

A ‘spirit of self-preservation’: herdsmen around Loughrea in the late 19th century [1]

Dr John Cunningham

Thanks to the spirit of self-preservation, based on the principles of trades unionism for mutual protection, these long-deserving toilers have unaided from any other source succeeded in putting their many grievances in such a manner that the owners of the flocks and herds felt constrained to recognise and atone for in many instances.[2]

The above tribute to the Loughrea-based South and East Galway Shepherds’ Association was prompted by the tenth anniversary celebrations of a remarkable organisation, at once the defender of the traditional prerogatives of its members and the vindicator of the legitimacy of their calling. The Loughrea Herds’ League*, as it was generally known, was one of the more durable trade unions in the history of rural Ireland, but it was also a contending party in the land war of the late 19th century.

The League first came into public view at an open-air meeting in the village of Bullaun on 8 June 1882. It was an appropriate venue —*bullán* may be translated from the Irish as ‘bullock’ — a place long associated with pastoral farming, and the centre of an extensive grazing district. The large and representative meeting had been widely-advertised by placard and word-of-mouth all over East Galway, and it succeeded in its purpose, which was to place the nascent League on a regular footing. Given the circumstances of the time, the authorities took a close interest in the proceedings, having been alerted by Oliver Dolphin junior, son of Oliver Dolphin of Turoe House, a grazing farmer of over 1,000 acres in his own right, and the employer of several herdsmen.[3]

The gathering at Bullaun was but the biggest in a series of organisational meetings held in the area during May and June 1882. There were others in Loughrea, in Killimor, and in Kilconnell.[4] Presenting the case at Kilconnell, Patrick Connolly —an employee of the McInerneys of Barnvihill— gave an insight into the herdsmen’s mentality: their sense of the venerability of their occupation; their conscientiousness as employees; their aspirations towards respectability:

It is now five and thirty years since the crook was given to me by my father, when I took his place in care of my master’s stock, and at that time I could buy a pair of shoes for six shillings; a hat for a shilling; get a suit of clothes made for very little; and potatoes, milk, butter and eggs could be had for a song. Our wages and freedoms were then just the same as now, when we must pay the tailor, the shoemaker and the hatter three times the amount and the cost of provisions has increased in greater proportion. Artisans, mechanics and labourers had their wages greatly increased in the last ten years, but the shepherds of Ireland have made no progress; they receive the same miserable wages as their fathers.[5]

‘...neither shepherds nor bailiffs, and yet a compound of both’

If shepherds had ‘made no progress’ since Patrick Connolly first grasped his crook, sheep certainly had. The post-Famine shift from tillage to pasture in Ireland had seen the national flock grow by 50% to more than three million in 30 years. In Co. Galway, sheep numbers grew by more than 60%, from 328,000 in 1851 to 531,000 (more than a sixth of the Irish total) in 1881. Cattle numbers were rising also, but somewhat more slowly. Within Co. Galway pastoral farming was strongest in the poor law unions of Loughrea and Ballinasloe No. 1.[6] Much of County Galway’s livestock was raised on small and medium mixed farms, but a considerable part of it was the property of the class of ‘graziers’ that employed herdsmen, something which is evident from census returns showing that at least 10% of those engaged in agriculture in the two unions were in the ‘shepherd’ category.* There were other intensive grazing districts—in North Leinster, in North Munster—but in no other region of Ireland were herdsmen so concentrated as in East Galway / Roscommon.

What of the employing graziers? Who were they, and where did they fit in society? The first point that should be made about them was that they were unpopular people in rural communities. Graziers, or more pejoratively ‘ranchers’, competed with tenant farmers for land and were believed to force up rent levels. While it is true that graziers were not a particular target of the Land League—most of them had a common interest with poorer tenants in reducing rents—the underlying resentment towards them did not dissipate.[7]

Graziers were not a homogenous group—some held thousands of acres, others held hundreds; some were landowners, others were tenants; some had held their land for many decades, others held from year to year. However, they were popularly represented as speculators, renting large tracts on the eleven months system, tracts which were the result of Famine clearances, and which had been brought into being by men who ‘respected no rights nor customs’ and who ‘regarded the old tenants as mere rent-producing machines to be worked to the utmost, or superseded by other rent-producing, animal or mechanical, as it might suit their interests best’.[8]

Implicit in the popular view of was a somewhat romantic social and economic argument against grazing, itself deriving from a notion of an ideal Ireland. This Ireland—as pre-Famine Ireland was—would be a densely populated place; it would be intensively-farmed, and its people would inhabit snug cottages, set in populous villages or nestling in a quilt of tilled fields and gardens. It is against this ideal Ireland that one must set nationalist commentators’ descriptions of the pastoral landscape. For William Bulfin, one of the most outspoken critics of the grazing economy, eastern Connacht was a ‘land desolate’:

There are no woodlands, no groves, scarcely any trees at all. There is no agriculture—the fertile desert is uncultivated from end to end. Away from our feet to the crest of the far off ridges the public road stretches in a straight line across the valley, between the stone walls, breast high, which separate it from the silent fields on either side. On the broad pastures the flocks and herds are scattered browsing the rich grass which grows over many a usurped hearth.[9]

If there was livestock grazing where cottages had recently stood, this was not the whole picture, for large grass farms were an established feature of the East Connacht plains since the 18th century or even before.[10] An English parliamentarian and agriculturalist, J.C. Curwen, visited one such near the site of the Battle of Aghrim in 1813. He admired the two

hundred cattle he saw there — ‘short in leg, well-formed in the carcass, and of a description not commonly driven to market’. The owner, one Major Kirwan, was a tenant of ‘some hundreds of acres’ in the vicinity, for which he paid four pounds an acre.[11]

No less than the grazing farm, the herdsman himself was an institution in the region, with idiosyncratic working practices that had evolved over the centuries. For contemporaries, these were archaic and obscure; almost a century after the West of Ireland herdsman passed into history, they are difficult to fully comprehend. For some understanding of the position of late 19th century herdsmen, the investigation by the Royal Commission on Labour —whose inspector, Roger C. Richards, visited Loughrea in 1894— was informative.[12] And in interpreting the information compiled by Richards, the assistance of Tom Glynn of Kilconeiron, a herdsman’s son with a considerable knowledge of the life and lore of the herding community, was valuable to this writer.

