

Virginia Crossman

Building the Nation: Local Administration in Rural Ireland 1850–1920

1. Introduction

During the second half of the nineteenth century Irish tenant farmers assumed an increasingly important role within both the rural economy and nationalist politics. The land question provided the driving force behind the emergence of nationalism as a mass movement, channelling popular grievances into a direct assault on landlordism. In resisting this assault, landlords were assisted by a British government anxious to maintain property rights and uphold the authority of the law. By the end of the century landlords had largely abandoned the field, and the nationalist movement was concentrating its efforts on mounting an effective challenge to British rule. The nature and progress of this challenge at the national level has been examined by a number of historians who have explored the interaction between the land and national questions and the ways in which each shaped the other. Far less attention has been paid to the operation of nationalist politics at the local level. How did local activists forge a sense of national identity and social citizenship that encompassed almost the whole of rural society and included groups such as women and labourers that were marginalised from the formal political process?

Ireland’s closeness to Britain and her participation in the political and intellectual developments that shaped the British nation were reflected in the focus of early nineteenth-century Irish nationalists on a constitutional monarchy, parliamentarianism and democracy. The nature of socio-economic relations in Ireland were, however, to have a significant impact on nationalism, facilitating its transformation in the later nineteenth century into a mass movement that would share some of the characteristics of the populist political movements that emerged in eastern Europe at around the same time. In calling on the people as a legitimating force, whilst claiming to be safeguarding the character and traditions

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of rural society, Irish nationalists had much in common with the leaders of the peasant-based nationalist movements of Serbia and Croatia. In his study of nations and nationalism, E. J. Hobsbawm identifies the period from 1870 to 1918 as a period of transformation, which saw political campaigns based on the national idea evolve into popular mass movements. The political pre-condition for this, Hobsbawm suggests, was «the democratization of politics in a growing number of states, and the creation of the modern, administrative, citizen-mobilizing and citizen-influencing state.» Ireland fits neatly into this framework, with the 1880s and 1890s seeing the establishment of the Home Rule movement as a clearly-defined parliamentary grouping with a well-organized popular base, while the gradual democratization of local government provided nationalists with their first experience of self-rule. But as Hobsbawn reminds us,

«the rise of mass politics helps to reformulate the question of support for nationalism rather than to answer it. What we need to discover is what precisely national slogans meant in politics, and whether they meant the same to different social constituencies, how they changed, and under what circumstances they combined or were incompatible with other slogans that might mobilize the citizenry, how they prevailed over them or failed to do so.»

This article explores the way in which Irish nationalists extended and maintained popular support for the movement through the exercise of administrative power in rural areas.

The inability of Irish landlords to maintain their monopoly of economic and political power owed much to their own failings. W. E. Vaughan has convincingly argued that the «essential weakness of the land system was not its oppressiveness but the fact that landlords became less useful to tenants as the century progressed». Unlike their English counterparts, Irish landlords failed to provide their tenants with practical benefits. At the same time the nationalist movement succeeded in establishing itself as a major source of power and authority in rural Ireland. The role of nationalists within local administration was crucial in this respect. As they took control first of Irish poor law boards and later of county and district councils, nationalists were able to demonstrate their capacity for self-government and to utilise their powers to assist those upon whose support the success of the wider movement depended. Before examining this process in detail, it is important to give a brief overview of the social and economic changes that provided the backdrop to political developments.


3 E. J. Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality (Cambridge, 1990), 110.

2. Economic and Social Change in Post-Famine Ireland

While few historians now regard the Great Famine (1845–1850) as a turning point in Irish history that fundamentally altered the economic and political landscape and propelled Ireland into the modern world, all acknowledge that the Famine had a profound impact on social, economic and political developments in Ireland. By accelerating changes that were already occurring, it transformed the economic and social structure of rural Ireland. Population levels fell dramatically during the Famine and continued to fall for the rest of the century, the result, primarily, of consistently high levels of emigration. Having reached over 8 million prior to the Famine, population figures had dropped to 4.4 million by 1911. With the loss of large numbers of small-holders and cottiers, subsistence agriculture declined in the post-Famine period, while the size of the average landholding increased. In 1845 holdings of between 1 and 15 acres made up 55 percent of farms. By 1853 this figure had fallen to 44 percent and by 1902 to 37 percent. At the same time, holdings over 15 acres increased from 31 percent of farms in 1845 to 51 percent in 1902. Another major change in the composition of rural society was the erosion of the agricultural labour force. The number of labourers fell by 20 percent between 1841 and 1851 and continued to decline in subsequent decades. Samuel Clark estimates that the proportion of labourers within the male agricultural labour force as a whole fell from 56 percent in 1841 to 38 percent in 1881, while that of farmers and farmers’ sons rose from 42 percent to 60 percent.

Yet despite the decrease in their numbers, the circumstances of agricultural labourers appear to have improved less quickly and less noticeably than those of farmers, for although wage levels increased, so did living expenses. Similarly, while housing conditions were generally better than they had been before the Famine, they remained poor and a major source of grievance. As their numbers increased, medium and large tenant farmers came to dominate rural society and rural politics. In order to maintain their position, they needed to hold onto the source of their power, land. Impartible inheritance thus became the norm in rural areas, leaving non-inheriting children with a stark choice between remaining on the family farm as an unpaid farm servant, seeking alternative employment within Ireland, or emigrating. The high levels of emigration in the post-Famine period testify to the limited opportunities available in Ireland. Levels of emigration were highest in those parts of the country where there were few employment opportunities outside agriculture. The prospects for women were particularly bleak. Female employment in both agriculture and industry contracted

over the second half of the nineteenth century as less intensive farming spread and Irish industry succumbed to competition from Britain. Women responded by emigrating in numbers that, unusually, matched those of men. Those who remained retreated into the home where, Joanna Bourke has argued, they could exercise a level of independence and control rarely available to them outside.

