

## 5 THE GOIDELIC REVOLT

*What fools the Irish landlords are!*

A. J. Balfour to Marquis of Salisbury  
2 November 1889, Salisbury papers.

Although the Hebridean land agitation caused many people to examine the urban aspects of the land problem, yet for several years the urban reformers exerted little influence upon the main course of events. The seed had been planted, but it was still germinating underground. In the rural parts of the British Isles, by contrast, interest in the land problem was acute, and it exerted a great effect on the policies of the Conservative Government which Lord Salisbury headed.

Ireland was still much the centre of attention, but the political alignments there were still very far from clear. On the one hand, it was possible that the Union with Great Britain might be disrupted, either through changes at Westminster, or through a social revolution in Ireland. On the other hand, a powerful Unionist movement had appeared in Ulster, and had received enthusiastic support from most Protestants in all social classes. There was still something to be said for the view that Irish Nationalism was really the dream of middle-class romantics; that the peasant Nationalism which had seemed so terrible during the Land War period had no deep roots even among the Catholics, and would soon abate if drastic action were taken to deal with the land question. A government which was prepared to deal with that problem with courage and imagination might perhaps succeed in "killing Home Rule with kindness".

Unfortunately for the Government, economic depression returned to the rural areas of the United Kingdom in about 1886. This new depression was quite different in character from the one which they had experienced seven years earlier. Crops were not ruined, and yields on the whole remained quite high,<sup>1</sup> but prices fell heavily as food began to flood in from abroad. As the margin of comfort was much less in Ireland than in most of the United Kingdom, it was again in Ireland that the signs of discontent first became evident. Tenants who relied on marketing a large part of

their produce to pay rent were in great difficulties. There was another spate of evictions — even Lord Salisbury, writing to the Queen, described them as “harsh”.<sup>2</sup> Between 1884 and the autumn of 1886 8,000 families suffered that fate.

Parnell introduced a Tenants’ Relief Bill in the early autumn of 1886. This Bill sought to stay evictions, to revise “fair rents” in the light of current prices, and to admit leaseholds to the benefits of the 1881 Act. The Government feared that these ideas would undermine the loyalty of Protestant tenants in the North who had been supporting the Union. Nevertheless, the Ministers were conscious of even bigger dangers, and a memorandum was circulated to the Cabinet, arguing that “Evictions could not be suspended without at the same time suspending all the other remedies for the recovery of rent, and it is almost certain that any legislation in this direction would be followed by an entire cessation of payment of rent in Ireland”.<sup>3</sup> Eventually the Government decided to oppose the Bill on all counts, and it was defeated. The Liberal Unionists were deeply split on the Bill. Thirty-one, including Harrington, voted with the Government, while the remainder, including Chamberlain, purposely abstained.<sup>4</sup>

The influence both of Parnell and of the National League in land matters was very much one of restraint, and this fact had not been lost upon the Government.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the Government also recognised the very precarious nature of the whole situation: “If the National League should depart from its present policy of conciliating and keeping in touch with British Radicalism, its organisation is so complete and powerful that it would be very dangerous; while on the other hand if this policy is continued, the Secret Societies, especially the I(rish) R(epublican) B(rotherhood) in which considerable activity now prevails, may at any moment break into action.”<sup>6</sup>

In fact the challenge to the Government came from a rather different quarter. On 23 October 1886, three well-known Irish politicians, T. C. Harrington, John Dillon and William O’Brien, launched what became known as the “Plan of Campaign”. Their scheme was that the tenants on an estate should send a deputation to their landlord and ask for rent reductions. If this request were refused, the tenants should pay no rent at all, but should contribute what seemed to them a reasonable rent into a campaign fund, which could be used to resist the inevitable attempts at eviction.

In spite of the large drop in agricultural prices, the existence of "judicial rents" which had been fixed comparatively recently set the "campaigners" at something of a moral disadvantage. Yet the judicial rents which the sub-commissioners fixed during 1886 were markedly lower than those which they had established in earlier years, and tenants whose rents had been prescribed during the more prosperous years inevitably developed a sense of grievance.<sup>7</sup> Lord Salisbury oversimplified the position, but he appealed to a strong and widespread English attitude, when he castigated the Plan of Campaign as "fraud" and "swindling".<sup>8</sup> Parnell also strongly disapproved of the Plan, and urged Davitt not to support it — arguing that it would antagonise British voters and thus prejudice Home Rule.<sup>9</sup>

The Government was far from certain how to tackle the Plan. There may even have been some initial doubts whether it was actually unlawful<sup>10</sup> but they eventually decided to arrest and prosecute O'Brien and Dillon. Predictably, the jury disagreed, and the prisoners were discharged.

Yet again, the familiar amalgam of coercion and conciliation was applied. A Land Bill was introduced by the Government, designed to halt the evictions. In its original form, the Bill was also intended to allay, so far as possible, the fears of the Irish landlords;<sup>11</sup> but the Liberal Unionists issued an ultimatum to the Government<sup>12</sup> and compelled them to bring forward a much stronger measure. The Liberal Unionists were by no means free agents in the matter. Not only were they of very mixed origins and composition but their more radical members were all too conscious that many of their own voters were far from happy about the estrangement from Gladstone, and were being constantly stirred to revolt by the Liberal organisers. Having made concessions to the Liberal Unionists — Salisbury regarded them as "the price we have to pay for the Union, and it is a heavy one" — the Ministers suddenly found themselves fighting a war on two fronts. Salisbury had by no means complete control over the House of Lords, and some compromise between the two Houses was necessary before the measure could be passed.<sup>13</sup> When the Bill eventually became law, it provided that judicial rents could be revised when the recent price fall had affected the peasants' ability to pay. It also brought 100,000 leaseholders within the ambit of provisions similar to those of the 1881 Act.