For Roger C. Richards, the west of Ireland herdsmen formed ‘a class quite distinct from any employed in any of the English districts’, being ‘neither shepherds nor bailiffs, and yet a compound of both’. Richards elaborated on what he meant, explaining that the Loughrea herdsman was obliged to exercise far more care than the typical workman, and to make restitution to his employer when he did not: ‘he is held responsible for any loss arising from or traceable to his own negligence; among such risks are scab or grub in sheep, injury to cattle from an open drain, or anything obviously out of order’.[13] The herdsmen themselves had a pithy phrase that summed up their obligations —they were liable for damage inflicted by ‘hogs, dogs, bogs and thieves’.[14]

The reward mechanism for herdsmen seemed anachronistic also: their wages were mostly in the form of ‘freedoms’, calculated according to the amount of land the individual was responsible for. In the early 1880s, typically, the herdsman’s freedoms consisted of one acre of tillage ground and one ‘collop’ for each 80 acres in his care. A ‘collop’ (the term ‘sum’ was used in Roscommon) was an archaic Irish land measurement, qualitative rather than a quantitative, being the grass of one cow and her calf or equivalent (i.e. one horse, three yearling calves, four ewes with lambs, six dry sheep). With these freedoms came a rent-free cottage and a small cash wage. ‘In addition to this’, noted Richards sardonically, ‘the herd according to his conscience or his worth, is allowed to throw in a few pigs, geese, poultry, &c’.[15] That the system was long-established is indicated by the following comment from Hely Dutton, writing in the early 1820s:

Shepherds have usually a house, small garden, some tillage ground, and grass for a cow and heifer, and generally keeping for a brood mare. As they are servants of some responsibility, they have commonly many indulgences, and no person would take a herd without his possessing some stock, as they are frequently the only security from neglect or misdemeanour.[16]

Their several ‘freedoms’ combined to provide most herdsmen with a reasonably good living by the standards of the time. If an estimate of £5 to £6 a year is accepted as the value of a ‘collop’ in the 1880s, and a like amount as the value of an acre of tillage ground, a herdsman of 300 acres might earn the equivalent of about £50 a year. This was several times what even an optimistic agricultural labourer might expect —a fully-employed labourer got about £20 a year, while a ‘servant’ got £10 and board— and it placed the herdsman on the same

economic footing as a tradesman or a middling west of Ireland tenant farmer. A herdsman might have argued that his income was uncertain, and that, anyway, he was unable to superintend 300 acres by himself, so the £50 represented the combined potential earnings of himself and his son, or himself and a casual labourer.[17]

Herdsmen's expertise and relative scarcity meant that they had a strong bargaining position—something that was reflected in their incomes before 1882. By acting collectively, they might improve their position further, especially if farming neighbours were persuaded not to take their places.

Through their association with an unpopular type of land use herdsman risked unpopularity. But the indications are that the majority of them were well-integrated in the rural community, and that they were regarded as the social equals of tenant farmers. One indicator of this is in marriage patterns. Of a sample drawn from Roscommon / North Galway in the years 1864 to 1880, Samuel Clarke found that 56% of the sons and daughters of herdsman married the offspring of tenant farmer. In the same period, only 13% of labourers' children married into farming families. Arguably, the herdsman's lifestyle facilitated his integration. He was certainly as independent as his farming neighbours, raising his own crops and his own livestock, exercising discretion, and largely in control of his own time. There are indications too that the herdsman's knowledge and judgement of animals, especially his customary expertise in the veterinary sphere, was shared freely with his neighbours.[18]

Demanding 'payment in proportion —gardening, grazing or money equivalent'

For modernising graziers of the late 19th century, the herding system was expensive and inefficient. They were involved in an extremely volatile business, and margins were very small.[19] If some such admitted that their employees were skilled and responsible men who were entitled to £50 a year, they argued nonetheless that traditional working practices were open to abuse. Under the 'collop' arrangement, the employee's stock ran with his master's—was there not a temptation to feed the best grass and the largest portion of hay to the herdsman's own animals, or to switch a scrawny creature for a sleek one? Landlord and extensive grazier, Lord Ashtown of Woodlawn, was one who abolished 'freedoms' among his herdsman, replaced them with a weekly wage of £1 together with a house and a few acres of garden.[20] But herdsman were attached to their freedoms, and when they established their League in 1882, the founding 'rules' sought to extend customary entitlements, rather than to replace them with wages:

That the scale of salaries should be as follows—for every 80 acres of land we care, the grass of two cows with calves for a year with winter-keeping for same, two acres of garden with £10 per year, and for all additional land we have to care, payment in proportion—gardening, grazing or money equivalent.[21]

The 'rules' represented a claim for a doubling of freedoms.

The Loughrea League's rules were copied from their fellows in Roscommon who had formed their own association earlier in 1882. For its part, the Roscommon Herds' Association was an off-shoot of a Roscommon Labour League, one of several such which organised rural and small town labourers—and which also provided cover for some tenant farmer agitation in the

interval between the suppression of the Land League in October 1881 and the formation of the Irish National League a year later. Several monster meetings of the Roscommon herdsmen in Tulsk, in Boyle, in ‘historic Roscroghan’, and on ‘the historic hills of Carnes’, presaged a sometimes violent conflict in that county which continued into 1883.[22]

According to the resident magistrate at Loughrea, one Beresford, the East Galway mobilisation began in response to circulars ‘sent to the herds in this locality’, by James Scott of Tulsk. This intelligence came from a Kilrickle herd, stated to be ‘on good terms with the constabulary’, who lent his membership card—a document printed in Roscommon—for copying during mid-May. The magistrate feared strike action, regarding which ‘the consequences will be very serious’[23]

