

# THE LAND WAR: A PARIS PAMPHLET

**I**n the years 1879 - 1882, the Irish tenant farmers engaged in a bitter and often violent struggle against their landlords. A long period of comparative prosperity in Irish agriculture following the Famine was ended by a sudden drop in world food prices. Small farmers were unable to pay their rents, and the old animosities between tenant and landlord flared up again.

Michael Davitt, who had been imprisoned in England for his Fenian activities, returned to Ireland in 1877 and, with John Dillon, founded the Irish National Land League. William O'Brien and Timothy Harrington became the League's leading organisers. Davitt's objective was land nationalisation:

*The land of Ireland belongs to the people of Ireland, to be held and cultivated for the sustenance of those whom God declared to be the inhabitants thereof<sup>(1)</sup>*

Magnus Magnusson has described the contemporary state of affairs:

*The conventional picture of this time is of huge estates in Ireland predominantly owned by Protestant landlords, frequently absentee, who were living in idle luxury off the rents. They had the power to raise these rents or evict their tenants at will; the tenants had no rights at all. A tenant who improved his land would have the rent raised, because of the improvement, to a level he could not afford, and the landlord would instal a new tenant who could. But the picture is one-sided; the rents, it seems, were never high enough to service the estates properly, according to modern hist-*

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*orians, but it was a hugely emotional issue in Ireland at the time.<sup>(2)</sup>*

Charles Stewart Parnell, the leader of the Irish Nationalist Party, became president of the Land League. The aim of the League was to reduce rents (by withholding them if necessary), to prevent evictions for non-payment, and ultimately to get the land back into native hands. Parnell devised the tactic of social ostracism which was to give the English language a new word - 'boycott'.

In 1880, Lord Erne's agent, Captain Charles Boycott of Lough Mask House, County Mayo, defied the League by refusing a tenant's request for a reduction in rent and evicted him with the intention of getting a new more amenable tenant.

Parnell advocated that offending 'land-grabbers' should be treated as social lepers:

*When a man takes a farm from which another has been evicted, you must show him on the roadside when you meet him, you must show him in the fair and in the market place, and even in the house of worship, by leaving him severely alone, by putting him into a moral Coventry, by isolating him from his own kind as if he were a leper of old - you must shown him your detestation of the crime he has committed, and you may depend upon it*

*that there will be no man so full of avarice, so lost to shame, as to dare the public opinion of all right-thinking men and to transgress your unwritten code of laws.<sup>(3)</sup>*

This ostracism was employed against Captain Boycott and it became so severe that Boycott and his family had to be rescued by troops. Volunteer Orange labourers from Ulster were brought in to harvest his crops after his own workmen had all deserted. Some £350 worth of crops were harvested at an estimated cost of £3,500. Captain Boycott's nerve was eventually broken and he returned to England.

Ostracism was not the only weapon employed. There was large scale violence against landlords and their agents, and also against those tenant farmers who disobeyed the Land League orders. Some of the Leagues leaders were less than forthright in their condemnation of the violence: for example, Joseph Biggar, the Nationalist MP for Cavan, said that the shooting of landlords was wrong because the assailant frequently missed and shot somebody else!

The 'Land War' came to an end in 1881 when the Land Act of that year gave tenants a right to the land and reduced rents by 20 percent. The Land League campaign continued, however, and by 1887 'outrages' were again occurring, as the tenant farmers resumed their struggles against the landlords.