The 1887 Land Act was accompanied by a Crimes Act which

gave extraordinary powers to the Irish executive. Passage of the Crimes Act caused considerable discomfort to a section of the Government's Liberal Unionist allies, four of whom were driven back to the ranks of the Gladstonians.<sup>14</sup> The Irish peasant agitation continued, and the new powers granted by the Act were soon used. On 19 August 1887, the Government "proclaimed" the National League as a dangerous organisation, and proceeded a month later to suppress some of its branches.<sup>15</sup>

Coercion, however, brought its own difficulties, both in Ireland and in England. Five of the Liberal Unionists, including Chamberlain himself, went so far as to vote in favour of Gladstone's motion condemning the Government's decision to "proclaim" the National League.<sup>16</sup> Not long after the "proclamation" a crowd of 8,000 gathered for a demonstration at Mitchelstown, Co. Cork. A Government reporter who arrived late sought to push his way, with police escort, through the assembly. John Morley described the *dénouement*: "What followed is a matter of conflicting testimony. One side alleges that a furious throng rushed after the police, attacked the barracks and half murdered a constable outside, and that the constables inside, in order to save their comrade and to beat off the assailing force, opened fire from an upstairs window. The other side declare that no crowd followed the retreating police at all, that the assault on the barracks was a myth, and that the police fired without orders from any responsible officer, in mere blind panic and confusion. One old man was shot dead, two others were mortally wounded and died within a week."<sup>17</sup> Whatever actually happened, three new martyrs were certainly made. Gladstone's injunction, "Remember Mitchelstown!", delivered not long after, became a great watchword with the Irish and with the Liberals.

The Plan soon came under attack from another quarter, and one where it was much more vulnerable. In its early stages, it had received widespread support from the Catholic clergy, including many of the hierarchy. In the autumn of 1887, a body of Catholics, including the Duke of Norfolk, met the Pope, and seem to have exerted an influence upon him. In April 1888, he formally condemned the Plan of Campaign, and, indeed, the practice of "boycotting" as well. Although Dillon had declared earlier that Irish Catholics would "no more take their political guidance from the Pope than from the Sultan of Turkey", and many local tenants' organisations in Ireland indignantly repudiated

the Papal authority on such matters, yet the Plan of Campaign certainly declined sharply, and in 1888 its receipts were well under a third of what they had been two years earlier.<sup>18</sup>

In October 1890, Dillon and O'Brien fled the country to avoid arrest. This, in the view of one distinguished modern scholar, "marks the end of the Plan as a vital, purposeful movement".<sup>19</sup> It did not die at once, however, and seventeen disputes were still outstanding in 1893. The Plan was operated on 116 estates in all, and the total sum which it received was set at £234,000.<sup>20</sup> Nor was the Plan wholly confined to Ireland, for it was also set into action by tenants on the Ellore estate in Aberdeenshire.<sup>21</sup> On some particular Irish estates — such as the Smith-Barry estates in Co. Tipperary — there were long and complicated struggles, involving large numbers of people, and attracting immense public interest over a prolonged period. So far as its defined objectives were concerned, the Plan of Campaign was only a very qualified success; but it was an extremely effective means of keeping the Irish land agitation alive, and probably exerted a substantial indirect effect upon political attitudes.

The Government was disturbed no less by the militancy of some landlords than by the militancy of the tenants. The most recalcitrant of these Irish landlords was the Marquis of Clanricarde — "Lord Clan Rack-Rent" — absentee owner of nearly a hundred square miles of Ireland. His estates in Co. Galway were divided into two sections. The one at Woodford was notorious for agrarian crime, and was indeed the first place where the Plan of Campaign had been set in operation. The other, at Portumna, however, was exempt from crime down to the autumn of 1888, largely through the influence of Bishop Healy, who was also the local parish priest. Some of the Portumna tenants had obtained much greater reductions than others under the 1881 Act, and in 1886 the aggrieved tenants decided to adopt the Plan of Campaign. The Bishop, however, persuaded them to abandon it — promising to use his influence upon Lord Clanricarde to obtain a fair concession. Clanricarde did not reply to the petition — described by the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Arthur Balfour, as "most respectful" — which had been sent by the tenants and signed by the Bishop. Instead, Clanricarde made a counter-offer which was practically worthless. Balfour told the Cabinet: "The Clanricarde property has already cost the country about £9,000, and is costing it at this moment £100 a month for protection. These sums will probably

be doubled, and it is, in my opinion, intolerable that a man like Clanricarde should be permitted to endanger the Union by his selfish stupidity. The terms of arrangement suggested by the Bishop are certainly not in excess of those which are commonly granted by good landlords throughout Ireland . . . The Bishop has defeated the Plan of Campaign and has preserved the peace of the district, solely by his personal influence . . . if, through the rejection of his terms his influence is shattered, as it most undoubtedly will be, a state of affairs will arise ruinous to the landlord, ruinous to the tenantry, and most dangerous to the whole cause of the Union."<sup>22</sup>

