

Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland 1891-1921

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Fergus Campbell's book explores the relationship between agrarian conflict and nationalist politics in the period from 1891 to 1921. Although the study focuses primarily on the five counties of Connaught, with a particular emphasis on east Galway and especially the Craughwell area, provincial and local events are located in a national context. In order to achieve this Campbell adopts what he calls a 'concertina motion: shifting from the wide-angle shot to the close-up, and then back again (sometimes within a single chapter)' (p. 5).

The work is essentially a study of the United Irish League (UIL) and Sinn Féin during the period. The stated aim is to 'write the history of Irish agrarian and nationalist movements from below' (p. 7). Much emphasis is placed on the examination of popular political activity and the evolution of nationalist politics at a local level. This is accomplished through a detailed and meticulous investigation of local politics and agrarian activity in east Galway. The author is anxious to explore the relationship between land and revolution through the eyes and experiences of the nationalist rank-and-file. The actions of Irish political leaders or events in Dublin and Westminster do not take centre stage.

As the birthplace of the Land League (1879) and of the UIL (1898) the province of Connaught is an obvious choice for a study of this kind. The three principal periods of agrarian agitation in the early decades of the 20th century, the compulsory land purchase campaign of 1901–3, the Ranch War of 1904–8 and the unrest of the revolutionary period of 1917–23, were most virulent in the province and are central to the narrative.

The book adopts a chronological format although a thematic approach is taken in the various chapters.

Chapter one explores the nature of everyday life in the west of Ireland in the final decade of the 19th century. The social and economic conditions of the population and the prevalence of widespread poverty are brought to the fore. Campbell identifies the unequal distribution of land in the province as one of the principal causes of poverty. The majority of the population were huddled on small uneconomic holdings whilst a minority of graziers occupied a disproportionate amount of land. Many graziers were publicans or shopkeepers, the main sources of credit in rural Ireland, and thus their influence could often be immense. William O'Brien's indignation and anger over the system of land holding in the west led him to found the UIL in 1898 with the principal aim being land redistribution.

Chapters two and three deal predominantly with the UIL. Chapter two traces the origins of the 1903 Land Act or the Wyndham Act as it was better known. The UIL's campaign of agrarian agitation for compulsory land purchase, in the south and west of Ireland, is credited with laying the foundations for the Land Conference and the subsequent 1903 act. Campbell argues that the UIL agitation and the coercive response it provoked from the government have not been sufficiently acknowledged by historians. The rise and growth of the UIL are systematically traced and examined from its humble beginnings in Co. Mayo in 1898 to its establishment as the official organisation of the Irish Parliamentary Party. By scrutinising the make-up and activity of the movement in east Galway the nature and extent of the agrarian agitation of 1901–3 are revealed.

Chapter three traces the role of the UIL in the Ranch War from 1904 to 1908 and the response of the nationalist community to the Wyndham Act. Campbell is eager to differentiate his bottom-up approach to studying the Ranch War from the high politics approach he attributes to the works of Paul Bew, David Seth Jones and Philip Bull.⁽¹⁾ This section of the monograph shows how the UIL found a new purpose after 1903 by agitating to ensure that tenants received reasonable purchase prices under the Wyndham Act. The utilisation of rent strikes and later cattle-driving during the Ranch War, to ensure that the landlords' untenanted land was sold along with the tenanted estate so it could be redistributed, gave a new impetus to the UIL. This chapter also provides a valuable insight into the rise of Sinn Féin and how their policy of absenteeism provided an apparently viable alternative to the Irish Parliamentary Party's alliance with the Liberals especially after the rejection of the Irish Council Bill in 1907. Campbell convincingly argues that Sinn Féin's support for radical agrarianism forced John Redmond and the leaders of the Irish Parliamentary Party to row in behind the Ranch War agitation, which prior to the Irish Council Bill fiasco had been pushed by nationalist MPs such as Laurence Ginnell and David Sheehy, in order to counteract the growth of Sinn Féin.

Chapter four investigates the UIL court system and the 'law of the league' which have received scant attention from historians. Throughout large areas of Connaught and Munster these courts claimed authority over agrarian matters and land disputes. A thorough investigation of the role played by the UIL courts in the implementation of its objectives is carried out, while the organisation, procedural norms and decisions of the various courts are dealt with in considerable detail.

