

Nationalism and the Irish Party: Provincial Ireland, 1910–1916

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This is an ambitious and original book that brings to light a good deal of new material on nationalist politics in the Irish midlands between 1910 and 1916. Wheatley has adopted an original methodology – to explore five counties in what he calls 'middle Ireland' (Leitrim, Longford, Roscommon, Sligo and Westmeath) over the period between the general elections of 1910 and the Easter Rising of 1916. Most studies of provincial Ireland (by Paul Dillon, David Fitzpatrick and Peter Hart, for instance) have focused on a single county (Kerry, Clare and Cork, respectively), and Wheatley is to be congratulated for bravely departing from the norm and taking as his focus of study a larger group of counties or region. (1) This book also explores a relatively neglected period – that between 1910 and 1916 – and complements key works by Bew and others which cover the earlier 1890–1910 period, as well as influential studies by Hart and others that focus on the 1916–23 period. Like his mentor Paul Bew, Wheatley has opted to use newspapers as the main source for his study, and this book is largely based on his systematic reading of 18 provincial newspapers published in his five chosen counties.

The book begins by setting up a debate as to the nature of the Irish Party in provincial Ireland between 1910 and 1916. According to Wheatley, there are two main views of the state of the Irish Parliamentary Party in Ireland before the Rising. On the one hand, there are those historians who argue that the Irish Parliamentary Party was in a weakened and decayed state before the beginning of the Great War (Garvin, Lyons, and Rumpf and Hepburn). (2) And, on the other, there are those who suggest – as David Fitzpatrick does – that the Party remained 'vigorous and eclectic' and in a strong and representative position up to at least 1913 (Bew, Fitzpatrick and O'Day). (3) Wheatley characterises these divergent views as the 'rotten' or 'representative' hypotheses, and sets out to examine which model of IPP organisation best fits the evidence from 'middle Ireland'. This frames the discussion in the book well, and is followed by three general chapters that describe IPP organisation and ideology; then three chapters that investigate particular case studies (in Roscommon, Westmeath and Sligo); and finally four further general chapters taking the narrative up to 1916, followed by a strong and effective conclusion.

The book makes four main arguments that I will outline briefly here, and then go on to discuss in detail later in the review. First, Wheatley (following Philip Bull and Paul Bew) argues that the land question was largely resolved by the Wyndham Land Act of 1903. (4) According to Wheatley, this caused a substantial reduction in political activism in the Irish countryside (as farmers who had purchased their landholdings gave up political activity), and caused the small towns to replace the country as the centres of political activism in provincial Ireland. Second, that political conflicts in 'middle Ireland' between 1910 and 1916 were generally caused by personal disputes rather than ideological or class-based conflicts. Third, that the Irish Volunteer movement – far from bolstering the Irish Parliamentary Party's support base in 1913–14 (as David Fitzpatrick has suggested) actually superseded the Party as the dominant organisation in provincial Ireland on the eve of the Great War. And fourth, that the IPP was neither 'rotten' nor 'representative' in 1913, but that Redmond's Woodenbridge speech (on 20 September 1914), in which he pledged the support of the Volunteers to the British war effort, was a bridge too far for provincial nationalists. According to Wheatley, it was Redmond's support for the British war effort that fundamentally weakened the IPP in the eyes of provincial nationalists, so that the Party was insufficiently strong to respond to the crisis generated by the Easter Rising in 1916.

One of the central arguments of Wheatley's second chapter, 'The waning of popular politics' (see especially pp. 22–3), is that the Wyndham Land Act of 1903 largely resolved the Irish land question and greatly reduced popular support for the dominant Home Rule organisation in provincial Ireland, the United Irish League (UIL). It is argued that newly purchased farmers gave up their political activism and that the UIL fell into decline in what Wheatley describes as 'the departing tide of mass [political] enthusiasm in the countryside' (p. 32). However, Wheatley's own data suggests some problems with this analysis. Land purchase was a slow and drawn out process, and as late as 1912 – according to figures presented on p. 26 – only between about one third (32 per cent) and half (55 per cent) of the tenant farmers in 'middle Ireland' had purchased their holdings. This left between half and two thirds of the farmers in 'middle Ireland' still needing to purchase their land. Because agrarian grievances remained unsolved long after 1903, agrarian conflict remained significant in provincial Ireland between 1910 and 1916. Although Wheatley suggests that there was 'a clear and pronounced decline' (p. 24) in agrarian conflict, and that such disputes as did occur were 'related more to mopping-up operations than to any deep-seated anger' (p. 30), the volume of agrarian conflict remained high (see table 1). Admittedly, the Ranch War (1904–9) had witnessed particularly high rates of agrarian conflict, and there was some decline in agrarian conflict after 1909. But agrarian conflict continued to be significant in at least fifteen counties between 1909 and 1914 and – as the figures in table 1 demonstrate – the volume of agrarian conflict remained considerable (and fluctuating). Indeed, some of the contemporary sources that Wheatley cites confirm the ongoing importance of agrarian agitation. The County Inspector for Roscommon, for instance, observed in May 1912 that: 'Land is the great question in this county.' (p. 28) And the massive outbreak of agrarian conflict in Roscommon (and other parts of the west and the midlands) in 1920 suggests that the land question was far from resolved in 1903.