Eventually Balfour and the Prime Minister went so far as to see Clanricarde personally in order to attempt to obtain some concession, but they were completely unsuccessful.<sup>23</sup> Balfour thereupon refused protection to the bailiffs who sought to enforce ejection decrees on the Portumna estates. He even contemplated new legislation whereby the estates of a peculiarly obstructive landlord might be administered, in his own interest, by public authorities.<sup>24</sup> Apparently nothing came of these endeavours, and the Clanricarde properties provided a constant vexation to successive British governments until they were acquired by the Congested Districts Board in 1915.

Nor was Lord Clanricarde the only Irish landlord who excited Balfour's ire. The Chief Secretary gave the Cabinet his own answer to the familiar argument that the Irish landlords functioned as a sort of English garrison in a hostile country: "I do not dissent from the premises, but I draw from them an opposite conclusion. The landlords are no doubt like a garrison, but like a garrison in a hostile country which they are unable to hold, which they cannot conquer themselves nor help us to conquer, and who are constantly hampering our movements by the necessity we are under of not abandoning them to our enemies. I may add that they are a garrison totally without discipline, wholly ignorant of elements of strategy, and who are much more successful in embarrassing their friends than in beating their foes."<sup>25</sup>

If this was the impression which Irish landlords made upon a man who was by class, race, religion and politics their natural friend, it is not difficult to gauge how they must have looked to their enemies.

In the teeth of these difficulties (or perhaps because of them) the Government went ahead with its policy of fostering peasant-

proprietorship in Ireland. As we have seen, the 1870 and 1881 Act had had only very qualified successes in this particular direction. The Act of 1885, however, was far more effective. A Royal Commission which reported in February 1887, showed that almost half of the £5 millions allocated had already been requested, and over 5,000 applications had been received.<sup>26</sup> By 1888, 14,000 purchase agreements had been concluded, and nearly half of them related to holdings with an annual value below £30. Half of the agreements, it is true, concerned land in Ulster; but even in stricken Connaught there were more than 1,500. The instalments had been paid remarkably — one might almost say incredibly — well. Of a total sum of £90,000 which had been due, only a little over £1,000 was outstanding, and there was reason to think that this sum would soon be met. Indeed, the success was in one sense an embarrassment, for agreements had been concluded to a value of nearly £6 millions,<sup>27</sup> while the sum authorised under the Ashbourne Act was only £5 millions.

Encouraged by this success, and pressed strongly by the Liberal Unionists,<sup>28</sup> the Government procured the passage of another Land Purchase Act in 1888 which doubled the sum available, and this loan was speedily taken up. Again success made further legislation necessary, and Balfour contemplated a measure which would be more far-reaching than its predecessors. Not to put too fine a point on it, the Government was still acutely conscious that the preservation of the Union would turn largely upon its capacity to allay the grievances of Irish tenants. Even the Protestant areas of what men were pleased to call "loyal Ulster" continued to provide signs that they might not be immovable in their support for the Union. While the Land Bill of 1887 was wending its way through Parliament, the Liberal Unionists had needed to remind the Government that "unless considerable alterations were made in the Land Bill, Ulster itself would very probably be lost to the Unionist cause".<sup>29</sup> A powerful body, the Ulster Tenants' Defence Association, demanded that landlords should be compelled to sell farms at their tenants' demand.<sup>30</sup>

This question of possible compulsion upon recalcitrant landowners was the thorniest of all those raised by the Government's policy of promoting peasant-proprietorship. Unlike the English or lowland-Scots tenant farmer, who was willing to move from farm to farm, the Irish peasant usually exhibited an immense attachment to some particular piece of land. What he demanded

was not simply the freehold of any farm with the required acreage and soil, but the freehold of the particular farm which he and his ancestors had tilled for generations. Hence he sought compulsion upon some specific landlord to sell the property, not merely that an economic climate should be created in which landlords as a whole would be disposed to sell.

From the landlords' point of view, land ownership could have had few attractions in the prevailing state of Ireland. It might not even yield rent for much longer. As one modern commentator has observed: "If the administration waited too long before acting, the chances were that the Irish landlords would be lucky to escape with the clothes on their backs."<sup>31</sup>

It was a fair guess that wise, kindly and progressive landlords would be likely to sell voluntarily, while those who would refuse would be obstinate and obstructive men of the Clanricarde type, whose characters were not even softened by enlightened self-interest. Neither Balfour nor Salisbury seems to have been opposed to compulsion as a principle; nevertheless, Balfour decided that "however desirable compulsion may be, it will very likely be impossible to get Parliament, public opinion, or the Irish landlords to think so".<sup>32</sup> Lord Salisbury, after recording "a tremendous scream" from one of his supporters at the prospect of compulsion, endorsed the view that it "would have broken up the Cabinet, the Party and the Union".<sup>33</sup> Corresponding — or perhaps even deeper — splits appeared between the Chamberlain and Hartington wings of the Liberal Unionists.<sup>34</sup> An Irish Land Purchase Bill of some kind was essential; but it was exceedingly difficult to frame one which would not split the Government and its supporters along every imaginable line of cleavage.

