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(1)

THE LAND
AND THE PEOPLE OF
NINETEENTH-CENTURY
CORK

*The Rural Economy and
the Land Question*

by
JAMES S. DONNELLY, JR.

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will not take place. Remember what I tell you, that evictions will take place if they see that there is a way for evictions to be carried on, and the only way to prevent them is for you to be prepared to defend your houses whenever these people get it into their heads.¹⁸⁴

O'Brien also anticipated evictions by the dowager countess of Kingston's order before the land legislation could benefit the tenants, and he explained his reasons:

Because she knew that in a couple of months that new land bill would brand her as a rackrenter. They knew well [that] if this bill was to be administered with anything like honesty, . . . her income will be pulled down double what the Plan of Campaign proposed, and therefore it was that she and Mr O'Grady and all the rest of the troop of attorneys and bum-bailiffs . . . would play upon your industry. That was why they were so anxious to drag whatever plunder they could drag within the next few weeks that remained to them. . . .¹⁸⁵

Incitement to resist eviction was a punishable offence under the new crimes act, and the government could hardly have asked for a clearer case. Accordingly, both O'Brien and Mandeville were summoned to appear before a crimes act court in Mitchelstown on 9 September.¹⁸⁶ Large crowds of country people assembled on that day in Mitchelstown to see the crimes act tested by a famous Parnellite and by a local hero, but neither of them appeared for trial. Instead, a great protest meeting attended by John Dillon and several English radical M.P.s including Henry Labouchere, was held in the market square. The Rev. B. MacCarthy had just been moved to the chair in order to address a gathering of several thousands when about twenty police tried to open a passage to the speakers' platform for the government's customary note taker. Observing this, Thomas Condon, M.P., reportedly stood up and shouted: 'Stand together, boys; don't let one of them through; they're near enough'. Cheering, the crowd turned and confronted the police, who were hopelessly outnumbered and had to retreat under a barrage of blackthorns and stones. A reinforcement group of forty police charging up the square on foot was halted by men on horseback at the edge of the crowd and then repulsed when they attempted to make a baton charge. Condon succeeded temporarily in restoring order and Dillon spoke, but halfway through his speech the police made a second baton charge. They were again driven back by an angry portion of the crowd that kept up a barrage of rock

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 12 Aug. 1887.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 26 Sept. 1887.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 25, 29 Aug. 1887.

throwing. From the barracks that overlooked the square, the frustrated and provoked police fired two volleys into the ranks of their tormentors below, killing two, and seriously wounding twenty persons.¹⁸⁷ Following this 'massacre', O'Brien and Mandeville were apprehended, and on 24 September they were convicted of having incited the Kingston tenants to resist eviction in the previous month. Mandeville was sentenced to two, and O'Brien to three months in prison.¹⁸⁸ The government was opening its arsenal. Shortly before, the orders under the crimes act had been signed to suppress the branches of the National League in the districts of Mitchelstown, Kanturk, and Millstreet, although it was widely expected that meetings would continue in secret.¹⁸⁹

The so-called Mitchelstown massacre had serious and significant repercussions. It badly embarrassed the conservative government (Arthur Balfour was thereafter known in Ireland as 'bloody Balfour'), it shocked English public opinion, and it drove Gladstonian liberals and Parnellites closer together.¹⁹⁰ One thing it definitely did not do, however; it did not destroy the Plan on the Kingston estate. If anything, it helped to polarize the feelings of the belligerents and to postpone the possibility of a settlement for several months. In early October the agent made a feeble, halfhearted effort at compromise. Three gales of rent had by then accumulated, and if the tenants would pay two of them in full at once, he offered to reduce the third gale by the amount of the court's future abatement, if any.¹⁹¹ Even though a future court reduction could not legally affect rent already due, this was a meagre concession, and the tenants' reaction was predictable. At a meeting over which Thomas Condon and Ambrose Mandeville presided, they flatly rejected Frenn's gambit and decided to wait to see if the land courts would give them justice.¹⁹² Ambrose Mandeville and Maurice Healy, brother of Tim and a prominent catholic solicitor in Cork city, had filed 540 applications to have 'fair rents' fixed on behalf of as many leaseholding tenants on the Kingston estate.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁷ Killed were Maurice Murphy and John Shinnick; a third man, John Casey, later died of gunshot wounds. In addition to the twenty persons seriously wounded, twenty others received wounds and bruises of a less serious nature (ibid., 10, 12 Sept. 1887). Cf. Lyons, *Dillon*, pp. 88-9; Curtis, *Coercion & conciliation*, pp. 197-8.

¹⁸⁸ Curtis, *Coercion & conciliation*, p. 223.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 435-8; *C.C.*, 22 Sept. 1887.

¹⁹⁰ Lyons, *Dillon*, p. 89.

¹⁹¹ *C.C.*, 4 Oct. 1887.

¹⁹² Ibid., 7 Oct. 1887.

¹⁹³ *C.E.*, 29 Sept. 1887.