Changes in land-holding were accompanied by changes in the type of farming undertaken. Pasture replaced tillage in many parts of the country, and where crops were grown these were often for feeding animals. The acreage under hay, for example, doubled in the period from 1850 to 1910. In shifting from tillage to pasture, Irish farmers were responding to both internal and external factors. Depopulation meant that there was less demand within Ireland, as well as less labour available for intensive arable farming. At the same time, the growing demand for meat and dairy products across western Europe, and particularly in England, boosted the prices of these commodities relative to cereals. The spread of pasture farming is reflected in the rapid growth in livestock numbers. The total number of cattle on Irish farms increased from 1.4 million in 1850 to 3.8 million in 1870, while numbers of sheep rose from 1.9 million to 4.3 million, and numbers of pigs from 0.9 million to 1.5 million. Irish output and productivity levels, though showing only low levels of growth in the second half of the nineteenth century, were better than those in Britain, and better than the European average. Irish farmers were, moreover, exporting an increasing share of their produce. Total agricultural exports doubled in the period from the late 1850s to 1914, while imports of agricultural produce more than tripled. If Irish agriculture was becoming more commercialised, the Irish economy as a whole was becoming more modernised. Communications improved, the retail and banking sectors expanded and the population became more literate. There was a general improvement in living standards due to a combination of rising prices, improving standards of housing and health, declining pauperism, and increasing literacy.

3. The Land War

The benefits of economic growth were not evenly distributed. While large farmers and farm labourers were better off by the end of the nineteenth century than they had been in 1850, small farmers were probably worse off. Modernisation was
most notable in the north and east. In the west of the country the number of small holdings remained high and many people continued to rely on the potato as their main crop. These areas found it more difficult to weather the economic storms of the post-Famine period, when harvest failures coincided with troughs in economic activity. Resentment at the unequal distribution of rural prosperity combined with fears of a return to the straightened circumstances of earlier decades, gave the initial impetus to the land war. At its most basic level, the land war was a contest between landlords and tenants over land tenure. Economic depression and falling agricultural prices in the late 1870s prompted tenants to demand first more favourable rental terms and greater security of tenure, and subsequently the right to purchase their holdings. But it is unlikely that the land question would have assumed the significance that it did in Ireland had it not been linked to the question of Irish governance. Realising the mobilising power of tenant discontent over the land question, nationalist politicians placed themselves at the head of a movement committed to achieving both land reform and self government for Ireland.

The land war can best be understood as encompassing the period from the establishment of the Land League in 1879 to the passage of the 1903 Land Act, which introduced a heavily subsidised land purchase scheme that opened the way for the large-scale transfer of land from landlords to tenants. The main phases of the war were the Land League agitation (1879–1882), the period of the Plan of Campaign (1886–1890) and the United Irish League campaign (1898–1903), each of which was characterised by a combination of agrarian agitation and formal political activity focused on parliament. Each phase was distinct with its own regional and organisational specificity, but all shared certain characteristics. Agrarian agitation was aimed at extracting concessions from landlords whilst also maintaining communal solidarity. The methods adopted to achieve this included rent strikes and boycotts. Anyone who rented land from which the previous tenant had been evicted, or who either worked for or provided goods and services to an evicting landlord was liable to be threatened, boycotted and sometimes assaulted. Attempts to bring the perpetrators of such attacks to justice were generally frustrated by the inability of the police to obtain information as to their identity.

Such actions, Philip Bull has suggested, represented «the continuance of many aspects of a pre-modern rural economy». Pre-Famine Ireland had been marked by high levels of agrarian violence, much of it perpetrated by secret societies. The objectives of agrarian violence were primarily defensive and conservative, aiming to maintain traditional practices governing the usage and occupation of land, and the employment of labour, and to prevent excessive financial demands, whether in the form of rent, tithes or priests’ dues. The traditions of agrarian secret societies

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16 Bull, Land, Politics and Nationalism, 95–96.
17 V. Crossman, Politics, Law and Order in Nineteenth-Century Ireland (Dublin, 1996).
18 Bull, Land, Politics and Nationalism, 119.
are evident in the Land League agitation and the subsequent land campaigns
which, as Bull observes, «display the survival and re-expression of a still funda-
mental identification with a tradition of protest based on an alternative moral
legitimacy». But it would be wrong to see the land agitation as an atavistic resort
to traditional methods of social protest. In aims, structures and scale, the Land
League and its successors manifested the characteristics of modern political
organisations. Moreover, in contrast to the pre-Famine period, the Catholic Church
was prepared to endorse the aspirations and the activities of late nineteenth-
century agrarian agitators, thereby reinforcing the authority and legitimacy of the
movement. The Church also provided local leadership. Many Land and National
League branches, for example, were chaired by priests.