The Bill which Balfour eventually proposed, in March 1890, firmly excluded compulsion. As with the Ashbourne Act, no initial payment was required from the tenant, and the annuity instalments were four per cent. The cost of purchase, however, would be defrayed by Treasury stock created *ad hoc* — rather as Gladstone had proposed in 1886.

The initial reaction of the Nationalists was hostile, for they argued that only a small proportion of tenants would benefit, and it would be difficult to raise credit for any schemes which might later be devised to assist the remainder. In the later stages of the Bill, however, the Irish were disposed to accept it. By that time they were in no position either to impede the passage of the Bill



or to improve its contents, for their Party had been shattered by the disputes which attended Parnell's divorce. The Bill took an exceptionally long time to pass through Parliament, and eventually became law in August 1891. Parnell was within a few weeks of his death, and nearly a decade would elapse before his Party was again able to speak with something like a united voice.

The Balfour Act of 1891 was not only concerned with land purchase. It also began to deal with the special problem of these densely-populated rural areas which were known as the "Congested Districts". This problem had deep roots, and it deserves a digression.

During the early part of the Land War, the peasants who attracted most attention were those whose problems could be met, at least in part, by the "Three Fs". The gravamen of the complaint of those peasants was that they were over-rented; that their improvements were liable to be arrogated by landlords; and that the risk of arbitrary eviction hung over their heads. Such people would (in theory) be completely satisfied if they could become proprietors instead of tenants, secure in their holdings and without the obligation to pay rent. Yet there also existed in Ireland considerable numbers of peasants whose problems were of a completely different kind. Their holdings were so tiny that it would have made little difference if rent had been abolished altogether. Their improvements were of negligible value; and even eviction could hardly make their lot much worse. In about 1890, William O'Brien went to live in one of the worst of these Congested Districts, in Co. Mayo. He later described the situation thus: ". . . While the overcrowded villagers . . . lived on patches of heather hills or morasses in which the periodical failure of crops was a necessity of nature, these scenes of wretchedness were surrounded by wide-ranging pastures from which the villagers or their fathers had been evicted in the clearances following the Great Famine of 1847 . . . The peculiar conditions of the western problem were then as little known over three-fourths of Ireland, or even by five-sixths of the Irish Party, as the geography of mid-Africa."<sup>35</sup>

"Congested Districts" extended over a large part of the West of Ireland, and their origin was not always the same. Sometimes, as in the cases which O'Brien observed, they had been brought into existence by mass-extirpation of peasants after the Famine.

Others were quite different. An important official in the Local Government Board for Ireland described the situation on another estate, also in Co. Mayo. The landlord there, Lord Dillon, did not evict wholesale, or even discourage the peasants from subdividing their holdings if they wished. As a result: "The people married early, bred in swarms, and squatted down upon their bits of reclaimed bogs in the winter, migrating to England in the summer to earn money enough to pay their rent, and keep them alive till the spring came round again . . . The population has increased since the famine years, though in Ireland the total population has enormously decreased. The rent roll was greatly increased, of course; how much it would be hard to say, but it is popularly believed that it was raised from £5,000 a year to £25,000. It was not contended, however, that individual rents were too high and both Lord Dillon and Strickland" — Lord Dillon's agent — "were liked by the people and the rents were fairly paid, the people saying that whereas Lords Lucan and Sligo cleared off thousands and made large grass farms of the holdings . . . Lord Dillon was a kind man and not an exterminator. As long as good wages could be earned in England and the people were left to themselves all went well and evictions on the property were, I believe, almost unknown." The inauguration of the Plan of Campaign, however, coincided with a time when earnings were fifteen to twenty per cent lower than usual, and "the agitators . . . told the people that they were being defrauded as the land could not pay the rent, making no mention of course of the fact that if the people were living rent free the land could not support them for six months of the year." By the middle of 1887, when this account was written: "The tenants, flushed with the success of last year's fight, now say that the terms dictated by the plan of campaign are too high, and that next year they will take the matter into their own hands and go in for a larger reduction than last time."<sup>38</sup>

This account shows obvious bias. It might be contended, for example, that a species of kindness by which a man multiplied his rent-roll fivefold and bought a long period of peace from his tenants as well was something less than sublime altruism; yet nevertheless the description throws some interesting light on the problem of the origin of the Congested Districts. It also gives an interesting illustration of the mechanism by which disaffection could easily grow in areas which had previously been contented. Finally, it serves to remind us that seasonal work in Great Britain

was often very important to the economy of Ireland, as many peasants were not "full-timers". Whether we regard O'Brien's explanation of the Congested Districts or that of the Local Government Board official as the one more generally applicable, it is evident that land purchase would be no solution to the peasants' problems in places where the land was not sufficient to support the people.

Balfour's 1891 Act did not solve the problem, but it did make a serious attempt to face it. The Act set up a Congested Districts Board, with considerable powers to provide technical instruction in fisheries and other industries, and also to purchase land, to amalgamate and improve holdings, and to resettle tenants thereon.<sup>37</sup> Here at least an important beginning had been made.