The years 1885 - 88 saw another agricultural depression, with the prices of crops and livestock falling catastrophically as a result of American competition. Tenants were unable to pay even the reduced rents set by the 1881 Act. In October, 1886, the Land League



Charles Stewart Parnell receives the Freedom of Limerick, 14 July, 1880.



leader and *United Ireland* editor, Timothy Harrington, proposed what became known as 'the Plan of Campaign' which F.S.L. Lyons has described as follows:

... a device for collective bargaining on individual estates. Where a landlord refused to lower his demands voluntarily the tenants were to combine to offer him reduced rents. If he declined to accept these, they were to pay him no rents at all, but instead to contribute to an 'estate fund' the money they would have paid him if he had accepted the offer. This fund was to be used for the maintenance and protection of the tenants who were certain to be evicted for putting this policy into practice . . . As for the land-grabbers, for them there remained, as before, the boycott. 'That the farms thus unjustly evicted will be left severely alone, and everyone who aids the evictions shunned, is scarcely necessary to say'. (*United Ireland*, 23 October, 1986).<sup>(4)</sup>

While the Plan of Campaign was neither as brutal nor as extensive as the Land War, it nevertheless developed into a bitter conflict, especially in counties Tipperary, Limerick and Kerry.

The Roman Catholic clergy in Ireland generally either supported or turned a blind eye to the Plan of Campaign. Many priests were actively involved in supporting it and some were imprisoned for their activities. The Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Walsh, and the Archbishop of Cashel, Dr. Croke, were prominent supporters.



*Bishop Edward Thomas O'Dwyer.*

The British Government tried to enlist the aid of the Pope in its attempt to end the Plan of Campaign and this aroused the anger of Irish Catholics who supported it. But there were elements within the Church who opposed the boycott, and two bishops independently complained to the Vatican about the Plan of Campaign and the involvement of priests in it.

The Pope ordered the Supreme Congregation of the inquisition 'to subject the matter to serious and careful examination.' Monsignor Persico arrived in Ireland in 1887 to investigate. He reported to the Vatican, and on 20 April,

1888, the Pope issued a decree which included the following passage (translated from the French of a pamphlet published in Paris in 1890 by the Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union):

*Hence the question was proposed to their Eminences the Cardinals of the Congregation:—Is it permissible, in the disputes between landowners and tenants in Ireland to use the means known as the Plan of Campaign and boycotting? After long and mature deliberation their Eminences, unanimously answered in the negative, and the decision was confirmed by the Holy Father . . . (5)*

At that time, the Plan of Campaign was being put into effect on the Glensharrold estate near Ardagh, County Limerick. The Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick, Dr. Edward O'Dwyer, supported the Papal decree against the Plan of Campaign and did his best to ensure that it was observed. He intervened in the Glensharrold estate dispute and, by negotiation, arrived at settlement terms which he thought were very favourable for the tenants. The respective figures (as given in the I.L.P.U. pamphlet) were:

Rent Arrears due to March,	
1890:.....	£2,611.00
Payment to be accepted .....	£384.00
Arrears to be forgotten .....	£2,227.00
Rents - Old rent .....	£738.00
Present Offer .....	£384.00
Gross Annual Reduction.....	£354.00

This episcopal intervention was not



*Police baton-charge the crowd at Limerick.*



John Dillon.

welcomed by the nationalist leaders who urged the Glensharrold tenants to reject the settlement terms.

Bishop O'Dwyer then came under attack from the Nationalist MPs, John Dillon and William O'Brien. The details of the charges and counter-charges made in the course of this bitter dispute were published in the 1890 pamphlet issued by the Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union, at that time the major unionist body and the forerunner of the Irish Unionist Association.

The pamphlet consists of press correspondence between Bishop O'Dwyer and John Dillon and the editor

of the *Freeman's Journal*, the leading nationalist newspaper of the day. An I.L.P.U. commentary linked the various items.<sup>(6)</sup>

At the same time as the Glensharrold dispute was coming to the boil, the British Government sent a mission to the Holy See purportedly to negotiate on matters concerning Malta. In fact, it appears that this mission also raised the Plan of Campaign issue. Certainly nationalists were convinced that this is what happened, and were furious at this intervention.

