

The Land Question in nineteenth-century Wales, Ireland and Scotland: a comparative study*

by David W. Howell

Abstract

This article follows the recent trend of adopting a comparative approach in the historiography of the Land Question. Some studies have sought to compare the land agitations of Ireland and the Western Highlands of Scotland while others have been concerned to explain the absence of a land war in Wales compared to that of Ireland. By comparing the Welsh Land Question with those of the other two Celtic nations, this study argues that while there were common grievances fuelling all three land agitations and – partly through knowledge of happenings elsewhere in the Celtic fringe – similar reform programmes and courses of action, it is the differences between the three land movements that need recognition and emphasis.

Much attention has been paid to the origins and nature of the ‘Land Question’ which was to play such a crucial role in the politics of nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland. Although middle-class urban radicals drew attention to an English land question in their criticism of the management of landed estates and the aristocratic monopoly of land through primogeniture and the strict settlement, no mass tenant movement came into existence in the late-nineteenth century.¹ In spite of grievances felt over issues like game and tenant right, relations between farmers and their landlords remained reasonably harmonious and bore little resemblance to the bitterness and frequent violence experienced in Ireland, the Western Highlands of Scotland and, if to a lesser extent, Wales.² However, notwithstanding certain basic complaints shared by all three peasantries, for all the (unsuccessful) efforts of certain Highland Land Leaguers to forge a pan-Celtic League in 1886³ and despite the influence exerted by Ireland on the Highland crofting

* I am especially grateful to the *Review*’s referees for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

¹ The Farmers’ Alliance established in 1879 drew its main support from the arable farmers of East Anglia, who were severely hit by the depression. Essentially a Liberal radical movement, farmers joined it in the hope that it would ease their situation. While the newly returned Liberals passed pro-farmer legislation like the Ground Game Act and the new Agricultural Holdings Act, farmers did not sympathize with the more radical aims of Liberal reformers so that by 1883 the alliance was in decline, farmers returning to their traditional relationship with their landlords. See especially J. R. Fisher,

‘The Farmers’ Alliance: An agricultural protest movement in the 1880s’, *AgHR* 26 (1978), pp. 15–28.

² F. M. L. Thompson, *English landed society in the nineteenth century* (1963), pp. 203–4; J. V. Beckett, ‘Agricultural land ownership and estate management’, in E. J. T. Collins (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, VII, 1850–1914 (2 parts, 2000), i, pp. 741–45; G. E. Mingay, *Rural life in Victorian England* (1976), pp. 53–4.

³ Peris Jones-Evans, ‘Evan Pan Jones – Land Reformer’, *Welsh History Rev.* 4 (1968–9), p. 153.

community and by both Ireland and the Scottish Highlands on Welsh tenant farmers, the land question in each of the three regions had its own distinctive nature and remedial programme.⁴

This article will, firstly, offer a more nuanced analysis of the Welsh Land Question than that advanced in my *Land and people in nineteenth-century Wales* (1978) and then draw some comparisons between the Welsh, Irish and Highland crofter land campaigns, comparisons which will serve to illuminate the particularity of the land systems and the struggles to reform them within each of the three Celtic nations in turn. It is rendered the more opportune given that non-Welsh historians have largely confined their Celtic comparisons to the Irish and Scottish Gaels.⁵ And because the Irish land war led the way in organized violent protest within the Celtic fringe, comparisons between the Irish and crofter land campaigns have been undertaken mainly by Scottish historians concerned to assess the degree of influence of events in Ireland on the land war in the Highlands. In this exercise, understandably no attention has been paid to the land question in Wales. This was the tendency, too, among contemporary commentators. For example, in 1880, John MacMillan, Free Church minister at Lochbroom, Ross-shire, was to refer to the 'tyranny and bondage' under landlordism in Scotland and Ireland, while John Murdoch, the prominent crofter land campaigner, sought in his newspaper *The Highlander* to draw parallels between the sufferings of the Irish peasantry and those of his native crofters.⁶ For their part Welsh historians like Matthew Cragoe, John Davies and Graham Jones⁷ have likewise sought to compare conditions in Wales and Ireland and to measure the impact of events in the latter upon the Welsh land reform movement; scant interest, however, has been shown in the crofter land war. Written from a Welsh perspective, this essay seeks to redress this imbalance by exploring similarities and differences between all three Celtic nations. By comparing the Welsh, Irish and Highland crofter land questions it will be shown that there were greater similarities between the Irish and crofting communities than their Welsh counterpart, experiences shared in common which determined that both peasantries organized effective land leagues and embarked on land wars. Even so, many Welsh tenant farmers experienced similar tenurial problems to their Celtic cousins, which led to a determined, if peaceful, campaign for land reform. This movement, however, bore greater similarities to the crofter one; in particular, neither Welsh tenant farmers nor Scottish crofters sought free sale of holdings and land purchase, both desired by Irish peasants.