In the West of Scotland, events were in some ways closely parallel to those of Ireland, but in other respects they were markedly different. The "Crofters' Party" was not united over the Home Rule question in 1886. Three of the four MPs supported Gladstone, while Fraser Mackintosh of Inverness-shire went the other way. At the ensuing General Election, Mackintosh was returned unopposed as a Liberal Unionist. The "Crofters" captured Sutherland, but lost Argyll. For all practical purposes, they merged thenceforth into the main body of Gladstonian Liberalism. Fraser Mackintosh came under heavy fire from his sometime supporters, and it is likely that his return was due largely to the practical difficulty of finding a rival candidate in a hurry<sup>38</sup> — but the presence of one undoubted Highland land reformer on the Unionist side was of considerable importance to Chamberlain. At the beginning of 1887, the last serious attempt at a *rapprochement* between Gladstonian and Unionist Liberals — the "round table conference" — collapsed in failure, and Chamberlain was evidently anxious to give tangible proof of his continued radicalism. He shortly set out on a tour of Scotland, "to fight in a Radical style for his old friends the crofters and to inspire Liberal Unionism".<sup>39</sup> This visit was followed by the preparation of a draft Crofters' Relief Bill, which was widely circulated, but went no further.

Meanwhile, the Hebridean land agitation continued. The Crofters' Act gave little immediate assistance, and the general effects of the renewed agricultural depression were very similar to those in Ireland. The economic difficulties of Ireland led to

the Plan of Campaign in 1886; the same year saw the outbreak of a further spate of disturbances in the Western Isles. The little island of Tiree had a population of 2,700, and a total rent-roll of £6,000. The agitation there was so severe that a large contingent of police was incapable of coping with the trouble, and the authorities needed to send a hundred marines, each of them equipped with a hundred rounds of ammunition.<sup>40</sup> Skye was again the principal centre. This time the trouble was not the failure of crofters to pay rent, or to observe notices of eviction. The local Parochial Boards (which were effectively dominated by the landlords of the district) were under a statutory duty to collect money for the upkeep of the poor. These Boards failed to perform the obligation which the law had set upon them.<sup>41</sup> By the end of March 1886: “. . . The total amount of arrears of poor and educational rate in Skye was £5,200. Of that sum, £3,600 was owed by the landlords, £1,000 was owed by tacksmen and farmers paying more than £30 rent, and under £600 was due by crofters. And not alone were the lairds the chief defaulters, but leading men among them — magistrates, commissioners of supply, deputy lieutenants, and so forth, were reported openly and publicly to have declared that they would not pay their poor-rates until they themselves received their rents.”

In Ivory's view, the rent arrears stood at about £20,000 by late April.<sup>42</sup> Thus was the Government confronted with open and flagrant defiance of the law, not only by peasants but by the wealthy classes on Skye as well. The behaviour of both groups was understandable but no Government could possibly allow it to continue.

A. J. Balfour, who was briefly Secretary of State for Scotland, countenanced sending a gunboat and fifty marines to Skye, to co-operate with fifty police who would be serving writs for rents and rates.<sup>43</sup> He was by no means prepared to give a *carte blanche* to Ivory; when he heard that Alec Macdonald had “taken upon himself to apply for writs only in the case of the crofters and small tenants, leaving the defaulting landlords and tacksmen to be proceeded against, if proceeded against at all, by some less summary process”. Balfour told Ivory that unless this was reversed immediately, the whole expedition would be withdrawn. Macdonald complied; the rates, and a good many of the rents, were soon paid.<sup>44</sup> Balfour was particularly pleased with the initial result, but advised Ivory that difficulties were likely to arise

when stock had to be distrained and sold to pay the rents which were still outstanding.<sup>45</sup> In fact, the trouble was not over at all. At Bornaskitaig, in the far north of the island, it proved impossible to serve writs without military assistance, and there were arrests at Herbista,<sup>46</sup> near Dunvegan.

For a time, attention swung to the Assynt district in the west of Sutherlandshire, where in May 1887 another serious deforcement occurred; women seized and burnt summonses which were being conveyed by the Sheriff Officer.<sup>47</sup> There were several separate, but evidently related, disturbances in the area, and troubles in the township of Clashmore and at other parts of Assynt continued until the end of the year. Hugh Kerr, one of the Clashmore ringleaders, became something of a hero through his remarkable skill at avoiding arrest<sup>48</sup> — although he was eventually caught and imprisoned.

At the turn of 1887-8, conditions in the Isles were appalling, as bad harvests brought a serious threat of starvation. In February 1888, for example, the Crofters' Commission revealed that in parts of the Isle of Lewis "on all sides . . . we observed evidence of the deepest poverty and dejection; everywhere the potato crop is nearly consumed . . . within the next two months, as far as we have been able to discover, the bulk of the population in Lochs and elsewhere will be brought face to face with the necessity of killing their cattle and sheep to sustain life, while those who have no stock must either approach the parochial board or starve."<sup>49</sup>