Table 1: Agrarian conflict in Ireland, 1907–1916 (5)

Year	Agrarian outrages	Cattle drives	Rent combinations (average per month)
1907	372	390	27
1908	576	681	

45

1909

397

200

36

1910

420

188

25

1911

324

114

17

1912

307

69

17

1913

190

55

8

1914

235

127

4

1915

183

36

1916

158

51

I would argue that the UIL did retain a significant role in provincial Irish life after 1903 (as an organisation that negotiated with landlords on behalf of tenants for land purchase). Indeed, the figures on UIL membership in 'middle Ireland' do not confirm the 'distinct slowing of the political pulse' (p. 41) that Wheatley suggests. Between December 1909 and December 1913, the membership of the UIL in the five counties did decline but only by two branches and six per cent of the total membership (from 193 to 191 branches, and from 24,462 to 23,057 members). Admittedly, some branches were more active than others and some were described by the police as 'nominal', but the police records do indicate that they continued to exist. Certainly, there is some evidence of UIL decline (skilfully researched and discussed by Wheatley) but I do not believe that the decline was as serious or as substantial as Wheatley suggests. This raises questions about some of the deductions that Wheatley makes based on his – to my mind – incorrect view that the land question was solved and the UIL was in irreversible decline. For instance, Wheatley makes two far-ranging observations about the nature of popular politics in provincial Ireland based on his questionable reading of

the state of the land question. First, that 'the withdrawal of many farmers from active politics meant that the balance of political life shifted further to the towns' (p. 32). And second, that 'the departing tide of mass enthusiasm in the countryside left exposed the grubbier mechanics of local patronage, manipulation, and faction' (p. 32). These are intriguing hypotheses but they require further investigation to be either proved or disproved. Indeed, the second hypothesis – that local manipulation and jockeying for position became the dominant issue in provincial Irish politics after 1910 – is one of the central arguments in the book, and I will now move on to a fuller discussion of that point.

At the centre of the book are three in-depth local studies of Roscommon, Westmeath and Sligo which present an enormous amount of new information and raise many important questions. For Wheatley, the disputes that he describes in provincial Ireland were generated largely by personal rivalries or the 'pursuit of local influence and status' (p. 111) while most of them were not 'in any way ideological' (p. 106). In chapter 5, for instance, Wheatley describes the arrival of Father Thomas Cummins in Roscommon town in 1910, where he immediately engaged in a dispute with the town UIL branch. The ostensible cause of the conflict was the nomination of a United Irish League candidate for the county council election: Cummins wanted one candidate, and the town UIL branch another. In the event, the town UIL won out and put their man forward. Wheatley, therefore, concludes that the basis of the conflict was 'a personal snub' when Cummins's preferred candidate did not get the nomination. However, as Wheatley explains, Cummins promoted a radical agrarian policy in Roscommon. In 1911, he founded the Roscommon Associated Estates Committee (RAEC) in the town (and the rural hinterland of the town) which aimed to force the sale of estates (under the Wyndham Land Act) and also to redistribute grazing land among the small tenant farmers in the region. Moreover, Cummins referred to the members of the town UIL as 'land-grabbers', suggesting that he regarded them as graziers or the supporters of grazing interests. It seems possible, therefore, that the conflict between Cummins and the Roscommon UIL branch was ideological and perhaps based on Cummins's support for land redistribution, which was not as eagerly supported by the local UIL. I would have liked to have seen Wheatley investigate this dispute (and other local disputes) more fully, and to explore the social composition of the RAEC (officers and rank and file) and the Roscommon town UIL to see if each organisation appealed to different social groups in the locality (which might suggest the ideological/social nature of the conflict). What ostensibly appears to have been a personal dispute may have been based on wider social, political and agrarian disagreements.

