of the 1870s saw the Catholic middle class in Kerry now begin to play a significant political role, as they were responsible for the distribution of relief. The formal establishment of the Land League in Kerry saw Timothy Harrington of the *Kerry Sentinel* becoming its president, with the *Sentinel* becoming its mouthpiece. The provincial press played an important role in disseminating ideas during the Land War. While traditional, 'unwritten' laws still played an important role in the countryside, Lucey contends that they were unable to take the evolving market economy of post-Famine Ireland into account. The illiterate, monoglot, Irish speakers of the south and west limited the spread of the league in Kerry, with activity concentrated in North and Central Kerry.

Chapter four explores the proto-nationalist nature of agrarian violence that evolved into later movements. The localist and subaltern nature of it poses the question as to the level of nationalist consciousness there was amongst the lower classes in rural society. It is arguable whether Whiteboyism, as Lucey contended, was based on class consciousness. It would have been useful to provide a definition of class as contemporaries may have understood it. This is especially pertinent as peasants were generally passive creatures until their immediate circumstances were threatened. The suppression of the league led to a new wave of agrarian violence that strengthened the anti-rent campaign, and the imprisonment of moderate leaders removed an important buffer, which led to what Lucey terms 'agrarian anarchy'. Lucey states that evidence suggests that individual Land League members played important roles in secret societies, with Moonlighters often claiming to be carrying out the work of the Land League, and leaders were sometimes ambivalent to violence and extra-constitutional activity. While some of the leading members of the league in Kerry encouraged violence, they did not commit it, with some, such as Harrington and the clergy, opposing

it. The violence in Kerry was a mesh of anti-landlord sentiment and personal disputes, and Lucey challenges Lee's assertion that 'the boys' carried out the violence. More than social frustrations were responsible for the social unrest.

Chapter five sheds important new light on that phenomenon that was Parnellism. Lucey is correct in asserting that the stress upon 'high politics' within Irish historiography limits our understanding as to the dynamics of the semi-revolutionary land war by failing to examine the role of the 'rank and file' participants in the movement. Parnell had succeeded in moderating nationalism, though Lucey could also have argued that the imprisonment of some of the more radical leaders played an equally important role in this regard.

The violent consequences of the 'No Rent Manifesto' in Kerry saw three murders and numerous shootings. This violence was checked in the aftermath of the 1881 Land Act and the 1882 Arrears Act, as tenants wanted to derive some benefit from them. This was coupled with a special 'police tax' imposed on disturbed districts and a shame felt towards violence, with no desire to return to it. The movement had moved from a nascent radical hue and was now appealing to a wealthier, middle class and this resulted in a rightward shift. The coercive nature of the Crimes Act also limited the effectiveness of the National League. Labour Leagues had emerged simultaneously, and with agricultural labourers having active involvement in these the police believed them to be a form of subterfuge for the Land League. The reports of the Special Resident Magistrates for this time are a wholly under-utilised source, with references to the 'Land and Labour League' being carried in their weekly reports. Despite the cause of labour being championed somewhat briefly throughout the country in 1882, it had no strong advocates amongst the leadership of the National League at a local level. Lucey's argument at this point is unclear. Labourers did play an important role as participants in the Land League and Irish National League, but Lucey could have made better use of the source material in trying to uncover the sincerity of the leadership in representing their cause.

While the Protestant middle classes felt isolated because of the Catholic dimension of the Irish National League, an anti-rates movement emerged in Kerry that transcended political and religious interests, being a response to the strain felt by the middle classes in relation to the payment of rates. There was further co-operation regarding the establishment of a creamery, which would create jobs. When Earl Spencer visited in September 1884, he was generally warmly received, though there was some hostility in parts of the county where there was a strong Fenian element at play. The Royal visit in 1885 was seen to be a good opportunity to drum up anti-English support and rhetoric admonished the tyranny of British rule. However, Nationalist organisation was disjointed in Kerry, which undermined their ability to mobilise against the visit. While demonstrations took place, the 'respectable' classes greeted the party with warmth.

Sporting organisations were a cause for tensions within the nationalist community in Kerry and this was symptomatic of diverging nationalist opinions in the county. Those desiring 'respectability' participated in the events of the Tralee Athletics Sports Day. However, its links with the gentry and obvious class connotations saw it struggle to gain support against the nascent Gaelic Athletics Association, which had a more egalitarian hue. The centralisation of control was a tendency of Parnellism, and in Kerry this resulted in a schism between Harrington and others, as there was frustration with the League because of their constant focus on returning MPs to the neglect of other local issues that concerned people. Edward Harrington and his brother, Thomas, were both divisive figures in Kerry, and Edward's failure to support the GAA threatened the political stability of nationalists in the county. Their rather forceful personalities saw Tim become known as 'the supreme dictator in Ireland' (p. 142).