The main disturbances which inevitably accompanied these privations took place in the chain of the Outer Hebrides which is collectively known as Long Island. As in 1882 and 1884, the Scottish Press gave major coverage to these events and the English newspapers also gave them frequent attention. The first major target of the crofters was a great "deer forest" — a reserved shooting area — of 80,000 acres in the Isle of Lewis, known as New Park Forest. The creation of such an area, devoted to what men were pleased to call "sport", had involved the destruction of seventeen villages.<sup>50</sup> In November 1887, 2,000 Highlanders, headed by pipers, and equipped with rifles, tents and baggage, decamped on New Park Forest with the avowed object of exterminating the deer, so that the land might be returned to productive use. This disturbance was sufficiently serious for a contingent of police to be sent with a support of marines and

soldiers. The peasants quite speedily destroyed about a third of the 600 deer, and Lord Lothian — who by this time had succeeded Balfour as Secretary of State for Scotland — told a delegation soon afterwards that he “was not one of those who thought that people who had recently broken the law there had broken it for any very bad motive at all.”<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, a prosecution was inaugurated against the ringleaders. They were eventually acquitted through a defect in the indictment under which they had been charged.<sup>52</sup>

Although the “Park Raid” — as the incident became known — was the most spectacular attack on “sporting” land, it seems to have been by no means the only one. Lord Lothian was informed that the technique of the crofters was “to destroy the grouse eggs (which they have done already so effectively in one part of the Lews that the bag has fallen from 600 brace per annum to under 100): to kill and frighten off the deer from the forests and to make a wholesale destruction of spawning salmon and trout in the rivers.”<sup>53</sup>

Sheep farms were only marginally less offensive to land-hungry crofters than were deer forests. According to the same informant, the crofters’ technique with them was “to destroy the fences, disturb the stock, and so alarm the tenants, their servants and families, that they will soon be inclined to throw in their leases rather than endure a state of matters which will soon become intolerable”. The most famous raid on a sheep farm was at Aignish, near Stornoway, where hundreds of Highlanders drove the offending beasts off the land.<sup>54</sup> Again it was found necessary to use marines and soldiers to quell the disturbances, and this time the Riot Act was read. The main culprits were less fortunate than the “Park Raiders”; they were sentenced to terms of imprisonment.<sup>55</sup> At Barvas, on the west side of the island, there was a serious conflict when police sought to intercept crofters who were destroying fences on sheep farms which, they alleged, had been unjustly taken from them some years earlier.<sup>56</sup>

There were also troubles elsewhere in the Isles. Harris and South Uist were in a state of much agitation. These were islands where there existed a substantial class of cottars — that is, peasants who technically had no land at all, but who were in practice allowed to “squat” on the crofters’ holdings. The strategy of the land reformers — at least in South Uist — was to induce crofters to eject the cottars, and then urge the cottars in their

turn to take possession of the demesne farm. Apparently the peasants again claimed a right of pasturage; and at one moment the township of Stoneybridge on this little island was described as "the cradle of the crofters' agitation in the Western Islands".<sup>57</sup> It is evident that unlawful acts of one kind or another were by this time endemic in the Scottish islands, and that the authorities had little power to cope with the situation, save by the use of gunboats, marines and soldiers.<sup>58</sup> The employment of military forces against crofters was by the late 1880s such a common phenomenon that it hardly excited any special comment.

The state of affairs which we have already observed in Sutherland shows that the trouble was by no means confined to the islands. There was also much unrest in the Coigach districts of the Rossshire mainland. By January 1888, *The Times* was fearing a general rising in the Highlands.<sup>59</sup>

In fact, the general rising did not occur. Instead, there was a gradual decline in unlawful activities within the Highland area from the spring of 1888 onwards. "Gradual", indeed, is the operative word. In the late autumn of that year, a sheriff's officer who visited Glendale in Skye with summonses for payment of rent was pelted with stones and clods of earth, and had some difficulty in escaping from the enraged crofters.<sup>60</sup> There was at least one deforcement case, and several instances of fencebreaking, in Lewis in 1889.<sup>61</sup> As late as the spring of 1891, land was seized at the farm of Orinsay in Lewis, and Lord Lothian took the matter sufficiently seriously to order that a gunboat or troopship should be held in readiness in case it was required.<sup>62</sup>

To what may we attribute the slow pacification of the Highlands? There is no single cause. At the crudest level, the forces of "law and order" became more effective when the tactical and psychological errors of the early days were understood and remedied. The authorities, for example, realised that the crofters regarded the police as no more than agents of the landlords, but respected the Queen's uniform. At the beginning of 1888, Lord Lothian was advised to keep a force of three or four gunboats and about 300 marines in the area.<sup>63</sup> It is not clear whether he followed this advice or not, but it would seem likely that he did.

More important, however, were the positive measures which were taken. Although Lord Lothian was told by a delegation from the Outer Isles "that the Crofters' Act of 1886 had not been of the slightest benefit to the crofters",<sup>64</sup> this was an exag-

geration. The "security of tenure" clauses must have prevented any exacerbation of the problem by further evictions to create deer forests and sheep farms. The Crofters' Commission reduced rents and cancelled arrears on a large scale; by the end of the decade, rent reductions averaged 30 per cent, and arrears for well over 60 per cent of the money owed had been cancelled. In some places, the figures were far higher than these; at one township in Lewis, rents were reduced by 53 per cent, and 91 per cent of the arrears were cancelled.<sup>65</sup> A Royal Commission which reported in 1892 disclosed substantial improvements in the crofters' condition.