In Dublin Castle, there was suspicion that hidden forces were at work. The majority of herdsmen were quite content, it was believed, but they might be ‘coerced’ into joining in agitation, even to the extent of all-out strike. If this occurred, there would be great difficulty in finding replacements, stock would be ruined, farms would fall vacant, and the grazing economy would be disrupted. This would suit the agenda of the agrarian radicals who sought the break up of grass farms and the redistribution of the land. Were Fenians, or the suppressed Land League, at the back of it all?[24]

Magistrate Beresford’s superiors advised him to ‘use his own discretion’ regarding the mobilisation of the herdsmen in his area in June 1882, and he decided not to interfere for the moment. The grazier employers, however, resolved to act. At a meeting of so-called ‘flockmasters’ in Athenry in early July 1882, £800 was subscribed to a ‘defence fund’, and a week later, at a meeting in Mack’s Hotel, Galway—following Roscommon precedent—the Galway Grazing Landholders Protection Association was formed. Agreement was reached on a number of practical matters: ‘all graziers should treat their herds according to a liberal scheme’; ‘on no account’, would graziers agree to meet with representatives of the herdsmen; the secretary should ‘proceed to the North of Ireland and engage the services of some herds who will for the present be able to meet any emergency’[25]

A key figure in the graziers’ association was Joseph Hardy of Dartfield, near Kilrickle. By his own account, Hardy was a self-made man, the owner of a small mill in 1837 who had taken up farming. He ‘commenced to take land for grazing’ in 1846—a date that indicates he benefited from famine clearances—and gradually extended his activities. In 1880, he was renting 6,000 acres for grazing, mostly between Loughrea and the River Shannon, from five different landlords, including Lords Clonbrock and Dunsandle. Hardy’s home in Dartfield, and the 800 acres surrounding it, he held from a Mr Gowing of London.[26]

Hardy’s testimony before several royal commissions indicates that he possessed some of the traits of the self-made man, for he came across as opinionated, self-righteous, and impatient. And in dealing with the herdsmen’s grievances, he displayed the same traits. When approached by Thomas Broder, a representative of his own herdsmen, he responded very unwisely—in the way that he had recommended at meetings of his fellow graziers—dismissing the man immediately and seeking possession of his house at the following Petty Sessions in Loughrea. Hardy’s other herdsmen promptly went on strike, whereupon he replaced them with men brought from Lurgan, Co. Armagh.[27] The eviction, together with the introduction of ‘emergency men’ who were billeted in the village of Killimor, and the

provision of police protection, evoked comparisons with the Captain Boycott episode, and ensured that Hardy lost almost all sympathy in the community. Ballinasloe's *Western News* commented:

We say it, above board, that the man is not patriotic, or a good citizen, who shows the temper that Mr Hardy has shown, and who struts about the country in the company of armed soldiers and policemen...The man whom would turn thus suddenly on a herd of twenty years service has no soul, nor is he possessed of a human feeling.[28]

The cost of protecting Hardy and his 'emergency men' was a charge on the local rates, something that did not enhance the popularity of either. And, as often happened when 'blacklegs' were introduced into a community, the Lurgan herdsmen were disparaged in village gossip and in newsprint. 'They are little corner boys about so high always fighting among themselves, and asking money', was the evaluation of a policeman who had close contact with them.[29]

Realising that their herdsmen could not be replaced easily, and not wishing to further stoke popular antipathy towards themselves, many of Hardy's colleagues were taking a rather different approach. At a public meeting in Killimor which was attended by 'upwards of one hundred' herdsmen, as well as by the people of the village and by the farmers of the district, one employer, Timothy Kirwan of Oxgrove, wished the Herds' League 'God speed' and promised his co-operation with it.[30]

More significantly, a leading grazier, Captain Smyth of Masonbrook, made concessions to his herdsmen (who included Thomas Mahon of the Loughrea Herds' League). At a meeting between sixteen of Smyth's herdsmen and his agent, J.J. Egan of Cooliney, it was announced that the new 'salary' was to be three collops, two acres of tillage ground, and £10 a year per hundred acres herded, an offer which was approximately equal to the herdsmen's full demands. Egan further indicated that he would grant the same to the few herdsmen in his own employment. After partaking of refreshments, the sixteen went outside and, seeing an unmade hayfield near Egan's house, they spontaneously transformed it into small cocks as a gesture of appreciation.[31]

Hardy's growing isolation forced him to reconsider his strategy and, in the second week of the dispute, he sent his son to call on his herdsmen with an invitation to attend a meeting in Dartfield. The offer made there, which included a promise to build new herdsmen's cottages, was accepted and, according to one report, 'the know-nothing herds of Emergency men from Lurgan were allowed to go whence they came'.[32]

Hardy's surrender marked the end of the herdsmen's dispute. The 'rules' of their League came into force throughout the district, and were not subsequently challenged in any systematic way.

But life did not return to normal for Joseph Hardy. Interviewed a few years later, he stated that he had 'got a great deal of annoyance personally', that he still had police protection, and that his holdings were reduced to 1900 acres. The origin of his troubles lay in the herdsmen's strike of 1882 which, he still believed, was fomented by Land League elements. Since then, he had endured public opprobrium, but he had also suffered the consequences of the

settlement, a 'most extravagant increase, in fact more than the farmers had by the land' and one 'foolishly paid in kind rather than in cash which would have been the better way'.[33] In light of Hardy's difficulties, it may not have been entirely coincidental that the Dolphins of Turoe, also leading opponents of the Loughrea Herds' League, in advertising 'a great auction... of 1169 head of cattle, sheep and horses', announced that they were 'relinquishing many of their extensive farms' a short time after the dispute ended.[34]

What of the alleged Land League involvement in the dispute? There is no persuasive evidence of any direct connection between it and the Herds' Leagues. That the authorities and some grazing employers thought otherwise, is more an indicator of the mindset of elite elements than a guide to the situation on the ground. The fact was that members of the elite found it hard to believe that working men in the countryside were capable of organising themselves, and there was a consequent tendency to look for the hidden hand of Fenians in all manifestations of unrest. A resolution passed by an isolated branch of the Land League, advising that 'the herds should give up herding so that the land might become waste' was therefore accorded far more significance than it merited.[35] For their part, herdsmen had reasons for not discouraging such speculation. Any association with the Land League, and the popular democracy which it represented, served to strengthen their bargaining position *vis a vis* their employers and, at the same time, enhance the legitimacy of their position within the community.