In chapter five Campbell openly challenges David Fitzpatrick's conclusions in his study of Co. Clare ⁽²⁾, showing how this model does not necessarily apply to Co. Galway. Whereas Fitzpatrick found that there was considerable continuity between the membership of Sinn Féin and the UIL in Co. Clare, Campbell found that rather than emerging from the home rule movement in east Galway, Sinn Féin had its roots in a tradition of radical agrarianism epitomised by Tom Kenny's secret society. The case study of the Craughwell UIL provides some illuminating insights into the make-up of a typical branch while the analysis of the split between the Kennyite and Hallanite factions is most revealing. In fact, Campbell's analysis of the career of Tom Kenny and his secret society is one of the most interesting aspects of the work. Kenny and his followers, mainly smaller tenants and agricultural labourers, were in favour of a more radical agrarianism. This resulted in conflict with the local UIL, which contained many of the Catholic elite such as shopkeepers, graziers and publicans who, in order to protect their position and property, had joined the organisation to control the radical tendencies of groups such as the Kennyites. Therefore, the Kennyites gradually developed strong links with Sinn Féin due to its willingness to accept a more radical form of agrarianism.

Campbell's reconstruction of the 1916 rebellion in Galway is one of the most detailed yet for provincial Ireland. He shrewdly asserts that the rising in Galway was envisaged as a serious military struggle and not simply motivated by the notion of a blood sacrifice. Indeed, the rising in the county is viewed as a continuation of earlier agrarian struggles although influenced by distrust of the local Protestant elite and class tensions in agricultural society.

Chapter six takes a similar line to other recent works, such as Terence Dooley's *'The Land for the People': the Land Question in Independent Ireland* (3), in challenging the orthodoxy that there was no social element to the Irish revolution. Campbell's findings demonstrate that in Galway there was a considerable difference in the social and generational background of the UIL and Sinn Féin members. Indeed, the experiences of Kevin O'Shiel as the Dáil Land Commissioner during the revolutionary period highlight the agrarian aspect of the revolution, particularly in Connaught.

The author has done a great service for historians by locating in the National Archives the Royal Irish Constabulary monthly reports for the period 1903 to 1908, which are missing from the official CO 904 series in London. Likewise, his location and utilisation of six collections of privately held letters and diaries in Connaught and his use of the more recently released Bureau of Military History archives is admirable. However, extensive use could have been made of the annual reports of the Irish Land Commission, the Congested Districts Board or the Estates Commission between 1891 and 1921. These annual reports contain a wealth of information and could only have enhanced the study.

One of the strengths of Campbell's work is the detailed analysis of the growth and social composition of the UIL and Sinn Féin, particularly in the study of the local branches in Galway. Campbell's extensive use of census returns and land valuation books is commendable. However, the social composition of these groups could have been given even further analysis by examining the parliamentary returns of advances, these being government loans to tenant-purchasers repaid by an annuity, for the land acts of 1891, 1896, 1903 and 1909. This would have allowed a number of questions to be assessed. For example, what effect did land purchase have on UIL membership? Was a tenant farmer more likely to be a member of Sinn Féin if he had not purchased his land?

Campbell rightly claims that insufficient recognition has been given to the UIL agitation for compulsory purchase between 1901 and 1903, which helped lay the foundations for the Land Conference and the subsequent 1903 Land Act. His dissection of how the campaign operated is also noteworthy. Although Campbell acknowledges that the 'architect of the demand for compulsory purchase was T. W. Russell' (p. 47), little mention is made of the compulsory purchase campaign of 1900–3 in Ulster orchestrated by the unionist MP for South Tyrone. Russell's campaign not only ensured that Ireland was united in its demand for compulsory purchase but it also threatened to split Ulster unionism. Russell has gained more prominence and relevance in recent times owing to the works of certain historians.(4) There is growing evidence to suggest that not only was the compulsory purchase movement initiated in Ulster but that the origins of the Land Conference and the 1903 Land Act lay in the parallel campaigns of T. W. Russell and the UIL.