Yet the root cause of the trouble was peculiarly intractable. Lord Lothian told the Cabinet of the conclusions which the Royal Commission of 1884 had reached, and the Commissioners set up under the 1886 Act had later confirmed: "According to the view of the people themselves, 57 acres per head are necessary for the maintenance of a family in comfort, whereas, with the exception of Bracedale, there is no parish in Skye or the Long Island where the proportion of acreage to population comes near this figure, while the average number of acres per head over these islands is only 19.43 acres."<sup>66</sup>

He later made the same point more forcefully: "If the Land League doctrine of 'migration' at the expense of the State were carried into effect, and the whole of the land now under sheep or deer were distributed among people now possessed of little or no land, each family would have a croft worth little more than £4, or not more than one fifth or one sixth of what is absolutely necessary to afford a chance of decent maintenance."<sup>67</sup>

Although there is some argument for the contrary view, it is difficult to dissent from Lord Lothian's substantive judgment. The deer forests and sheep walks made the problem far worse than it need have been, and served as a great irritation to people who were desperately short of land, but they were not at the root of the problem. It was generally agreed that the population of the islands must be greatly reduced by emigration. Both public and private schemes of emigration were devised, and the people came to accept the inevitability of this unhappy solution.

Other measures were taken. The opening of railways, such as the lines to Mallaig and Kyle, was a considerable boon. Some Highland landowners made substantial grants of land, in the spirit of their resolutions in 1885. In 1892, an Act with similar



aims to Balfour's Irish Act of the previous year was passed for the crofting parts of Scotland. County Councils in the "Crofting Counties" were empowered to purchase land by voluntary agreement with landlords, and then to sell or lease it to crofters. The Act had some effect in dealing with congestion, but it was far less successful in its parallel aim of encouraging peasant proprietorship. The only place where the opportunity was taken up was at Glendale in Skye, and there it seems to have been a failure.<sup>68</sup> An Act of 1897 set up a Scottish Congested Districts Board, with power to administer an annual grant of £35,000 for a variety of purposes, including roads, fishing, the provision of land for crofts, and migration to other parts of Scotland.

By the time that the Crofters' Commission came to issue its final report, in 1913, the improvement seemed, at first sight, truly startling: "Any one acquainted with the housing conditions in the rural districts of the West Coast and islands twenty-five to thirty years ago, and who revisited those districts today, could scarcely realise the improvement that has taken place . . . The black hovels in which too many of the people lived are now passing away, and have been replaced by smart, tidy cottages which would do credit to any part of the country."

Yet it would be wrong to imagine that the country had been made economically viable on a redistribution or wiser use of its own resources, or even through the injection of public money as capital. The Commission added that: "The crofter sends his sons and daughters to the large cities of the south and to the colonies, and if they prosper they are mindful of, and dutiful to, their parents at home. They are the source from which the money now invested in stone and lime comes." One can hardly conclude that a really healthy economy had been created in the Highlands when their apparent prosperity depended on the sense of filial duty felt by younger people who lived many miles away.

This, then, was the strange result of the Highland agitation. The places where the exciting disturbances of the 1880s took place slid again into the backwaters of history; much happier than before, but no more significant to the main course of events. Yet people in other places were stirred to their depths by these happenings, and the rest of the country would not forget the consequences of those stirrings.

## Notes-5

- 1 Thus, the Irish potato yield had been only 1.3 tons per acre in 1879, but it was never less than 3.1 tons per acre in the period 1883-8. Mitchell & Deane, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
- 2 Salisbury to Queen Victoria, 13 June 1887 (copy). S. D/87 p. 516.
- 3 Memorandum (? author) to Cabinet, 14 August 1886. CAB 37/14/40.
- 4 Peter Davis, "The Liberal Unionist Party and Irish Policy 1886-1892", *Historical Journal*, xviii (1975), at p. 87.
- 5 Sir Michael Hicks-Beach's memorandum to Cabinet, 4 October 1886. CAB 37/18/46.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Rents fixed by subcommissioners had been reduced by 20.5 per cent in the year ending 22 August 1882, but by lesser sums each year down to 1885, when the reduction was 18.1 per cent. In 1886, however, the reduction was 24.1 per cent. Reductions fixed by courts declined from 22 per cent to 19.6 per cent in 1882-5, but in 1886 were 22.5 per cent. Cowper Report, p. 6.
- 8 *Freeman's Journal*, 8 December 1886.
- 9 Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* (see bibliog.), pp. 516-19. See also F. S. L. Lyons, "John Dillon and the Plan of Campaign 1886-1890", *Irish Historical Studies*, 14 (1964-5), pp. 313-47.
- 10 See speech of John Pinkerton MP, *Freeman's Journal*, 23 December 1886.
- 11 Salisbury to Queen Victoria, 13 June 1887 (copy). S. D/87 p. 516.
- 12 Salisbury to Queen Victoria, 13 July 1887 (copy). S. D/87 p. 524. Chamberlain to A. J. Balfour, 30 March 1887 (copy). JC 5/5 fo. 42.
- 13 Salisbury to Queen Victoria, 9 August 1887 (copy). S. D/87 p. 533.
- 14 Peter Davis, *op. cit.*, at p. 89.
- 15 Balfour to Salisbury, 21 September 1887. S. E.
- 16 Peter Davis, *op. cit.*, at p. 92.
- 17 John (Viscount) Morley, *Life of Gladstone*, ii (see bibliog.), p. 466.
- 18 A. J. Balfour's memorandum to Cabinet, 20 February 1889. CAB 37/23/5.
- 19 F. S. L. Lyons, "John Dillon and the Plan of Campaign 1886-1890", *supra*.
- 20 A. J. Balfour's memorandum to Cabinet, 20 February 1889. CAB 37/23/5; F. S. L. Lyons, *John Dillon* (see bibliog.), pp. 109, 345.
- 21 *The Times*, 31 December 1887.