The land agitation was executed by a broad alliance of social groups that inclu-
ded substantial tenant farmers, rural businessmen, small-holders and labourers.
Since these groups had different interests and priorities, the ability of the Land
League and its successors in building and maintaining this alliance could not be
taken for granted. Their success in this regard depended on a number of factors.
First, the creation of clearly identifiable enemies in Irish landlords and British
rulers against whom the people could unite in opposition, and on whom all the
problems of Ireland could be blamed. Second, the adoption of tactics that
combined traditional forms of social protest with modern methods of political
campaigning, thus strengthening associational identity whilst maximising
political pressure. Communally-based activities such as boycotting operated along-
side the machinery of a national political organisation. Third, the establishment of
institutional structures that could deliver practical benefits and establish the
movement as a credible alternative to the British government. While the re-
mainder of this article focuses on the last of these factors, reference to the other
two will be made where appropriate.

4. Poor Law Boards, Politics and Prestige

The first half of the nineteenth century had seen the poor law board gradually
eclipse the grand jury as the primary organ of rural administration. First
introduced in 1838, poor law boards were composed partly of guardians elected by
the ratepayers and partly of local magistrates sitting ex officio. The boards were
entrusted with a wide range of responsibilities in addition to their management of
the workhouse and the distribution of relief. Administration of local dispensaries
was transferred from grand juries to poor law boards in the 1850s, and the latter
became the administering authorities under the health and safety legislation of the

19 Ibid.
20 E. Larkin, The Roman Catholic Church and the
Creation of the Modern Irish State 1878–1886 (Dub-
lin, 1975).
21 J. O’Shea, Priests, Politics and Society in post-Fa-
mire Ireland: A Study of County Tipperary 1850–
1891 (Dublin, 1983).
1860s and 1870s. The increasing importance of the poor law system within local government is reflected in levels of local expenditure. The level of county cess, raised by the grand jury, rose steeply in the first half of the nineteenth century but remained fairly static in the second half, while poor law expenditure doubled.\textsuperscript{22}

In the early decades of the poor law system, the majority of boards of guardians were dominated by landowners or their agents. This situation was to change in the 1880s as a consequence of the radicalisation of rural politics that took place during the years of the Land League campaign. Key figures within the Land League, including Charles Stewart Parnell, were fierce critics of the system of local government in Ireland arguing that local affairs should be in the hands of people who commanded the confidence of the governed.\textsuperscript{23} During the 1880s poor law elections were increasingly contested as part of the national campaign for self government, and elected guardians began to take control of a growing number of boards. William L. Feingold estimated that 88 percent of all board offices – chair, vice-chair and deputy vice-chair – were held by landlords or their agents in 1877. By 1886 this figure had dropped to 50 percent.\textsuperscript{24} The resulting shift in power on many poor law boards was to range elected guardians seeking to protect the interests of tenants and advance the cause of Irish nationalism, against ex-officio guardians seeking to protect the interests of landlords and defend the Union.

Membership of a poor law board brought access to power and influence. Guardians had considerable patronage at their disposal in terms of jobs and contracts, as well as control over local expenditure on matters that directly affected people’s lives such as water and bewage services. Poor law guardians were thus significant figures in the local community. As W. E. Vaughan notes, «if the use of the abbreviation ‹PLG › in petitions and newspaper reports is an indication of social prestige», then guardians «had considerable prestige».\textsuperscript{25} Indeed, Samuel Clark has suggested that tenant victories on poor law boards in the 1880s were «largely prestigious», arguing that the assault on the boards was undertaken less for pragmatic reasons than «because it accorded unprecedented status in the local community to the shopkeepers and large farmers who came to manage these government bodies so recently under the patronizing rule of the landed elite».\textsuperscript{26} While prestige clearly was important, this underestimates the extent to which local activists sought control of the poor law boards in order to utilise the power of the boards to their own ends.

Control of the boards had both symbolic and practical value to the nationalist movement. Victory was welcomed as a demonstration of popular support and as

\textsuperscript{22} V. Crossman, \textit{Local Government in Nineteenth-Century Ireland} (Belfast, 1994), 40.  
\textsuperscript{25} W. E. Vaughan, \textit{Landlords and Tenants in Mid-Victorian Ireland} (Oxford, 1994), 203.  
\textsuperscript{26} Clark, \textit{Social Origins of the Irish Land War}, 329.
a sign of things to come. As the nationalist weekly *United Ireland* declared in 1882, poor law administration was «the first rung of the ladder of national self-government. Win at the Poor Law Boards, and we will presently win at the Castle». Celebrating his election as chair of the Westport Board of Guardians, J. J. Louden maintained that in electing a board that was «essentially and intrinsically national», the people of County Mayo had «risen to national manhood and stand up today as freemen determined they will have the last of their rights». The growing influence of elected guardians from the late 1870s led to a more open and accessible style of poor law administration. Instead of being held in private, as had generally been the case earlier in the century, most board meetings were now open to members of the press and the public. With detailed reports of board proceedings appearing in local and national newspapers, the opinions and pronouncements of poor law guardians reached a large audience. The significance of this for the maintenance of political solidarity should not be underestimated. When a Kilrush guardian declared in 1887, to general approbation, that «no poor law guardian ought to drink or converse with an enemy of our cause», he was sending a message beyond the boardroom. Poor law guardians made the most of the opportunities open to them to promote nationalist campaigns. A regular feature of board meetings throughout the period of the land war was the introduction of resolutions supportive of the Land or National or United Irish League, commending the movement’s leaders, or condemning the actions of landlords and ministers. In 1881, for example, the Tulla Union unanimously passed a resolution by which they resolved «to stick to the programme of the Land League […] as the only hope of salvation for the Irish people». The Croom Board of Guardians passed a similar resolution in 1889, approving of the Plan of Campaign as «the only means of salvation for the Irish tenant farmer».