The author correctly identifies that the 1903 Land Act created the conditions for the perpetuation of agrarian agitation by failing to ensure that the terms of purchase, between landlords and tenants, would not be a source of contention. The little known use of rent combinations in the west of Ireland after 1903, to force landlords to sell their tenanted and untenanted land at a price that the tenants considered reasonable, is revealed. Analysis of the returns of advances to tenant-purchasers under the 1903 Land Act would have enabled the purchase price to be calculated on estates where rent combinations had existed prior to sale. Whether or not the combinations succeeded in their objective of obtaining reduced prices could have been ascertained.

Campbell provides a compelling case that the Ranch War was 'primarily a conflict between landlord and tenant, and that the intra-tenant hostility between smallholder and grazier was a subsidiary aspect of this broader struggle' (p. 86). However, a more detailed examination of the provisions of the 1903 Land Act, for

example, would have revealed the cause of much of the unrest in the agricultural community during the Ranch War and allowed a more nuanced interpretation. Under clause two of the act [3 Ed. VII, c. 37.], a tenant on an estate being sold, his son, the tenant of a holding not exceeding £5 in valuation in the neighbourhood of the estate and evicted tenants were all eligible for a parcel of untenanted land where it was sold along with an estate. Under the 1906 Labourers Act [6 Ed. VIII, c. 7.], an agricultural labourer was added to the list of those eligible. To qualify, the labourer had to have been resident on the estate or in the neighbourhood for at least five years prior to the advance. For the first time members of the agricultural community, who were not occupiers of land, were eligible for a farm where untenanted land was sold along with an estate. By legitimising the claims of these groups, especially the sons of tenants who were landless men, the act triggered an agitation to ensure that landlords sold their tenanted and untenanted estates. Many landlords opposed the sale of such lands as they made a lucrative profit renting it on the eleven-month system. Land let by landlords on an eleven-month lease was not subject to the rent-fixing provisions of the land courts (established under the 1881 Land Act to regulate the fixing of rents) as they only dealt with tenancies of a year or greater. The system was quite popular among landlords as the rent was determined by the market demand and not by the land courts.

While Campbell's work is obviously keen to address the experiences of the nationalist rank-and-file, little attention is paid to the position of landlords or their organisations. East Galway contained some prominent resident landlords such as Lord Ashtown, the earl of Westmeath and Lord Clonbrock, who was very active in the Irish Landowners' Convention. More extensive use of the British parliamentary debates, especially those involving landlords from the west of Ireland and particularly Co. Galway which took place in the House of Lords during the period 1904 to 1908, would have revealed the fears, anxieties and frustrations of this class.⁽⁵⁾ Also, an extensive employment of estate papers would have undoubtedly complemented Campbell's findings and would have provided a much more rounded picture.

While the heightened UIL agitation in 1908 certainly contributed to a significant increase in sales in that year there is another more obvious reason which is not mentioned. Under the terms of the 1903 act every landlord who sold received a 12% cash bonus based on the purchase money of the estate. The 12% bonus that was given upon sale was up for consideration after five years and was thus guaranteed only until 1 November 1908. Correctly identifying that the bonus was to be reduced and fearing that it might be abolished altogether, Irish landlords rushed to take advantage of the act before the deadline. With a Liberal government in power from early 1906 and a new land bill in the pipeline, the generous terms of the Wyndham Act looked set to disappear. The report of the estates commissioners for the year ending 31 March 1909 highlighted the frenzied efforts of landlords to lodge their sales applications in time to avail of the 12% bonus. Indeed, in November 1908 landlords' fears were confirmed when the bonus was reduced from 12% to 3%.

The argument is made that it was the UIL agitation from below which brought about the introduction of the 1909 Land Act and that the act 'was not introduced primarily to amend the financial provisions of the Wyndham Act' (p. 122). While the delay in the distribution of the bonus and purchase money of estates sold is mentioned there is little attempt to get to the heart of the Wyndham Act's considerable financial difficulties. By 1908 it was clear to nationalists, unionists and the Liberal government that land purchase could not proceed for much longer under the Wyndham Act. The financing for its operation had proved decidedly unsound. Incidental charges, as a result of the act's operation, had not been taken into consideration and, as a result, the burden fell on the county councils and ratepayers of the country to pay them.