But if the Land League had no formal connection with the herdsmen agitation, it undoubtedly affected the environment in which the 1882 dispute was fought. The panic reaction of the grazing employers to the news that their herdsmen were forming a union is explicable only in light of the mobilisation of the previous few years. And likewise the alacrity with which the herdsmen organised. Patrick McGann of Gurteen, a shoemaker who had spent his adult life in Chicago, commented in 1882 on the transformation in popular attitudes in East Galway since his visit of four years previously:

Four years ago, the poor Irishman thought that because he had a bad coat, a hole in his shoe, or an empty purse, that he was fit for nothing better but to be the slave of the man who could enjoy these luxuries. But how different he is today. He stands erect and says to the man who domineers over him, or despises him: 'God may not have given me great talents, fortune did not give me a refined education or great wealth, but God has at least raised me to the dignity of a human being, and I must be treated as such'.[36]

But if the Land League struggle had provided space for the Herds' League to develop, it also gave herdsmen a reason to organise. They understood that their future was threatened by a settlement of the land question that did not include them and, moreover, that the system of land holding from which they derived their livelihoods was incompatible with the demands of tenant farmers.

'...not a single herd who is not a member'

The sources would indicate that the herdsmen's mobilisation 1882 was a West of Ireland phenomenon, with no equivalent elsewhere in the country. Within the west, even within County Galway, the agitation had several centres. Herdsmen in the Ballygar / Mountbellew area were affiliated with Roscommon, while Loughrea was regarded as the headquarters of

other Galway herdsmen, with Kilconnell and Tuam as subsidiary centres. The Roscommon Herdsmen's Association wound itself up in 1883 following an agreement with the Grazing Landholders Association of that county (which also repudiated its own combination). More than a decade later, it was reported that the Roscommon settlement of 1882-83 was still in force, but without any formal mechanism to enforce it.[37] While there was no dissolution in Co. Galway, there were only occasional reports of activity during the remainder of the 1880s[38], and it would appear that many branches lapsed, with those in the Tuam area remaining somewhat more vibrant than those around Loughrea. From one district, it was reported that a branch survived only because its meeting place was a public house, and that meetings had degenerated into 'rowdy gatherings, the principal feature of which is the consumption of large quantities of whiskey'.[39]

The movement underwent a 'revival' throughout the county in 1890-91, sparked, it was said, by 'harshness to one member of the body by an employer in the Loughrea area'. It is possible that the incident thus alluded to in the *Tuam News* was the dismissal by T.S. Eyre of James Kilchreest in the Kiltormer/Clontuskert area, an incident which certainly prompted active solidarity with the dismissed man.[40] Out of the revival emerged two distinct herdsmen's organisations: the St Patrick's Herdsmen's Association with headquarters in Tuam, and the South and East Galway Herdsmen's Association, based in Loughrea. Several attempts to unite the two did not succeed.[41]

There was no generalised dispute in this, the second phase of the herdsmen's movement, but officials and branches were kept occupied, like other trades unionists, supporting aggrieved members in their claims for proper payment and in their battles against unfair dismissal. (In practice, dismissal was almost always considered to be unfair). New activists, meanwhile, were coming to the fore, notably James Pender of the Kilrickle branch, who herded at Carrowntubber for two local farmers, James Monaghan of Lecarrowmagappogue and John Manton of Drought.[42]

Herdsmen expected to receive financial as well as moral support while in dispute, and also that their League would supply a substitute while they were indisposed.[43] Such benefits were expensive, and they meant that membership contributions were high. In the era before national insurance, however, they were attractive and they may have contributed to the creation of a virtual closed shop within herding in most of the county in the early 1890s. In this regard, however, the sense of fraternity which had developed within the occupation over generations and which was co-opted by the Leagues may be considered more important. In 1893, the Loughrea Herds' League claimed to have almost 500 members, adding that 'for twenty square miles around Loughrea, there were only twelve or thirteen shepherds missing from their association last year'. In similar vein, the St Patrick's Association declared that within a short period there would 'not be a single herd found in North Galway who is not a member.'[44]

Herdsmen had one concern which was not shared by employees in other sectors, and that was the succession on their death or retirement. Their Leagues sought to ensure that their members' aspirations to pass on herdings to their sons were given effect and, where there was no eligible sons, that the widow was adequately compensated before the herding was relinquished.

While no single conflict can be considered to be absolutely typical, a brief outline of one minor dispute involving the Loughrea Herds' League will provide an insight into the workings of the body. The dispute, in January 1892, was between a grazier, John Cullinane of Mountbrowne, Athenry, and J. Forde, his herdsman who had been six years in charge of 260 acres. Considering his tillage ground to be exhausted, Forde requested a new 'garden' and was offered one which was, by his own account, 'at a distance and in the worst part of the farm, with no fences and no stones nearby'. On refusing to accept, he was given notice, and soon afterwards Cullinane sought an order for possession of Forde's house, which was denied on a technicality by a magistrate. The response of the Loughrea Herds' League was to call a meeting to 'enquire' into the cause of the dispute. It was no ordinary inquiry, however, for it took place outside Cullinane's house, and it was attended by 150 'representatives' of the Herds' League—a 'small number', Thomas Mahon said, due to the shortness of the notice. The meeting, as one might expect, was considered intimidatory and a force of police under District Inspector Murphy sought to prevent it. Eventually, after some argument, the 'inquiry' proceeded at a distance from the house.[45]