5. Patronage as a Political Weapon

The passing of political resolutions by boards of guardians was an effective way of expressing support for the nationalist movement, and was useful for propaganda purposes, but, as the Local Government Board privately acknowledged, this was «probably the most harmless of their aggressive proceedings». A more potent means of advancing the movement was through the distribution of patronage. There was a propaganda aspect to this. In 1881, for example, a number of boards resolved to allow none but Irish manufacturers to tender for union contracts.

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27 *United Ireland*, 4 Feb. 1882. Dublin Castle was the seat of government in Ireland.
28 *Mayo Examiner*, 10 Apr. 1886.
31 Memorandum as to administration by local governing bodies in Ireland, 2 Apr. 1892, National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NA1), Chief Secretary’s Office Registered Papers (hereafter CSORP), 1892/4813. The Local Government Board was responsible for overseeing the operation of the poor law system.
But guardians were also demonstrating the power of the nationalist movement to benefit its supporters, and to penalise its opponents. Thus in 1888, the contract to supply meat to the Kanturk workhouse was removed from C. J. Conway after he had refused to stop dealing with the police. The Kanturk guardians subsequently gave the contract for workhouse bedding to a draper named Jeremiah McCarthy, even though other drapers had submitted superior samples at the same prices. McCarthy was described by the police as «a prominent Leaguer [who] had been in jail for holding meetings of suppressed branches of the Irish National League».

Through the awarding of contracts, nationalist guardians reinforced the character and authority of the nationalist movement. Appointments of union officials achieved the same end and encompassed a wider range of social groups, from the professional middle classes who supplied the boards’ solicitors and medical officers to the tradesmen who worked within the workhouses as carpenters, tailors and boot-makers. Appointments within the control of the boards of guardians included workhouse officials, relieving officers, rate collectors, medical officers and together the union clerk and solicitor. As in the selection of contractors, nationalist guardians took pains to appoint candidates who were active in or supporters of the movement, and to exclude opponents. Many boards took pride in appointing people who had made sacrifices for their beliefs. In the summer of 1890, United Ireland reported the appointment of an evicted tenant, Patrick Hickey, as a rate-collector in Kilrush Union, and commended the action of the other eleven candidates in withdrawing when they learned about the latter’s application. Their action exemplified the «spirit of patriotism and unselfishness which animates the people of Ireland». Union officials who failed either to demonstrate their loyalty or to adhere to prescribed codes of behaviour found themselves dismissed or their salaries reduced. When the clerk to Enniscorthy Board of Guardians refused to contribute to Land League funds in 1881, he was dismissed. He was subsequently reappointed but at a reduced salary. Some years later, the solicitor to the Tulla Union was removed from his post in consequence of having taken possession of an evicted farm.

6. «Nationalising» the Relief System

One of the most effective means of supporting the land campaigns available to boards of guardians was the distribution of poor relief. By granting or withholding relief, guardians could reward activists and punish opponents. Under the Evicted Poor Protection Act of 1848, boards of guardians were empowered to grant outdoor

33 Particulars of known cases of oppression on the part of public bodies such as Corporations or Boards of Guardians, Intelligence Department Memorandum, 1 Mar. 1892, NAI, CSORP, 1892/4813.
34 United Ireland, 12 July 1890.
35 Particulars of known cases of oppression, NAI, CSORP, 1892/4813.
relief for one calendar month to people made destitute by eviction.\textsuperscript{36} Nationalist guardians were quick to realise that this act could be used to provide material and moral support for participants in the land campaign. Such support was potentially of critical importance. For tenants to risk eviction by withholding rent, they needed to be confident that they would be assisted in the event of eviction taking place. If poor law boards could be relied on to provide assistance, tenants would feel more confident and would not have to make demands on the limited financial resources of the nationalist movement. Moreover, since landlords paid half the poor rate on land occupied by tenants, and the whole amount on land in their own hands or occupied by tenants rated at or below £4, any increase in poor rates fell most heavily on landlords.

Granting generous relief to evicted tenants thus became a means both of sustaining tenant campaigners and penalising evicting landlords. As a Kerry grazier explained to the \textit{Birmingham Daily Gazette} in 1893, nationalist guardians had been «fighting the landlords with money raised from the landlords by means of the poor rates. Evicted tenants generally receive a pound or twenty-five shillings a week out-door relief. This punishes the landords, and saves the funds of the Land League, now called the National League. Ingenious, isn’t it?»\textsuperscript{37} The authorities regarded such grants as unjustified and pernicious. Appearing before a parliamentary inquiry in 1885, Local Government Inspector George Spaight observed that evicted tenants were often granted sums larger than were necessary, and more than they would receive as ordinary recipients of relief. This, he believed, «had a most demoralising effect».\textsuperscript{38} So long as evicted tenants were «receiving 30s a week outdoor relief», one County Kerry police inspector remarked tartly in 1889, they would «be slow to settle with landlords».\textsuperscript{39}