John Dillon made a speech in the House of Commons on 11 July, 1890, in the course of which he was reported to have said certain things which enraged Bishop O'Dwyer. The *Freeman's Journal* account of Dillon's speech included the following words (this and all further quotations are taken from the I.L.P.U. pamphlet):

*There was no fouler stain cast on the people of England, and no more intolerable grievance inflicted on the people of Ireland, than when the right honourable gentleman (Balfour, the Irish Secretary), succeeded in getting his Holiness to send an agent to trade on the reverence of the Irish people.*

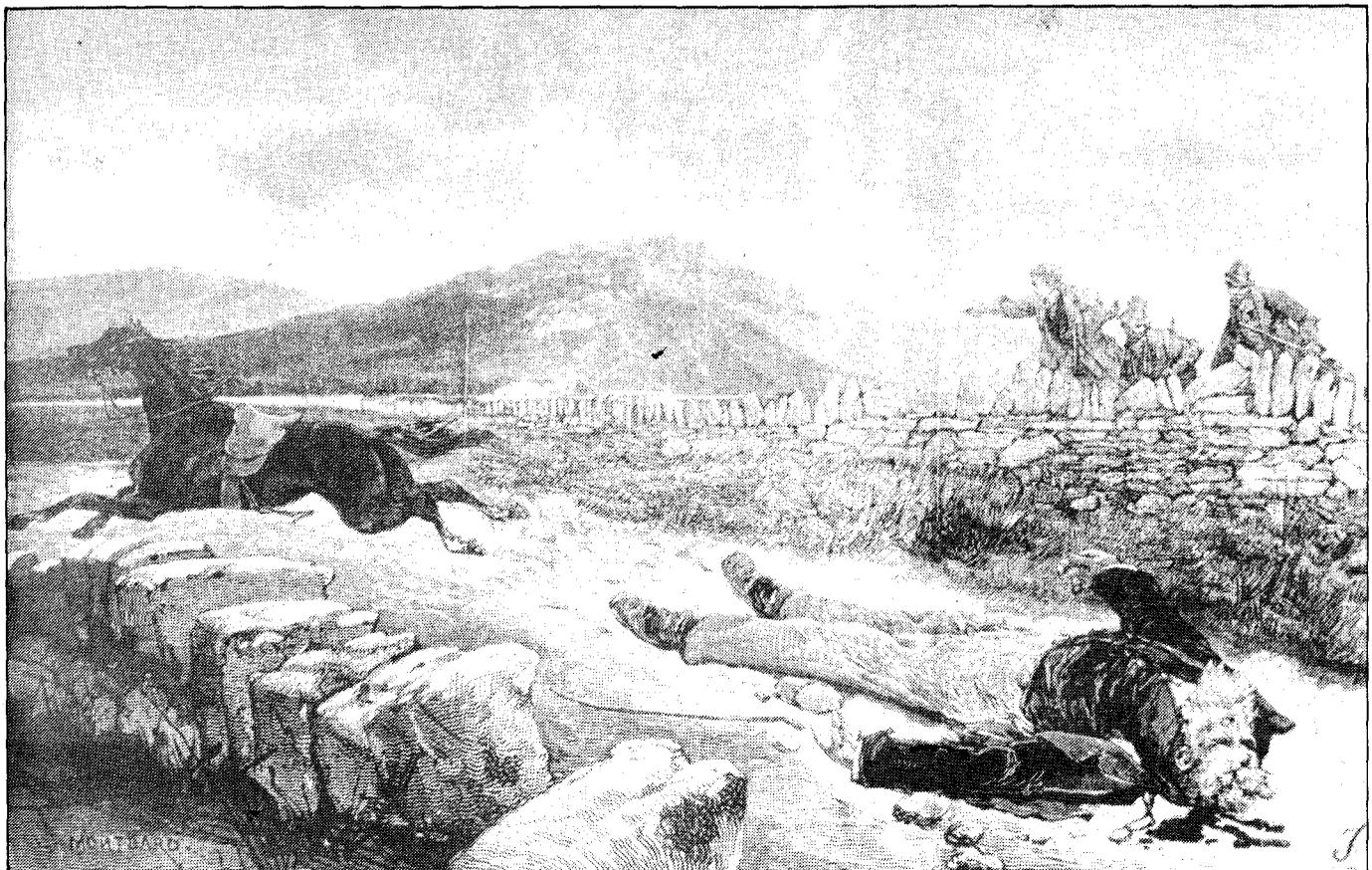
Dillon also referred to O'Dwyer:

*Dr. O'Dwyer, the Catholic Bishop of Limerick, had written a letter which was one of the most cowardly and dastardly ever penned. The Bishop was the servant of the Government.*

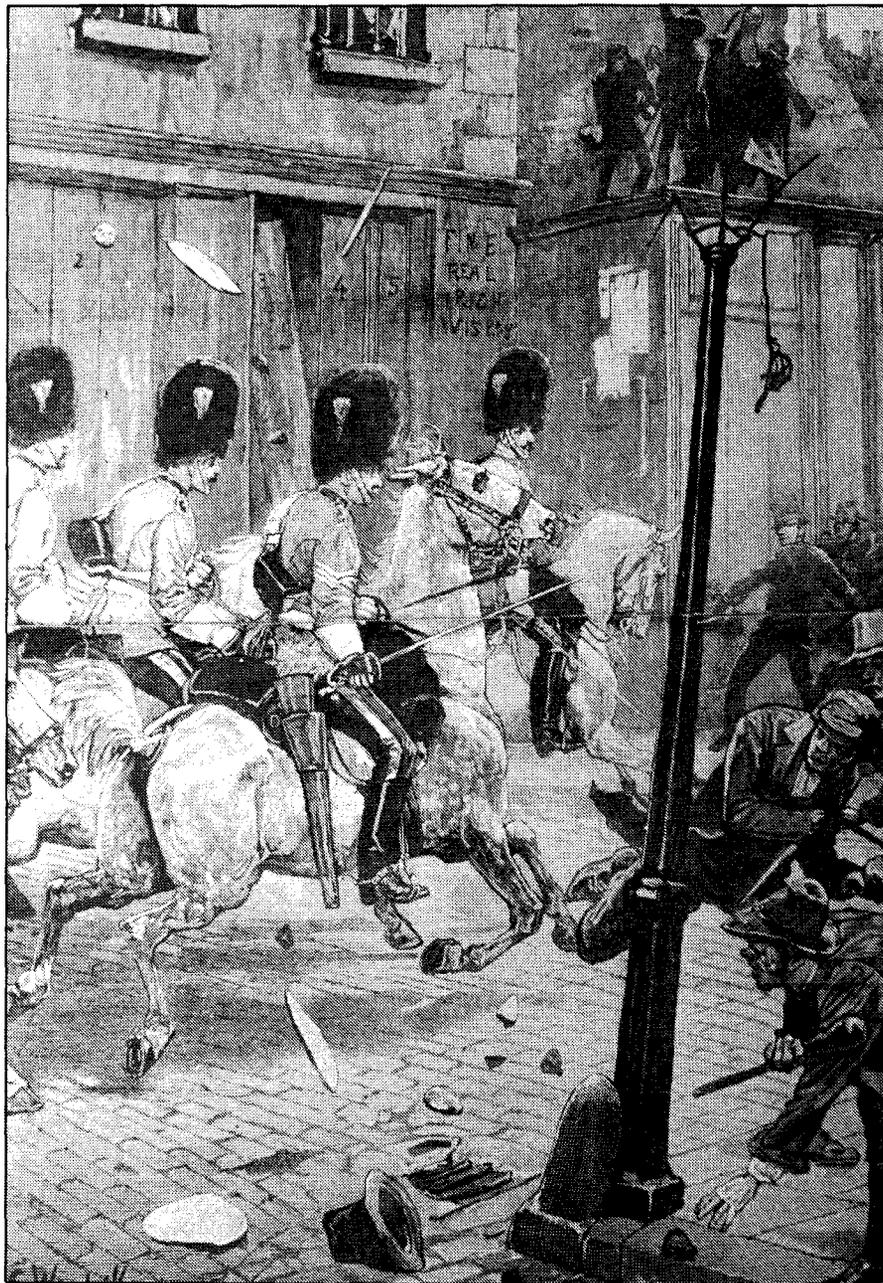
(Dillon here referred to a letter sent by O'Dwyer to an archdeacon in Ardagh,