Soon afterwards, the dispute was resolved on the terms, according to a version Cullinane supplied to the local press, which had been offered at the outset. This provoked a correction from James Pender, the Honorary Secretary of the Herd's League. It was not true, he stated, that Forde had settled for little or nothing: he now had a larger garden on a good part of Cullinane's farm, and he was to be permitted to draw a crop from his old garden while he prepared the new one. This settlement, Pender insisted, 'would not have been offered only for his being a member of the Herd's Association, and knowing well the stand that would be made for Forde, or for any other member who has a just cause, by our association'.[46]

But what exactly was the nature of 'the stand' which the Loughrea Herds' League could take for its members? Certainly, large mobilisations such as that at Mountbrowne served to intimidate employers and to embarrass them within the community. And no doubt, men like Thomas Mahon and James Pender developed negotiating skills that helped them win concessions for their members. But did the League offer more?

The answer must be a speculative one, because the evidence is not altogether conclusive. There was no doubt in the minds of senior policemen during the 1890s: the Loughrea Herds' League was 'dangerous association', a 'powerful and dangerous body' because it terrorised its' opponents with anonymous threatening notices, with warning gunfire outside their houses, even arranging that they be beaten or injured by gunshot.[47] It is true that incidents such as those occurred during disputes involving the Herds' League, It is not clear, however, whether these were spontaneous or strategic. From its establishment, the Loughrea Herds' League had renounced violence, always pledging itself to 'constitutional methods'. On the original membership card, for example, was a denunciation of 'the perpetrators of outrages on person or property as an enemy to our just cause and a traitor to our native land'.[48] Other agrarian movements of the period gave similar counsel to their members, but one feels that the Herd's League protested its pacifity rather too much. Unlike in Roscommon, there was no violence reported in the organised districts of Co. Galway in 1882, but there are indications that herdsman already enjoyed a reputation for militancy. If there were no Herds' Leagues before that date, an informal fraternity and a sense of mutuality had evolved in the occupation. And, in circumstances where herdsman might unwittingly find themselves expected to take sides in struggles between small farmers and large graziers, it was not surprising that they drew on

agrarian secret society traditions when it was necessary to defend their own interests. Certainly, a number of sources —secret intelligence, agrarian, and other— attributed violent incidents in the west of Ireland during the first phase of the land war to herdsmen.[49] Whether the denunciations from its platforms were sincere, or whether the Loughrea Herds' League secretly colluded in violent intimidation, there is no doubt that its bargaining position was considerably boosted by its reputation in this regard.

Claiming 'an honest recognition'

Periods of relative inactivity notwithstanding, the tenth anniversary of the herdsmen's movement was commemorated at Bullaun in July 1892. At a 'successful and enthusiastic' open-air meeting on this resonant site, the main resolution expressed a sense of satisfaction with achievements past, but it also signalled a change in orientation: 'That working as an independent body for the past ten years, side by side with the tenant farmers, labourers and mechanics who desire a native parliament, we claim an honest recognition by the Irish Parliamentary Party'.[50] Organised herdsmen had prevailed over their employers, but they needed political protection if their particular interests were to be guarded in the legislative arena.

Political protection was very much dependent on the attitude of the tenant farmers who dominated the grassroots parliamentary organisations. And they were not automatically sympathetic. As one Irish National League delegate put it, herdsmen should not be supported in any way, for 'they collaborate in grazing, an indefensible form of farming'.[51] Consequently, the herdsmen's leagues were careful to couch their grievances in terms that farmers could relate to. This was the consideration which led Thomas Mahon to insist at a meeting in Craughwell that 'land grabbers' and 'herd grabbers' were morally synonymous, [52] and it was why Mahon's League always referred to a dismissed members as 'evicted herdsmen'. It was also the reason why the acceptance of unpopular responsibilities was discouraged, with one set of rules insisting: 'That no member act as bailiff, rent warmer, or caretaker, unless the farm be conacred'.[53] Potentially controversial members, such as those taking charge farms that became vacant as a result of the land war, were simply refused membership. The following rule of 1882, therefore, was not just about maintaining a closed shop within herding:

That we will not recognise nor admit within our association any man who is not the son of a shepherd, or who has not been five years with a shepherd, or who has not been known to earn his livelihood as a shepherd during the three years previous to this date.[54]

By 1892, the quarantine period had been extended to ten years.

Eventually, in 1894, the herdsmen got the recognition they demanded when the MPs for South and for East Galway, David Sheehy and John Roche, were welcomed to a Herds' League platform at Bullaun by their veteran president, Thomas Mahon. Both, predictably, paid tribute to the Herds' League with Roche observing that it was responsible for bringing herdsmen to 'a position of comparative independence'. Stressing the importance of maintaining 'unity amongst themselves' and of 'standing by each other', he urged them to 'exact... the last farthing to which they were entitled'. The resolution of the day reiterated the

herdsmen's adherence to the policy of the agrarian mainstream and to its political representatives:

That we renew our unabated in our organisation...

That we pledge ourselves never to take charge of our farm that a member of our body or a tenant farmer might be unjustly evicted from; neither will we associate with or recognise any man so offending, but look upon him as an open foe to our cause, and an enemy to our country

That in view of the anticipated general election, we call upon all members of our association to have their votes registered...