In nationalist eyes, evicted tenants were not responsible for their own misfortune. They were victims of landlordism and as such had a clear entitlement to support. The Chair of the Longford Board of Guardians declared in 1882 that he «would be in favour of giving [evicted tenants] relief more than those who had always had it, who were mendicants».\textsuperscript{40} Such attitudes were encouraged by nationalist newspapers such as the \textit{Nation} which called on poor law guardians in February 1888, «to interpose the shield of charity between ravaging landlordism and its victims … remembering that the pauper-ward and the emigrant ship have ever been the favourite “remedies” of the enemy for the manufactured misery of our people».\textsuperscript{41}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{36} 11 & 12 Vict., c. 47, s. 4.
\bibitem{37} R. J. B., \textit{Ireland As It is and As It Would Be Under Home Rule: Letters Written by the Special Commissioner of the Birmingham Daily Gazette between March and August, 1893} (Birmingham, 1893), 267.
\bibitem{38} Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Poor Law Guardians (Ireland) Bill, Parliamentary Papers (hereafter P. P.), 1884–1885 (297), x, 364.
\bibitem{39} Monthly Report of County Inspector T. Singleton, 1 Nov. 1889, NAI, Crime Branch Special Files, CBS/DCCI, Carton 4.
\bibitem{40} \textit{United Ireland}, 28 Jan. 1882.
\bibitem{41} \textit{Nation}, 11 Feb. 1888.
\end{thebibliography}
Providing higher levels of relief than those normally granted distinguished evicted tenants from ordinary paupers and underlined their high moral and political standing. In 1887, the Athy Board of Guardians granted relief well in excess of normal rates to 45 tenants evicted from the Luggacurran estate. At the same time, individuals linked to the evictions were denied relief. Thus Mary Nolan was struck off the outdoor relief list, having provided an eviction party «with a comfortable dinner».42 Some months later, William Dandy, who had been working on the Luggacurran estate helping to prevent the re-possession of evicted farms by their previous occupants, was ordered to be discharged from the workhouse together with his wife, children and father. Since Dandy had been getting one pound a week as an emergencyman, the guardians refused to believe that he could be destitute. He was, one guardian claimed, «getting one pound a week and squandering it».43

Some boards of guardians also arranged for evicted tenants to receive preferential treatment within the workhouse. As the Local Government Board noted in a memorandum drawn up in 1892,

«not only were grants of money made illegally to campaign tenants; in some Unions it was proposed to relax the Workhouse Rules in favour of persons evicted for non-payment of rent, and to fit up ‘Wards of Honour’ for their benefit, and to place them in other respects on a better footing than the ordinary destitute poor.»44

The Board gave the example of the Kanturk Union, where a committee had been appointed in October 1886,

«to go through the house accompanied by the Master to point out the most suitable ward, which is to be called the Evicted Tenants Ward, and to get the said ward made comfortable with a view of making tenant farmers throughout the Union threatened with eviction as comfortable as possible when evicted.»45

The Kanturk guardians went no further than making plans to accommodate evicted tenants. In the New Ross Union, however, the guardians «actually carried out their intention, and as they persisted in their illegal action the Board was dissolved and the Union placed in the hands of paid officers».46

42 Kildare Observer, 2 Apr. 1887; 14 May 1887.  
43 Leinster Leader, 5 Nov. 1887.  
44 Memorandum as to administration by local governing bodies, NAI, CSORP, 1892/4813.  
45 Extract from Minutes of Kanturk Board of Guardians, 7 Oct. 1886, cited in Memorandum as to administration by local governing bodies, NAI, CSORP, 1892/4813.  
46 Memorandum as to administration by local governing bodies, NAI, CSORP, 1892/4813. The Irish poor law authorities were empowered to dissolve any board of guardians that was failing to discharge its duties and appoint paid officers, known as vice-guardians, to administer the union. 1 & 2 Vict., c. 56, s. 26; 10 & 11 Vict., c. 31, s. 18.
7. The New Ross Board of Guardians and the Ely Tenants

In the summer of 1886, eleven families had been evicted from their homes on the Marquess of Ely’s estate at Fethard, County Wexford. The tenants had been withholding their rent in an effort to secure a rent reduction of 25 percent. Following their eviction the families entered the New Ross workhouse where they were allowed to stay together, to wear their own clothes and to cook food brought in for them by supporters. Objecting to this violation of workhouse regulations, the Local Government Board had warned the guardians in December 1886, that «distinguishing certain paupers by granting them privileges which are not enjoyed by others of the same class is entirely at variance with the proper administration of the Poor Laws and cannot be permitted to continue». This ultimatum provoked a defiant response from the guardians. In a unanimously-adopted resolution, they announced their determination, «as the elected representatives of the ratepayers», to defy the threats of the Local Government Board,

«a non-representative body, which in the present instance as on all other occasions has taken the side of the landlord faction. The Board of Guardians refuse to treat persons who have been rendered homeless and destitute by the tyranny of a brainless agent as ordinary paupers and if they require any justification for ordering those people to be treated in an exceptional manner they have only to point to the exceptional circumstances of the times.»

This resolution presented a clear assertion of the guardians’ right to administer the poor law as they saw fit. Daring the Local Government Board to send down vice-guardians, the guardians declared confidently that «relying on the soundness of public opinion they have no doubt as to the issue of the contest forced upon them».