Co. Limerick, recommending the Glensharrold settlement terms). As soon as O'Dwyer read the account of Dillon's speech, he wrote to the editor of the *Freeman's Journal*:

*... Sir, I am almost ashamed of myself to waste so many words on this gentleman's personal offensiveness to myself when I read the language which he dares to use towards the august and sacred person of the Vicar of Christ. It is no disgrace but an honour for a poor, simple Bishop to receive a few spatters of the dirt that is flung at the representative of his Divine Master. If only I could get it all, and be covered with opprobrium while I lived, so as to spare our old Catholic nation the shame before the world that one of the foulest charges ever levelled against the successors of St. Peter was hurled at Leo XIII amidst the cheers of English Protestants and English unbelievers by one who professes to be a member of the Church... here is a Catholic boasting of his Catholicity, the friend of bishops and Archbishops, using the privileges of the faith in order to get near the Father of the Faithful and stab him in the back... Was ever so desperate, so recklessly and wildly desperate a charge made by any Catholic in the greatest drunkenness of excess comparable to this - that Leo XIII trafficked in the reverence of a Catholic people for his own purposes, pretended to teach them the duties of the Christian life, whereas for some bribe or other that he got from the English Government he was leading them deliberately astray?*



The assassination of Lord Mountmorris - as seen by the French.



A Scots Greys charge at Limerick, from the 'London Illustrated News', 29 October, 1881.

Why, apart altogether from his office, and that divine guidance under which he acts, if we think only of the personality of Leo XIII we shall see the horrible grotesqueness of this vile accusation. In Christendom there is no nobler figure this moment . . .

Bishop O'Dwyer's long letter concluded: Again and again, I have said I am a Home Ruler. At home and abroad I have maintained the right of my country to self-government. In so far as the agitation legitimately advances that cause I am with it. I would join tomorrow if I had any assurance that the movement was to be purged from sinful methods, but while Mr. Dillon and men like him, in defiance of their own leader (Parnell), are the practical leaders, I must only stand aloof. I may illustrate my position by a humorous incident. Some time ago great crowds attended the

sermons of a revivalist here in Limerick. At the end of a very vehement discourse he called upon all those of his audience who wished to go to Heaven to stand up. All stood up except one Catholic young man, who ought not to have been there at all. 'Young man' said the preacher solemnly, 'Do you not wish to go to Heaven?' 'Oh yes, I do,' said the young man, 'but not with that crowd'. (Freeman's Journal, 13 July, 1890)

John Dillon immediately replied denying that he had said what he was reported to have said:

I am quite certain I never used those words. I was speaking all along of the action of the Government of Lord Sailsbury, and so far as my memory carries me, I made no comment on any action of his Holiness. My memory in this respect is borne out by the context of my speech, by the Times report in which

these words are not found, and by the recollection of several friends who were listening to me, and whom I have consulted on this point. (Freeman's Journal, 15 July, 1890).

O'Dwyer replied insisting that Dillon had spoken the offending words and quoted Hansard, the official parliamentary record, in support of his claim.

On 24 August, a large demonstration was held in Limerick against Bishop O'Dwyer and in support of John Dillon. The I.L.P.U. pamphlet states that 'A large concourse of people attended, whipped up from the South of Ireland and conveyed together by special train'. The demonstration was 'calculated most seriously to impair that pastoral liberty which a Bishop is always supposed to enjoy in a Christian land, and to interfere with his decisions upon moral questions'.

Dillon's speech at the demonstration accused O'Dwyer of

'pouring out abominable and filthy libels which can only sully the lips that utter them . . . I venture to say that, if you were to seek out a specimen of a cranky and cross-grained Irish politician it is Dr. O'Dwyer. He is always on the opposite side to us, and his friendship is likely to be an absolute harbinger of failure to every cause which has the misfortune to incur his friendship. His whole life has been a graveyard strewn with the dead bones of his failures and blunders'. (Freeman's Journal report, 25 August, 1890).