⁴ David Cannadine, *The decline and fall of the British aristocracy* (1990), pp. 54–69.

⁵ Examples are: J. Hunter, 'The Gaelic connection: the Highlands, Ireland and Nationalism, 1873–1922', *Scottish Historical Rev.* 54 (1975); Charles W. J. Withers, 'Rural protest in the Highlands of Scotland and in Ireland, 1850–1930', in S. J. Connolly, R. A. Houston and R. J. Morris (eds), *Conflict, identity and economic development: Ireland and Scotland, 1600–1939* (1995); Andrew Newby, "'Scotia Major and Scotia Minor': Ireland and the birth of the Scottish Land Agitation, 1878–1882", *Irish Economic and Social Hist.* 31 (2004); Ewen A. Cameron, 'Communication or separation? Reactions to Irish land agitation and legislation in the Highlands of Scotland, c.1870–1910', *English Historical*

Rev. 210 (2005), pp. 633–66.

⁶ A. W. Macoll, *Land, faith and the crofting community: Christianity and social criticism in the Highlands of Scotland, 1843–1893* (2006), p. 98; T. M. Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War: The social transformation of the Scottish Highlands* (1994), pp. 223, 225; Hunter, 'Gaelic Connection', p. 182.

⁷ John Davies, 'Wales and Ireland Compared', *Planet*, 95 (Oct.–Nov. 1992); Matthew Cragoe, "'A contemptible mimic of the Irish': The Land Question in Victorian Wales", in Matthew Cragoe and Paul Readman (eds), *The Land Question in Britain, 1750–1950* (2010); J. Graham Jones, 'Michael Davitt, David Lloyd George and T. E. Ellis: The Welsh experience, 1886', *Welsh History Rev.* 18 (1996–7).

I

If the Welsh Land Question was to become a burning issue with strong national overtones only from the 1880s, earlier generations had voiced criticism of Welsh landlords for oppressing their tenants and the wider community. Resentment on the part of tenant farmers towards them for charging high rents had been felt in the 1770s, 1780s and the war years of the 1790s, such dissatisfaction hardening thereafter through their unwillingness to reduce the high wartime rents when prices for farm produce collapsed after 1814. The Welsh gentry's increasing haughtiness and 'their habits of sternness and reserve' in the post-Napoleonic war years further increased the antagonism felt towards them.⁸ Anger over the landowners' unsympathetic response to their tenants' plight during the unprecedented farming crisis of the late 1830s and early 1840s erupted in the Rebecca riots. A powerful attack in print on Welsh landlords for their greed was made by Samuel Roberts ('SR') of Llanbrynmair (Montgomeryshire) in the 1850s, in which he claimed that many tenants had been 'long relentlessly robbed of the just fruit of their toil'.⁹ All-important in fuelling the growing anti-landlord sentiment on the part of the peasantry was their joining the ranks of nonconformity from the opening decades of the century; it meant that landlords were not only depicted by the emerging radical nonconformist leaders as rack-renters but also as Anglican, Anglicized and Tory gentlemen who were unfit to be the parliamentary representatives of the predominantly nonconformist people of Wales. Landlords' vengeful eviction of tenants in the wake of the 1868 parliamentary election as punishment for their 'disloyalty' at the polls certainly heightened resentment against them.

It was only in the 1880s and 1890s, however, that the leadership of nonconformity came to enunciate a specifically Welsh Land Question. In response to generations of neglect at Westminster – 'contemptuous neglect' stated Welsh national leader Tom Ellis¹⁰ – the last two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed agitation by Welsh patriots for legislation to redress the distinctive grievances and needs of the people of Wales. Prominent among their demands were disestablishment of the Welsh church and land reform. The desire among Welsh country dwellers for separate legislation to deal with the 'land problem' became a vital ingredient of Welsh ethnic mobilization, Welsh radicals pointing to what they saw as the social and economic hardships endured by Welsh-speaking, nonconformist and Liberal tenant farmers under an oppressive regime of anglicized, Anglican and Tory squires. Given that political power rested upon the ownership of land, the campaign for land reform in Wales, as elsewhere in Britain, had obvious leverage for the politicization of rural communities, and radical Liberal leaders accordingly 'worked' the land to clear advantage.¹¹

⁸ Anon., 'The present state of society in Wales', *Cambrian Quarterly Mag.* 3 (1831), pp. 126, 128–9.

⁹ See his *Farmer careful of Cilhaul Uchaf* (sec. edn, 1881), p. 7.

¹⁰ *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 28 Oct. 1892.