That we take this opportunity of expressing our unabated confidence in the tact, the patriotic honesty, and the unswerving and unflinching courage of the Irish Party, as led by Mr Justin McCarthy.[55]

In seconding the resolution, James Pender alluded to the 'great advantages that had been gained since the association had been started'. That herdsmen had been able to show 'those land sharks' that 'they knew how to keep themselves, their wives and their families' was due to their being organised, but they had also benefited from political support: 'In Mr Sheehy, they had a representative the like of whom did not exist in the length and breadth of the land'. [56]

In the years after 1895, according to an intelligence source, the Loughrea Herds' League was 'comparatively quiescent principally because the principles for which it was formed have not been meddled with'. This situation, it was anticipated in 1899, was about to change with the establishment of a new tenant farmers' organisation, the United Irish League (UIL).[57] The UIL, which was formed by William O'Brien in Mayo in 1898, became especially strong in the west of Ireland where its commitment to the cause of 'congests' (i.e., small farmers who found it virtually impossible to acquire enough acres to make their farms viable) put it at odds with grazing interests. 'Break up the grazing farms' was a key slogan of the new agitation in the west, which intensified with the land reforms of the new century. Ultimately, the UIL tactic of driving cattle off the large farms would make it almost impossible for graziers to continue in business.[58] A popular ballad of the period, 'The Grazier Tribe', was a call to arms:

Oh ye toilers of this nation, I hope you will draw near,

A new and true narration I mean to let you hear

'Tis for you information my pen I take in hand

To try describe a grazier tribe that now infests this land...

Oh ye men in name, have ye no shame, to see this beauteous land

Turned into one vast wilderness by a cursed grazier band;

This land so kind was ne'er designed by Providence on high
To keep John Bull with mutton full, while the natives starve and die...
So ye valiant sons of labour, wherever you are found,
To seek a home you need not roam, but quietly look around;
There may be seen fine meadows green, and bullocks sleek and grand,
Just get your pole and take an stroll, and clear them off the land.[59][59]

A Loughrea Herds' League revival was signalled when about sixty gathered for a meeting in Bullaun on 25 March 1899. Speakers referred to the activity of the UIL, stressing the need to be well-organised so that the new agitation did 'not affect the rights of herds'. The development was cautiously welcomed in police circles, where the activity of the UIL was a cause of great concern:

There is a certain antidote in the shape of the Shepherds' Association which was originally formed as a check to employers dismissing their herdsmen. The Association has recently revived for the express purpose of combating any interference with their interests on the part of the UIL. The latter, therefore, in intimidating herdsmen to leave their employers will have to reckon with the Shepherds' Association which under the circumstances is not an unmixed evil.[60]

The RIC county inspector kept a hopeful eye on the Herds' League, reporting in September 1899 that its 200 members were 'not doing much', but predicting two months later that open conflict with the UIL was 'not far off'. [61] The conflict did not happen. Quite the opposite, indeed, for a merger between the two organisations was canvassed. That did not happen either, at least not in the formal way that was anticipated.

The last significant struggle of the Loughrea Herds' League was fought in 1901-02, when Lord Ashtown dismissed the herdsmen he employed on several grazing farms on his estate around Woodlawn. Ashtown was a specialist breeder of high-class cattle, and he did not consider his workers competent to oversee some innovative pastoral practices that he wished to introduce.[62] He was a formidable opponent: a headstrong and somewhat irrational man, an agricultural innovator who had long dispensed with the 'collop' system on his holdings, and a leading activist in the Unionist political cause.

The replacement herdsmen were from Scotland, and were Presbyterian, something which introduced a religio-political element to the dispute. This 'ugly feature', according to the county police inspector, arose from a belief that Ashtown was 'bent on driving Catholics from his employment' and replacing them with loyal Protestants.[63] An examination of Ashtown's political writings shows that were grounds for this belief—he considered all manifestations of unrest in Ireland to be rooted in a secret sectarian Catholic conspiracy[64]—but in the circumstances he would not have been able to recruit Catholic Nationalist herdsmen, even had he wanted. And sectarian tensions were not eased by Ashtown's

behaviour: in the opinion of one of his allies, he was ‘an obstinate determined man without any tact, [who] talks too much and too openly about his employees and what he thinks of them, and [who] will listen to no advice’.[65]

The Herds’ League was active in mobilising support for its dismissed members throughout the Woodlawn / New Inn / Kilconnell district. And, understandably in the circumstances, it highlighted allegations of religious discrimination —the most resonant and effective argument in its armoury. With the support of Ballinasloe’s *Western News* and the backing of UIL branches in the vicinity, the campaign entered its seventh month in the New Year of 1902. Ashtown himself didn’t seem unduly concerned: he had his representatives handle eviction proceedings arising from the dismissals while he himself travelled on the continent.[66]

As the agitation continued, the UIL became directly involved, organising a series of public meetings in major villages in the neighbourhood, and declaring a boycott of Ashtown. Following the meetings, there were ‘feeble efforts made to refuse to sell him oats’, but the boycott had little overall effect. But the involvement of the mainstream agrarian organisation, however ineffectually, had the effect of sidelining the Herds’ League and the UIL took over the leadership of the campaign to reinstate Ashtown’s herdsmen. Having failed to win reinstatement via the Herds’ League, the dismissed men evidently transferred their allegiance.[67]

Meanwhile, throughout East Galway, there were ‘strenuous efforts’ to unite the Herds’ League and the UIL. ‘The bait held out by the latter’, it was reported, ‘is the acknowledgement of the shepherds’ claim to large slices of the grassland they now herd for others’. It could not be said that the UIL’s involvement in the Ashtown affair was an auspicious start to the relationship. After spluttering on through 1902, that campaign simply fizzled out. Ashtown subsequently boasted of the success of his new arrangements: ‘I am £23,031 in pocket since I made these changes’, he told a 1907 local government inquiry.[68]

The Ashtown affair was a grievous blow to the Loughrea Herds’ League, a blow it barely survived. Its annual general meeting in Bullaun in June 1902 was considered by the authorities to be ‘of no importance’.[69] Members fell away, many of them joining their farming neighbours in the UIL, a development which was condemned at the annual general meeting in Bullaun, ‘the usual rendezvous’, on 27 June 1903:

That we view with regret the apathy prevailing in some parishes towards our organisation, and entertain grave doubts of members who have recently fallen away from our ranks, and we must consider them as hostile to our movement, and in future members should hold but as little communication with them as justice and reason may point out.(70)[70]

The same meeting demanded of ‘our representatives in Parliament’ that they introduce an amendment to the Land Bill then being debated, ‘enabling herds to purchase a portion of the farms they herd’.