For the duration of the 1903 act's operation there was a depression in the stock market which ensured that the guaranteed land stock issued to raise the actual cash for advances to tenants-purchasers was never issued at anywhere near par. The cost of issuing stock at a discount had a snowballing effect so that even by 1907 the deficit had reached £2,800,000.⁽⁶⁾ If land purchase had continued under the terms of the Wyndham Act the ratepayers of Ireland would have been forced to cover the costs of stock being issued below par, as had been the case with the incidental charges, because the fund set aside to cover the losses, the Irish Development Grant, was almost exhausted. In reality, the act had been structured in such a way that

incidental charges and the cost of issuing land stock at a discount was taken out of Irish monies and not from the imperial exchequer. Therefore, without new legislation in 1909 land purchase simply could not have continued without incurring significant expense on the Irish ratepayer.

In addition, the question of the bonus was equally problematic. The terms of the 1903 act had only provided a sum of £12,000,000 to cover the 12% cash bonus to landlords. Augustine Birrell, Liberal chief secretary from 1907 to 1916, discarded George Wyndham's original estimation of 1903 that £100,000,000 would suffice to cover advances to tenant-purchasers under the act, for in his estimation the cost would be somewhere in the region of £180,000,000.⁽⁷⁾ The bonus fund was actually increased under the 1909 Land Act but it was distributed on a graduated scale and not fixed at 12%. A number of parliamentary papers, such as the 1908 report of the departmental committee appointed to enquire into Irish land purchase finance, ([Cd. 4005] H.C. 1908, xxiii, 267), or the return of guaranteed 2 ¾ % stock issues under the 1903 Land Act, ((279) H.C. 1909, I, 343), exist which emphasise the act's financial problems. Moreover, the 1917 Irish Convention, which was more or less a direct response to the 1916 rebellion, had a sub-committee devoted to the land purchase question and to the continued financial fallout from the Wyndham Act, which would have been worthy of examination.

Campbell's work is a welcome contribution to Irish historiography. It provides further evidence that there was a significant social element to the Irish revolution. Rather than being viewed primarily as a revision of existing studies, Campbell's work should be seen as another welcome contribution to the debate on the social aspect of the period. Similar locally based studies will undoubtedly enhance and develop our understanding of the social component of the Irish revolution.

Notes

1. Paul Bew, *Conflict and Conciliation in Ireland, 1890–1910: Parnellites and Radical Agrarians* (Oxford, 1987); David Seth Jones, *Graziers, Land Reform and Political Conflict in Ireland* (Washington, 1995); and Philip Bull, *Land, Politics and Nationalism: a Study of the Irish Land Question* (Dublin, 1996).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish life, 1913–1921: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution* (Dublin, 1977).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Terence Dooley, *'The Land for the People': the Land Question in Independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004).
[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See Alvin Jackson, *The Ulster Party: Irish Unionists in the House of Commons 1884–1911* (New York, 1989); idem, 'Irish unionism and the Russellite threat 1894–1906', *Irish Historical Studies*, xxv, 100 (Nov. 1987), 376–404; Andrew Gailey, *Ireland and the Death of Kindness: the Experience of Constructive Unionism 1890–1905* (Cork, 1987); Paul Bew, *Conflict and Conciliation in Ireland 1890–1910: Parnellites and Radical Agrarians* (Oxford, 1987); James Loughlin, 'T. W. Russell, the tenant-farmer interest, and progressive unionism in Ulster, 1886–1900', *Eire-Ireland*, xxv, 1 (1996), 44–63; Patrick Cosgrove, 'T. W. Russell and the compulsory land purchase campaign in Ulster, 1900–03', *Irish Historical Studies* (forthcoming).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See, for example, *Hansard* 4, cxxxiv, 876–9, (10 May 1904); cxxxv, 330–36 (19 May 1903); cxxxv, 1419–35 (13 June 1904) and cxlix, 687–718 (14 July 1905).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *Report of the Departmental Committee appointed to enquire into Irish Land Purchase Finance in connection with the provision of funds required for the purposes of the Irish Land Act, 1903*, 7, [Cd. 4005] H.C. 1908, xxiii, 267.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. *Hansard* 4, cxcvi, 1811–3 (23 Nov. 1908).[Back to \(7\)](#)

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