The editor of the Freeman's Journal, which had hitherto preserved a semblance of neutrality on the issue, launched into an attack on the Bishop in the issue of 26 August, describing him as

. . . illiberal, slippery, a doughty dialectician . . . calls names like a fishwife . . . puts on feathers and takes a tomahawk and scalping knife in hand, coming out on the political warpath . . . his own people have struck against him as an incorrigible crank. He stands isolated among his Episcopal brethren. He has provoked the scandal of a vast public demonstration against him in his own Catholic and Cathedral city. He is the Irish Bishop of Beauvais, who handed over the delivery of his people to the enemy, and consented to the burning of that deliverer at the stake in the name of religion. (Freeman's Journal, 26 August).

This editorial was followed by a further long letter from Dillon denouncing O'Dwyer and again condemning his interference in the Glensharrold estate affair.

The Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union pamphlet commented:

The scandal was now complete. A Bishop had taken upon himself the painful but conscientious duty of teaching his people morality. He had been denounced by the professional patriots in no measure of language for his legitimate actions . . .

*These men, who knew they were in the wrong, heaped insult upon him, they assailed his sacred office, and they attempted to defeat his efforts to do his duty to his Diocese . . .*

On 27 August, the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Walsh, from whom Dr. O'Dwyer might have expected to receive some support, wrote to the *Freeman's Journal* to dissociate himself from the whole dispute. He sailed from Ireland on the same day.

On 2 September, John Dillon and William O'Brien were honoured guests of Archbishop Croke of Cashel, the neighbouring diocese to Limerick. A large demonstration of supporters followed Dillon and O'Brien from the railway station to the Archbishop's palace. The *Freeman's Journal* account runs:

*Mr. William O'Brien, MP, who was received with loud cheers, said - Fellow countrymen, you are aware that we are here as the guests of your illustrious Archbishop Dr Croke (cheers).*

*Mr. John Dillon, MP, who was received with cheers said - I am proud to be here as the guest of his Grace the Archbishop of Cashel (cheers).*

*Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Dillon then proceeded to the Archbishop's palace, where they were received by his Grace.*

Bishop O'Dwyer was prominent in public life for many years after this incident, which does not appear to have done him any lasting damage. He was involved in several controversies in his attempts to develop a Catholic educational system, and was the first prelate to condemn the execution of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising. He was often described as the 'intrepid Dr. O'Dwyer'.

John Dillon became leader of the Nationalist Party in 1917, following John Redmond, and led the party into the disastrous 1918 general election, when the Nationalist Party gained half the number of votes the Sinn Fein gained but won only 6 seats to Sinn Fein's 74. The Nationalist Party ceased to be a force in Irish politics.

Why did the unionists go the trouble of publishing an account of the O'Dwyer-Dillon dispute in French? Of all the pamphlets and leaflets they produced in 1890 (over 60) this was the only one to be published in French. Perhaps they thought that the French would have been particularly shocked by Dillon's alleged

criticism of the Pope.

The headquarters of the Irish Land League had moved to Paris in 1881 for a year or so.<sup>(7)</sup> Its newspaper, *United Ireland*, which vigorously represented the agrarian and Home Rule movements into the next decade, was for periods published in Paris to avoid suppression. It is possible that the League's supporters in that city may have been active in producing propaganda in French in 1889. The unionist pamphlet may have been a response to such propaganda.

#### REFERENCES

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*Ibid*, p.102.

*Ibid*, p.103.

*Ireland Since The Famine* by F.S.L. Lyons, Weidenfield and Nicholson, London, 1971, pp. 188-189.

*Dr. O'Dwyer, Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick and the Irish Nationalists*, London, October, 1890.

*Ibid*.

*Michael Davitt Remembered* by Bernard O'Hara, 1984. Michael Davitt National Memorial Association, Straide, Co. Mayo. p.18.



*'The headquarters of the Land League had moved to Paris ...'*