Its 1903 AGM was the last held by the Loughrea Herds’ League. In post-Wyndham Act Ireland, there would be few herdsmen, and no need for a Herds’ League. There was no merger —herdsmen simply abandoned their own league, and joined one that seemed more suited to the situation. The land legislation did in fact enable the vast majority of herdsmen, as

employees on estates, to acquire land and to become farmers. In these circumstances, UIL membership was useful to individuals. And the evidence indicates that tenant farmers, by and large, were sympathetic towards herdsmen's claims, so the transition for most was relatively painless.[71] There were some, however, on controversial properties, who would fall foul of tenant farmer organisations during a subsequent phase of the land struggle, with terrible consequences for themselves.[72]

It is noteworthy that, just as the Loughrea Herds' League was expiring, herdsmen in other western counties were stirring themselves in response to the Wyndham Act. In Roscommon, where a herds' organisation had been dissolved twenty years earlier, there was a flurry of meetings in 1904, and some activity was also reported from Mayo.[73] These were short-lived manifestations, however, and it can be assumed that those involved pursued their claims through UIL branches.

Its inauspicious end, notwithstanding, the Loughrea Herds' League was a remarkable organisation. During twenty years, it succeeded in organising almost all of its constituency, a marginal section of the rural community. Until it faced Lord Ashtown, it was certainly effective in representing its members in disputes with employers, as evidenced by its success in defending and extending traditional rights. This was achieved using both constitutional methods and the time-honoured tactics of jacquerie. And their organisation made herdsmen a force to be reckoned with in East Galway. By likening their plight to that of the rural majority, and by steering them away from conflicts with small tenants, it protected their position and their status in the community. Moreover, the Loughrea Herds' League was virtually unique in Ireland, with only its offshoot in the Tuam district coming anywhere near matching it for effectiveness and for durability.

Footnotes

* The Loughrea Herds' League was one of many names by which the organisation was known. Since it was the name favoured by the herdsmen themselves, it is the one I shall use throughout. In direct quotations, other names may be used.

* 1901 Census. The breakdown was as follows: farmers/graziers, 69.5%; labourers, 22%; shepherds, 8.5%. An examination of individual census schedules, however, indicates that many herdsmen—in particular, the sons of herdsmen who worked with their fathers—were categorised as labourers. This leads me to believe that the true figure for herdsmen was in the region of 12%.

• The Land League had claimed to represent labourers as well as farmers, and had amended its name accordingly. This was adverted to in the manifesto of the Labour League: 'The Irish National Land League and Labourers Industrial Union, having been suppressed by the government of England, and the labourers of Ireland having thus been deprived of the services of the only organisation capable and willing to assist them in the assertion of their rights, it is deemed advisable to call upon the labourers to form in every parish in Ireland, a branch of the Labour League, so as to preserve their organisation till such time as the constitutional liberties of the people are restored...' (CSORP 1882, 37691).

- [1] The Loughrea herdsmen have previously been discussed by the present writer in his book, *Labour in the West of Ireland, 1890-1914*, Belfast 1995, pp.39-48.
- [2] *Tuam News*, 8 July 1892.
- [3] National Archives, CSORP 23402/1882, 24208/1882.
- [4] *Western News*, 24 June, 1 July 1882. Personal detail on Patrick Connolly from his census schedule of 1901.
- [5] *ibid.*, 24 June 1882.
- [6] *Agricultural Statistics, 1847-1926*, Dept of Industry and Commerce, 1928.
- [7] David Seth Jones, *Graziers, Land Reform, and Political Conflict in Ireland*, Washington 1995, pp.139-58; Samuel Clarke, 'The importance of agrarian classes: agrarian class structure and collective action in nineteenth-century Ireland', in *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. xxix, no.1, 1978, pp.22-40.
- [8] *Royal Commission on Congestion in Ireland: Minutes of Evidence*, H.C., 1908, par. 57566. Evidence of John F. Ward, Ballinasloe.
- [9] William Bulfin, *Rambles in Eirinn*, Dublin 1907, pp.45-46.
- [10] J.H. Andrews, 'Land and People, c.1685', in Moody, Martin & Byrne, *A New History of Ireland, iii, Early Modern Ireland*, p.461
- [11] J.C. Curwen, *Observations on the state of Ireland, principally directed to its agriculture and rural population*, London 1818, vol.ii, p.237.
- [12] *Royal Commission on Labour: The Agricultural Labourer*, vol iv, Ireland, pt.iii, report on the Loughrea Union by Roger C. Richards, H. of C. 1893-94, xxxvii, pp.19-31.
- [13] *ibid*, p.21.
- [14] Oral testimony of Thomas Glynn (b.1916).
- [15] *The Agricultural Labourer*, Loughrea, p.21.
- [16] Hely Dutton, *A Statistical and Agricultural Survey of the County of Galway, with Observations on the Means of Improvement*, Dublin 1824, p.361.
- [17] *The Agricultural Labourer*, Loughrea, pp.19-29; Tom Glynn testimony.
- [18] Samuel Clarke, *Social Origins of the Irish Land War*, Princeton 1979, pp.117-20; Tom Glynn testimony.
- [19] Jones, *Graziers*, pp.42-88 and 'The Cleavage between Graziers and Peasants in the Land Struggle', in Clarke & Donnelly, eds, *Irish Peasants: Violence & Political Unrest, 1780-1914*, Dublin 1983, pp.374-417; W.E. Vaughan, 'Farmer, Grazier and Gentleman: Edward Delaney of Woodtown' in *Irish Economic & Social History Journal*, vol.ix, 1982, pp.53-72.
- [20] *The Agricultural Labourer*, Loughrea, p.21; Tom Glynn testimony.
- [21] *Western News*, 1 July 1882.
- [22] National Archive, CSORP 36108/1882, 37691/1882; *Roscommon Messenger*, 4, 24 March, 24 June 1882, 9, 16, 23, 30, 7 October, 23 December 1882, 6 January, 3 March 1883; *Roscommon Herald*, 28 April, 20, 27 May 1882; *Roscommon Journal*, 18 March, 6 May, 3 June, 2 September 1882.
- [23] National Archives, CSORP 23402/1882.
- [24] *ibid.*, 24208/1882.
- [25] *Galway Express*, 15, 22 July 1882; *Roscommon Journal*, 6 May 1882.
- [26] *Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Working of the Landlord and Tenant (Ireland) Act, 1870* (Bessborough Commission), H. of C., 1881 xviii, minutes of evidence, pars 20889, 20929.
- [27] *Western News*, 15, 29 July, 5 August 1882.