The return of agricultural distress in 1885 as a result of a plunge in the price of cattle and butter in 1884 saw renewed support for the Irish National League in Kerry and this is explored in chapter six. The Land Acts created an expectation amongst tenants that reductions were possible and the refusal of many landlords to grant reductions saw a renewed agitation emerge. Prior to the Plan of Campaign, tenants did seek rent reductions, and while some, often smaller, landlords did grant these there were others that combined to resist demands by tenants to reduce their rent to Griffith's Valuation. The low returns for the produce undermined the reductions achieved in the Land Courts. While renewed hostilities were in the minds of organisers, with Thomas O'Rourke of the Tralee branch calling for the non-payment of rent in April 1885. The agrarianism

creeping into the league was at odds with national objectives and Timothy Harrington could do little to stop it. Following the failure of the Home Rule Bill, attention shifted towards the land question again. John Redmond told farmers that if they were patient, they would get land more cheaply, which is ironic, considering that recent scholarship has shown that he received a rather high price for the sale of his estate under the terms of the 1903 Land Act.[\(4\)](#)

As in other parts of the country, the Roman Catholic Church played an important role in the operation of the Irish National League. The law of the League often superseded civil law, with meetings held to settle disputes. While Timothy Harrington was a moderate, his control over the local League was not complete. The clergy also played an important role in moderating extremism because they needed to court middle-class favour to sustain their churches. Radicals had lost the ability to organise both in Kerry and across the country, but Lucey does not explain why, and this is something that warrants discussion in the context of the land question. Did some of the more radical leaders die or emigrate? For example, the death of Matt Harris in 1890 brought an end to the radical hue that had dominated the nationalist movement in east Galway.

Chapter seven explores the continuing ambiguous attitude of the Irish National League towards violence, even following the death of John O'Connell Curtin at the hands of Moonlighters. *United Ireland* was up in arms over this death, asserting that Captain Moonlight had come to the aid of landlords. While individual branches attempted to assert control over violence, Edward Harrington contended that where the League was weak, outrage was at its strongest. Those that carried out such violence had little stake in the country, and the League had failed to embrace them, thus, as a consequence, they had nothing to lose. This exposition is one of the more important features of this work. The subalterns were part of a marginal subculture, excluded from the burgeoning, middle-class polity in the countryside that was dominated by personalities like the Harrington brothers and The O'Donoghue of the Glens. Unlike in Galway and Mayo, which had radical, left-leaning Fenians such as Michael Davitt, Matt Harris and Michael Malachy O'Sullivan animating the countryside, the Kerry leadership were a conservative bunch, with little interest in radical concepts such as peasant proprietorship as they sought concessions in a continuing landlord-tenant paradigm. What is also quite striking from this work is the dominance of the moderate forces within the nationalist movement in Kerry. This forced the Fenian element to capitulate and support Home Rule by 1885, which ended any radicalism that may have ensued.

While Lucey has a tendency to repeat his points, this appears to be down to a lack of judicious copy-editing and should not detract from what is a fine book. There was nothing glamorous about the Land War, unlike the revolutionary period of the 20th century. Reading through dense reports of speeches in newspapers and police reports is tiresome and laborious. However, such graft is important for what was the most significant epoch in Irish history and Lucey has carried out his research in a comprehensive manner. A further strength is his ability to compare the agitation in Kerry with that in other counties. Mayo saw the fight take place between small farmers against graziers, a group that Matt Harris saw as more despicable than landlords; while the Kerry clergy stressed the woes of the strong farmers because they were of the same class. The agitation in Kerry did not take the same radical turn as that in the west because it was dominated by conservative elements. This is a book of significance. The research it embodies, and the arguments put forward by Lucey, all shed further light on a most intriguing period of Irish history. It shows that intra-class relations and tensions played an important role in popular politics, with the lower classes eventually being the losers in the story of the Land War.

Notes

1. L. P. Curtis Jr., 'Landlord responses to the Irish Land War, 1879–87', *Eire-Ireland: Journal of Irish Studies* (Fall-Winter 2003), 149.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. K. T. Hoppen, *Election, Politics and Society in Ireland, 1832–1885* (London, 1984), pp. 136–7.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. James S. Donnelly, Jr., 'Cork market: its role in the nineteenth century butter trade', *Studia Hibernica*, 11 (1971), 130–63.[Back to \(3\)](#)

4. See Patrick Cosgrove, 'The controversy and consequences of John Redmond's estate sale under the Wyndham Land Act, 1903', *The Historical Journal*, 55, 1 (March 2012), 75–96.[Back to \(4\)](#)
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