Wheatley's treatment of the Volunteers is one of the strongest and most important aspects of his book. In chapter 9, he challenges David Fitzpatrick's influential interpretation of the Irish Volunteers as bolstering the support of the pre-War Irish Parliamentary Party (see chapter 3 of his *Politics and Irish life, 1913–1921*). Wheatley convincingly argues that far from the IPP absorbing the Volunteers, it was the Volunteers that were absorbing the representatives of the IPP. This is a key point as it suggests that the IPP was not in quite as rude a state of health in 1914 as Fitzpatrick suggests. The discussion here would have been complemented by a reading of the Bureau of Military History witness statements (released in March 2003). Indeed, the witness statements of Volunteers in 'middle Ireland' would undoubtedly have illuminated the relationship between the IPP and the Volunteers even further.

In conclusion, Wheatley returns to the dilemma posed in the introduction: was the pre-war IPP 'rotten' or 'representative'? In his final chapter, Wheatley makes the critical argument that the IPP was neither in a state of decay nor unrepresentative of provincial nationalism in early 1914. Rather, the IPP's decline after 1914 was inaugurated by Redmond's support for the British war effort. This caused the Irish Volunteers (later the Redmondite National Volunteers) to fall into a steep decline, and led many provincial nationalists to reject the lead of the IPP. As the war progressed and recruiting and conscription became critical issues, the identification of the IPP with recruiting was the critical factor in its loss of support. Perhaps more even than the Rising, Redmond's support for recruiting meant that he ceased to represent provincial nationalist opinion and so the Party was in a fundamentally weakened state even before the Easter Rising. In this context, Sinn Féin, which had opposed recruiting to the British army since its formation in 1905, became the dominant nationalist organisation between 1916 and 1918, as it appealed to the anti-recruiting sentiments of provincial nationalists. Wheatley's discussion of the Volunteers and Redmond's response to the Great War are

extremely useful in helping us to understand the collapse of the IPP at the 1918 general election.

Wheatley deserves to be congratulated for his extensive reading of the provincial Irish press during this period: he has brought a massive amount of new material to light and also raised a number of intriguing questions that will no doubt inspire future researchers. This book – as the best history does – raises debates, and, as I have outlined, I would interpret some of the processes described in the book rather differently. This is as it should be, and it is a sign of the healthy state of Irish historiography that there is beginning to be respectful and productive debate about some of the key questions regarding the origins and dynamics of the Irish revolution (1916–23). Wheatley's work is innovative in its methodology and covers an impressive range of social groups in Irish society (shopkeepers, farmers, town tenants, labourers, and so on). To my mind, some of the questions that Wheatley raises can only be answered properly through more in-depth studies than he attempts. In particular, I think that the analysis of the local disputes would have been improved by a broader study of the social composition of the members of the UIL, AOH, RAEC, and so on. A full-scale analysis of the social composition of the various competing groups – at both officer and rank and file level – would have improved this book, and facilitated a better understanding of the origins of local conflicts (be they personal, ideological, or class-based). But this is an impressive and well-written book that will become essential reading for anyone interested in Irish society before the revolution.

Notes

1. Paul Dillon, 'Labour and politics in Kerry, 1879–1916' (University College Dublin, PhD thesis, 2004); David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish life, 1913–1921: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution*; and Peter Hart, *The IRA and its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916–1923* (Oxford, 1998). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Tom Garvin, *The Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics* (Dublin, 1981); F. S. L. Lyons, *The Irish Parliamentary Party, 1890–1910* (1951); and Erhard Rumpf and A. C. Hepburn, *Nationalism and Socialism in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Liverpool, 1977). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Paul Bew, *Ideology and the Irish Question: Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism, 1912–1916* (Oxford, 1994); Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life, 1913–1921*; and Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule, 1867–1921* (Manchester, 1998). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Philip Bull, *Land, Politics and Nationalism: A Study of the Irish Land Question* (Dublin, 1996); and Paul Bew, *Conflict and Conciliation in Ireland, 1890–1910: Parnellites and Radical Agrarians* (Oxford, 1987). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland, 1891–1921* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 186, 239. [Back to \(5\)](#)

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