- 22 A. J. Balfour's memorandum to Cabinet, 7 November 1888. CAB 37/22/33.
- 23 A. J. Balfour's memorandum to Cabinet, 30 January 1889. CAB 37/23/3.
- 24 CAB 37/22/33; CAB 37/23/3.
- 25 A. J. Balfour's memorandum to Cabinet, May 1889. CAB 37/25/31.
- 26 Cowper Report, p. 7.
- 27 *Annual Register* 1888, p. 206-7.
- 28 Peter Davis, *op. cit.*, at p. 98.
- 29 J. L. Garvin, *Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, ii (see bibliog.), p. 307.
- 30 Patrick Buckland, *Irish Unionism 2: Ulster Unionism and the Origins of Northern Ireland 1886-1922* (see bibliog.), pp. 23-4.
- 31 L. P. Curtis, jr, *Coercion and Conciliation in Ireland 1880-1892* (see bibliog.), p. 345.
- 32 A. J. Balfour's memorandum to Cabinet "Suggestions towards a scheme for land purchase in Ireland", May 1889. CAB 37/25/31.
- 33 Salisbury to Balfour, 1 November 1889. AJB 49,689 fos. 79-80.
- 34 Peter Davis, *op. cit.*, at p. 100.
- 35 William O'Brien, *An Olive Branch in Ireland* (see bibliog.), p. xxii.
- 36 H. A. Robinson (Irish Local Government Board) to his father, 28 June 1887 (copy). Balfour papers, B.M. 49,688, fos. 141-43.
- 37 A. J. Balfour's explanatory memorandum to Cabinet, 8 February 1890. CAB 37/26/8.
- 38 James Hunter, "The politics of highland land reform 1873-1895", *Scottish Historical Review*, 53 (1974), at p. 58.
- 39 J. L. Gavin, *Life of Joseph Chamberlain* ii (see bibliog.), p. 307.
- 40 *North British Daily Mail*, 26, 27 July, 1 September 1886, etc.
- 41 *The Skye Expedition of 1886: its constitutional and legal aspects*, speech by Charles Cameron MP at City Hall, Glasgow, 10 November 1886, printed as a pamphlet by NLF of Scotland. Copy, with notes in ink by William Ivory, sent to A. J. Balfour, 30 January 1887. Ivory GD/1/36/4.
- 42 Report by Sheriff to Commissioners of Supply in Inverness-shire, 27 April 1886. Ivory GD/1/36/12/1. Ivory gives a slightly different figure from Cameron for the rate arrears.
- 43 Ivory to I. G. Hamilton, 3 September 1886 (copy). Balfour 49,800 fos. 129-30.
- 44 Balfour/Ivory correspondence, 3-31 October 1886. Balfour 49,800 fos. 132-39, 160-63.
- 45 Balfour to Salisbury, 19 (or 17?) October 1886. S. E.
- 46 Kellas, *op. cit.*, p. 286.
- 47 Correspondence on Lothian. GD/40/16/4, fo. 5 ff.
- 48 *The Times*, 16 February 1888.

- 49 *The Times*, 13 December 1887.
- 50 *The Times*, 9 January 1888, etc.
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 *The Times*, 19 January 1888.
- 53 R.W.C.P. memorandum for Lord Lothian, 30 January 1888. Lothian GD/40/16/12, fos. 62-9 ("R.W.C.P. Memorandum").
- 54 *The Times, Glasgow Herald*, 10 January 1888.
- 55 *The Times*, 4 February 1888.
- 56 *The Times*, 13 January 1888; *Glasgow Herald*, 18 January 1888.
- 57 *The Times*, 13 December 1887.
- 58 On conditions in the Long Island, see letters and enclosures from Ivory, printed for Cabinet, 8 February 1888. CAB 1/1 no. 13B.
- 59 *The Times*, 31 December 1887, 11 January 1888.
- 60 *The Times*, 28 November 1888.
- 61 *Annual Register*, 1889, p. 263.
- 62 Documents in Lothian papers. GD/40/16/51, fos. 4-20.
- 63 R.W.C.P. Memorandum.
- 64 *The Times*, 13 December 1887.
- 65 *The Times*, 21 December 1888.
- 66 Memorandum to Cabinet, 10 May 1887. CAB 37/19 no. 29. For a similar view among active land reformers, see John Mackie to J. S. Blackie, 24 November 1883. Blackie 2635, fo. 105-6.
- 67 Memorandum of 26 July 1888. CAB 37/22 no. 23.
- 68 D. A. Crowley, *op. cit.*, p. 123, fn.