Following their dissolution on 14 December 1886, the New Ross guardians embarked upon a campaign of resistance and non-cooperation. Ratepayers were urged not to pay «a single penny [in] rates so long as the Union is managed by the representatives of Dublin Castle», and a boycott of the vice-guardians was established. «Let the Plan of Campaign be applied to the New Ross Workhouse by the New Ross traders», a local newspaper, the People, proclaimed, and the vice-guardians «will be starved into surrender». The boycott succeeded in disrupting the administration of the Union. The vice-guardians were obliged to move the Union account from the National Bank to the Bank of Ireland, and Union officials were forced to travel out of the county to obtain supplies, «local dealers having

49 [Wexford] People, 26 Jan. 1887. See also, 12 Feb. 1887.
refused to deal directly with the Vice Guardians». The impact was also felt by the poor. In mid-February a reporter for the *People* described meeting a number of distressed individuals at the gate of the workhouse who had not received relief for some weeks because the relieving officers had been unable either to obtain food or to cash cheques.

The failure of the vice-guardians to provide adequately for the poor became another grievance against them. The *Nation* reported that the poor of the district were «suffering severely by the state of things brought about the Dublin allies of evicting landlords», while the *People* claimed that the vice-guardians’ boasted reduction in expenditure had been achieved by «the shameless sacrifice of the poor». Nationalists were thus able to present their movement as a genuinely popular one, concerned with the well-being of the weak as well as the strong, and representative of the whole community, not just of the tenant farmers who dominated it. At the same time they were able to reinforce the popular view of the government as being aligned with landlords and thus as hostile to the interests of both tenants and the poor. The rates strike was eventually called off in August 1887, after the evicted tenants, who were the original cause of the dispute, left the workhouse and returned to their homes in Fethard. The National League was, however, able to claim victory when the tenants were offered, and accepted, a rent reduction of 50 percent later that year.

### 8. Women and Nationalism

The case of the Ely tenants highlights another important dimension of the land campaigns, the involvement of women. The active support of women was crucial if tactics such as rent strikes and boycotting were to be successful. Since women generally controlled the household economy, boycotts of shopkeepers and tradesmen depended on their participation. Women were also active in resisting evictions and preventing the occupation of evicted farms. When evictions took place, they involved whole families. Indeed, this is what made them so emotive. In seeking to persuade the Ely tenants to defy their landlord, the nationalist activist, Canon Thomas Doyle, appealed directly to the female members of the party, telling them that it was important to show that «the most delicate girl on the estate as well as the strongest man, are prepared to suffer for their rights». Doyle encouraged women from across the social spectrum to involve themselves in the land campaign. A visiting committee of the «ladies of New Ross», established at his suggestion, was reported in September 1886 to be «receiving subscriptions for...»

50 Resolution of Vice Guardians, 2 Mar. 1887; Minutes, 11 May, 28 May 1887, WCL, NRUMB, Jan.–July 1887, 167, 382, 442.
51 People, 19 Feb. 1887.
52 Nation, 26 Feb. 1887; People, 25 May 1887.
54 People, 10 Mar. 1886.
the benefit and enjoyment of the evicted persons while they are in the workhouse.\textsuperscript{55}

The Irish nationalist movement was typical of anti-imperial nationalist movements in placing important responsibilities on women, but according them few rights. Women’s role within the movement was a strictly limited one, being an extension of their domestic role within the home. Assuring the Ely tenants that entering the workhouse would not damage their social standing, Doyle promised them that there would be «a contest over the country to see who will be the happy man who will get one of the girls for a wife, who can display the medal of the New Ross Union».\textsuperscript{56} Their sacrifice was thus to be honoured in the domestic not the public sphere. Such attitudes were reflected throughout the movement. As the history of the Ladies’ Land League demonstrates, male activists were uncomfortable with women taking a leading role in the land campaign. Once women began appearing on public platforms and formulating strategy, they became a threat rather than an asset to the male leadership and their activities were quickly suppressed.\textsuperscript{57} Similarly, male nationalists showed no desire to see women’s involvement in poor law administration as ratepayers and as recipients of relief extended into the boardroom. Women won the right to run for election as poor law guardians in 1896, but the pressure for reform came not from the nationalist movement, but from social reformers and suffrage campaigners, the majority of whom were unionists.\textsuperscript{58} Nationalist women were acknowledged to have a place in the political community, and were encouraged to be active citizens, but not to demand or exercise a public voice.

\section{9. Nationalism and Labour}

The incorporation of rural labourers into the nationalist movement was a not dissimilar process. Their support and active involvement was sought but they were largely excluded from the leadership of nationalist organisations and were urged not to put their own interests before those of the nation. As Parnell reminded them in 1891, «above all things and beyond all things, they are Irish Nationalists», and their «duty is due to their motherland».\textsuperscript{59} Why labourers continued to support the movement when its most significant achievements were land reform measures from which they did not benefit, has long puzzled Irish historians. One reason identified by contemporaries was the improvement in the housing

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 4 Sept. 1886; 28 Aug. 1886.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 10 Mar. 1886.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Freeman’s Journal}, 9. Mar. 1891.
conditions of labourers brought about by the Labourers Acts (1883–1906). William O’Brien, who was a leading figure in the land campaigns, described the acts as «scarcely less wonder-working than the abolition of landlordism itself», having brought about

«the establishment of an entire rural labouring class in cosy cottages with allotments of one acre apiece [...] where only a few years ago they were huddled landless in some foetid room in a town slum, at a crushing rent to starve for half the year.»