- [28] *ibid.*, 29 July 1882.
- [29] *ibid.*, 5 August 1882.
- [30] *ibid.*, 1 July 1882
- [31] *ibid.*, 29 July 1882.
- [32] *ibid.*, 5 August 1882.
- [33] *Royal Commission on the Land Law* (Cowper Commission), H. of C. 1887 xxvi, minutes of evidence, pars 12200-02.
- [34] *Western News*, 7 October 1882; *Loughrea Journal*, October 1888. The ill-health of Dolphin senior was the reason publicly given.
- [35] Public Records Office, London, CO 904/16, p.401, Secret Societies, Register of Home Associations: 'Memorandum as to the Working of the Shepherds' or Herds' Association in County Galway, W.R.'
- [36] *Western News*, 3 June 1882. For Patrick McGann and his family, see Diarmaid Ó Cearbhaill, 'From Doughcloon to Chicago: the life and career of Congressman Lawrence E. McGann, 1852-1928' in *JGAHS* 51, 1999, pp.147-66.
- [37] *The Agricultural Labourer*, Report on the Castlerea Union, p.95.
- [38] *Tuam News*, 19 July 1887; *Western News*, 19 May 1888.
- [39] 'Memorandum as to the working of the Herds Association'.
- [40] *Western News*, 19 May 1888; *Tuam News*, 21 August 1891.
- [41] *Galway Observer*, 5 December 1891.
- [42] Personal detail from Pender's census schedule, 1901.
- [43] *Tuam News*, 12 January 1894.
- [44] *ibid.*, 10 November 1893, 13 July 1894.
- [45] *ibid.*, 22, 29 January 1892,
- [46] *ibid.*, 5 February 1892.
- [47] PRO, London: Divisional Commissioners' and County Inspectors' monthly confidential reports, January 1895, CO 904/57; Inspector General's and County Inspectors' monthly confidential reports for 1899, CO 903/8, p.51.
- [48] National Archives, CSORP 36108/1882.
- [49] PRO, London, CO 904/16, pp.401, 1-5, 'Memorandum as to the working of the Herds Association'; Parnell Commission, H. of C. 1890, xxvii, evidence of J.J. Loudon; Jarlath Waldron, *The Maamtrasna Murders*, Dublin 1992, pp.17, 312-13; P.G. Lane, 'The Agricultural Labourer in Ireland, 1850-1914, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, UCC, 1974, pp.174-77.
- [50] *Tuam News*, 8 July 1892.
- [51] *ibid.*, 14 January 1887
- [52] *ibid.*, 21 July 1893.
- [53] *ibid.*, 13 November 1891.
- [54] *Western News*, 24 June 1882.
- [55] *Tuam News*, 6 July 1882.
- [56] *ibid.*
- [57] PRO, London, CO 903/8 (1899), p.51, CO 904/69, January 1900.
- [58] Paul Bew, *Conflict and Conciliation in Ireland, 1890-1914: Parnellites and Radical Agrarians*, Oxford 1987, *passim*.
- [59] From 'The Grazier Tribe', in Colm Ó Lochlainn, *Irish Street Ballads*, Dublin 1939, pp. 154-55, 226. Ó Lochlainn collected the song from a ballad singer in Galway.

- [60] National Archives, Inspector General's and County Inspectors' monthly report for October 1899, Box 2.
- [61] *ibid*, September, November 1899.
- [62] PRO, London, CO 904/8 (1901), p.330, CO 904/73, June, July, October 1901.
- [63] PRO London, CO 904/8 (1901), p.330.
- [64] See, for example, Lord Ashtown, *The Unknown Power behind the Irish Nationalist Party: its Present Work and Criminal History*, London 1908, *passim*. (The 'unknown power' was the Ancient Order of Hibernians).
- [65] PRO London, CO 904/75, June 1902
- [66] *ibid*, CO 904/75, December 1901, January, February 1902
- [67] *ibid*
- [68] *ibid*, February 1902; *Tuam Herald*, 20 July 1907.
- [69] PRO London, CO 904/75, June 1902;
- [70] *Western News*, 4 July 1903.
- [71] Tom Glynn testimony; *Western News*, 12 May 1907, 14 November 1908, 31 August 1912; *Tuam Herald*, 30 January 1909.
- [72] See Anthony Varley, 'The Politics of Agrarian Reform: the State, Nationalists, and the Agrarian Question in the West of Ireland', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1994, pp.96-286.
- [73] *Western People*, 14 February 1903; *Roscommon Journal*, 2 July, 10 September 1904

John Cunningham, 'A "spirit of self-preservation": herdsmen around Loughrea in the late 19th century', Forde et al, *THE DISTRICT OF LOUGHREA, VOL.1: HISTORY, 1791-1918*, Loughrea 2003, pp.457-80.

John Cunningham may be contacted at the School of Humanities (History), NUI Galway, john.cunningham@nuigalway.ie

Information about the lives of the other groups of Connacht working people may be found in his books *Labour in the west of Ireland: working life and struggle, 1890-1914* (Belfast 1995), and 'A town tormented by the sea': *Galway, 1790-1914*, (Dublin 2004). Both books are available in libraries.

We are grateful to **Dr. John Cunningham** for kind permission to host this work on aughty.org