Under the acts, poor law boards, and later local councils, could borrow money to purchase land and build cottages for the accommodation of agricultural labourers on the security of the rates. Each cottage had a half-acre (later increased to an acre) of land attached, thus enabling the holder to supplement his or, from 1891, her income.

The grafting of labourers’ concerns onto the programme of the nationalist movement has generally been seen as a somewhat cynical exercise prompted by the need to maintain class unity. Aware that the land campaign required labourer participation to be fully effective, nationalists emphasised the commonality of interests within rural society. The labourers’ question, United Ireland declared in 1890, was «regarded in the popular mind as just as much a National topic as the land question. To suggest that the farmers are the enemies of the labourers in the matter is simply an absurdity». Nationalist leaders were, however, aware that farmers were unlikely to effect real improvements in labourers’ living conditions without external intervention. The labourers acts provided the basis for such intervention. Introduced by nationalist MPs, the original act received support from members of all political parties and from government ministers anxious to improve social and economic conditions in Ireland.

10. The Labourers Acts in Operation

Since many nationalist guardians were themselves tenant farmers, it was widely predicted that they would make little use of the acts. As one Ulster MP had noted during the debate on the 1883 bill, poor law boards were composed mainly of farmers of small means, and «they had not shown themselves very careful of the labourers’ condition» in the past. Historians have tended to accept this view. Guardians, it is suggested, were slow to put the acts into operation, fearing the

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61 M. Fraser, John Bull’s Other Homes: State Housing and British Policy in Ireland, 1883–1922 (Liverpool, 1996).
63 United Ireland, 11 Jan 1890.
64 Hansard, 3rd ser., cclxxix, col. 1244 (30 May 1883).
increased burden on ratepayers and that they would «create a more independent order of labourers». It is true that progress under the acts was slow. By the end of March 1888, boards of guardians had prepared schemes for the erection of just under 20,000 cottages, of which just over 3,000 had been completed. Given the complex machinery of the acts, however, this was a significant accomplishment. Within government the rate of activity was a surprise, and a concern. As one minister remarked in 1886, «timid persons» might think it to have been «so rapid as almost to be alarming». Far from having a problem with apathetic local authorities, a Local Government Board official recalled in 1906, the «difficulty in the beginning was to restrain them».

Nationalists took every opportunity to celebrate the achievements of tenant-dominated boards of guardians in executing the acts, whilst highlighting the comparative lack of progress in unions under landlord control. An editorial in United Ireland in January 1886 noted that «where the elected guardians are the ruling power, the Labourers Act is being almost universally put into practice, while in Ulster, where the landlord influence predominates, the Act remains an absolute dead-letter». The refusal of boards in Ulster to put the act in force, the paper declared, exposed landlords’ pretensions «to pose as champions of the labourers». At the same time, however, labourers were warned not to advance their claims for cottages too aggressively. Labourers who attempted to overawe boards of guardians by crowding into the boardroom and refusing to leave «do injury rather than service to their cause».

Nationalist claims should not be taken at face value. Many guardians were reluctant to take action that would increase rate levels, despite agitation by labourers. Correlation between numbers of cottages erected and the political complexion of boards of guardians does, however, confirm that tenant-dominated boards built more cottages more quickly than those controlled by landlords. By the end of March 1888, only ten unions had succeeded in erecting 100 or more cottages; all were tenant-controlled. Furthermore, unions that had built no cottages were more likely to be landlord-dominated or to have boards on which landlords maintained a significant presence. Every tenant-controlled board of guardians in Leinster, for example, had managed to build some cottages by 1888, with the exceptions of Granard, New Ross and Urlingford. In Ulster, on the other hand,
where boards remained overwhelmingly under landlord control, only four boards had attempted to implement the acts and none had erected any cottages.⁷²

Boards of guardians were responsible for the allocation as well as the erection of labourers’ cottages, and it was frequently alleged that in unions where nationalist guardians predominated, labourers could only acquire a cottage though the influence of the National League.⁷³ Branch officials were undoubtedly anxious to play a role in the selection process. The Catholic curate of Hollyford pressed the claims of branch members on the Tipperary Board of Guardians in 1886, informing the clerk of the union that it had be unanimously agreed by a committee of the branch «that members of the branch should get a preference of the labourers’ cottages».⁷⁴ But since his letter was prompted by the allocation of a cottage to a non-member, it would appear that such injunctions did not necessarily carry much weight with guardians. In some unions, cottages were used to reward tenant activists or to inconvenience opponents. In March 1887, for example, the Tulla Board of Guardians was said to have let a number of cottages situated on an evicted farm to «women of a low reputation» in order to annoy the new tenant.⁷⁵ Some years later, Richard Merrick of Glenbane, County Tipperary, was said to be living in a labourer’s cottage on a farm from which he had previously been evicted. The local police were convinced that «the house was built for Merrick by the Guardians to place him as a sentinel over his evicted farm».⁷⁶ The publicity given to such cases helped to create the impression that large numbers of labourers’ cottages were occupied by evicted tenants. This was not in fact the case. An official return produced in November 1888, revealed that of 3,359 cottages then completed, only 27 were let to evicted tenants.⁷⁷ Political considerations did, however, mean that those most in need of re-housing did not always receive priority in the allocation of cottages. Reporting on the working of the labourers acts in 1888, local government inspectors stated that the occupants of unsanitary and condemned houses were frequently passed over in the selection process.⁷⁸

The labourers acts did help to promote support for, and unity within, the nationalist movement. National League candidates in the general election of 1885 both sought the support of labourers and generally received it.⁷⁹ By the end of the century, however, over twenty years’ experience of the operation of the acts had helped to convince labourers that without direct representation on local govern-

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⁷⁴ Hansard, 3rd ser., xxxii, 1527 (1 Mar. 1886).
⁷⁵ H. Vandaleur to A. Balfour, 21 Mar. 1887, NAI, CSORP, 1887/5313.
⁷⁶ Particulars of known cases of oppression, NAI, CSORP, 1892/4813.
⁷⁷ Return showing the Working of the Labourers (Ireland) Acts up to the 31st day of May 1888, P. P., HL 1888 (288), xix, 203–207.
ment bodies, their claims to assistance would often struggle to be heard over those of other interest groups. It is no coincidence that there was a significant increase in activity under the acts following the passage of the Local Government Act of 1898 which enfranchised labourers as residents, allowing many to vote and run in local elections for the first time.\textsuperscript{80} In its annual report for 1900–1901 the Local Government Board noted «the very general revival throughout Ireland of operations under the Labourers Acts».\textsuperscript{81} This surge in activity peaked in 1904–1905 with the completion of 1,750 cottages, bringing the cumulative total to just over 19,000. A further impetus was provided by the passage of a new act in 1906 which widened the definition of an agricultural labourer and made available £4.5 million in government subsidies. Within ten years the number of completed cottages had risen from around 21,000 to just over 47,000.\textsuperscript{82}

\section*{11. Conclusion}

During the second half of the nineteenth century, poor law administration became an important sphere of nationalist activity in Ireland. It provided a platform from which nationalists could advance their aims, and a means of winning support within the rural community. Operating as a second front in the land war, nationalist guardians helped to intensify the land campaign, and to sustain public interest and support in periods, such as the early 1890s, when the land agitation was in abeyance. By giving substance to the idea of a national identity forged in opposition to landlordism and British rule, and of national interests that could best be pursued through the joint agitation for land reform and home rule, poor law guardians were helping to bring the nation into being. Administering the poor laws in the national interest constituted an effective challenge to British rule in the localities, and a credible alternative to it. The significance of this process has been largely ignored by Irish historians, whose primary focus has been on the broader campaign for self-government, and in particular on the way in which the character and ultimate aim of that campaign changed in the second decade of the twentieth century.

Radicalised by the Easter Rising (1916) and its brutal repression, Irish nationalists abandoned home rule and committed themselves to the achievement of an independent republic. Republican strategy was based on complementary civil and military campaigns, the former involving the creation of a \textit{de facto} Irish state. The success of this strategy in convincing the British to concede independence to

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{fraser}
Fraser, \textit{John Bull's Other Homes}, 35; McKay, «The Housing of the Rural Labourer», 30–33. The Local Government Act introduced a two-tier system of county and district councils. The administrative responsibilities of grand juries were transferred to county councils while rural district councils took on the functions of poor law boards and also became the sanitary authorities for their areas. See Crossman, \textit{Local Government in Nineteenth-Century Ireland}, 91–97.
\bibitem{annual}
\bibitem{fraser82}
Fraser, \textit{John Bull's Other Homes}, 35, 41–43, 308.
\end{thebibliography}
Ireland, albeit in a limited form, has overshadowed the full extent of the quiet revolution that had taken place in the Irish countryside during the previous decades. Working through the existing system of local government, Irish nationalists had established an institutional structure that gave substance and meaning to the Irish sense of nationhood. The readiness of Irish local councillors to declare themselves independent of British control and to pledge their allegiance to Dáil Éireann in 1919 reflected the extent to which they had already established their own parallel system of government.

**Die Nation bauen: Lokale Verwaltung im ländlichen Irland 1850–1920**

**Faire la Nation: l'administration locale dans l'Irlande rurale 1850–1920**
Après 1870, les conseils de bienfaisance locaux (poor law boards) devinrent des points d’ancrage et des champs d’action pour le mouvement nationaliste irlandais. Pendant la «Guerre pour la terre» (Land War) (1879–1903), une série de campagnes politiques pour les réformes agraires qui mobilisaient les paysans irlandais contre les grands propriétaires protestants, les militants du mouvement national se servirent de ces conseils communaux et locaux pour propager leurs buts politiques et fournir un soutien local aux grèves et aux boycotts. En même temps la présence de leurs élus dans ces conseils permit de distribuer des emplois, des aides financières ou matérielles à leur clientèle. Le mouvement nationaliste créa ainsi un réseau politique de solidarité englobant de larges couches de la société rurale hostiles à la grande propriété et la domination britannique. Ce mouvement mobilisait...
massivement, mais toujours en position subalterne, des femmes, et encadraient les journaliers qui bénéficièrent de la construction d'habitations rurales par les poor law boards.

Virginia Crossman
School of History
Keele University
Keele
Staffordshire
ST5 5BG
v.crossman@keele.ac.uk