¹¹ J. P. D. Dunbabin, *Rural discontent in nineteenth-century Britain* (1974), p. 231, refers to this 'working' of the countryside; see, likewise, Clare Boucher, 'Working the Land' (unpub. M.Phil. thesis, Swansea University,

1998). Matthew Cragoe asserts that 'the Welsh land question was not fundamentally an economic issue: it was political', "A contemptible mimic of the Irish", p. 102. Ewen Cameron similarly indicates that the Liberals' domination of Scottish politics saw them use 'the land question as a key component of their appeal north of the border': 'Setting the heather on fire: The Land Question in Scotland, 1850–1914', in Cragoe and Readman (eds), *Land Question*, p. 109.

Writing in 1886, the radical patriot T. J. Hughes ('Adfyfr'), one of the redoubtable champions of the Welsh land reform movement, warned darkly: 'The Welsh aspect of the Land problem cannot be dallied and trifled with without danger: it is about the most urgent question of the day, and unless it is equitably settled, it will also speedily become the question of the night'.¹² The influence of Irish and Highland crofter events and the hardship inflicted by the deepening agricultural depression in the mid-1880s together pushed the land question – alongside the overriding issue of disestablishment of the Welsh Church – to the forefront of Welsh parliamentary elections from 1885 onwards, both campaigns being championed by many Welsh- and English-language newspapers in Wales like *Baner ac Amserau Cymru* under its editor the Calvinistic Methodist preacher Thomas Gee of Denbigh. If more closely intertwined with disestablishment, the tithe war in Wales also had some connection with the land question and, once again, Welsh Liberal leaders were quick to 'work' the issue. Thus David Lloyd George was to ask Tom Ellis: 'Do you not think this tithe business is an excellent lever wherewith to raise the spirit of the people?'¹³

If the Land Question was being 'worked' by Welsh radical leaders, it is necessary to question to what extent they were justified in their criticisms of Welsh landlords. At the heart of the Land Question were land hunger and a consequent keen competition for holdings among small peasant-tenants, farms which were owned by a body of landlords culturally alien from their tenantry. Welsh radicals pointed to unfortunate consequences for tenants arising from these circumstances. Landlords were blamed for charging exorbitant rents and for failing to come to their tenants' rescue in the depression of the 1880s and early 1890s by making adequate abatements or reductions in their rents. Furthermore, tenants were supposedly afraid to make improvements to their holdings lest their landlords raised their rents. Allegations were also made that landlords favoured Anglicans and Conservatives over nonconformists and Liberals as tenants when farms fell vacant and that they made capricious evictions of politically 'disloyal' tenants. Finally, landlords were attacked for their cruel operation of the game laws.¹⁴ In accounting for the perceived evils of the situation, Tom Ellis placed emphasis on the divisions between landlords and tenants in language, creed and politics. That the all-important 'community of feeling' present between landlords and tenants in English counties was absent in Wales was a claim he made in his speech commending his Land Bill before the House of Commons on 16 March 1892, while, in the following November, he was to pronounce that: 'The system of rent was tolerable when the rent-receiver and the rent-producer were sympathetic partners. When estranged in language and religion, politics and social dealing, the system became unjust'.¹⁵

This indictment of Welsh Landlordism was in part an exaggeration, for there is plentiful evidence that tenants on large estates enjoyed considerate treatment at all times from their landlords.¹⁶ Where the criticism was more justified was in relation to smaller estates. Many

¹² T. J. Hughes, *Landlordism in Wales* (1887), pp. 3–4.

¹³ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British politics, 1868–1922* (rev. edn, 1970), p. 86.

¹⁴ The whole agrarian indictment was leveled in Hughes, *Landlordism in Wales*.

¹⁵ *Parliamentary Debates* (hereafter PD), *Commons*,

4th ser., 2 'Tenure of Land (Wales) Bill', 16 Mar. 1892; *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 11 Nov. 1892.

¹⁶ None of the large estate owners in Wales could match the wealth of the owner of the Scottish Sutherland estate. That the second and third dukes were generous to the crofters on their vast estate is to be

were encumbered by debt. Their owners were simply too impoverished to be able to treat their tenants liberally. With both parties lacking capital an inevitable clash of interests arose. Tenants felt insecure and were unwilling to improve from fear their efforts would be nullified by higher rents.¹⁷ J. E. Vincent, a barrister and stout supporter of the owners of large Welsh estates, wrote to *The Times* in 1888 concerning Cardiganshire: 'Of small landlords, on the other hand, I heard nothing but evil'.¹⁸ If the small hereditary Welsh landowner was more grasping, it was, however, the small newcomer from business entering the land market from the 1870s – which in Wales remained buoyant throughout the depression years owing to land hunger keeping up capital values – who was the worst offender, concerned as he was to obtain as good as possible return on his outlay.¹⁹

Even on the liberally run large estates, however, tenants suffered as a consequence of the growing number of land sales from the 1870s. When property changed hands by purchase, the land was often valued as it existed without any reference as to how, or by whom, that value was produced. As mentioned, the small purchaser proceeded to fix the rents in order to obtain a satisfactory return on the purchase price, and in this way the tenant's rent was raised regardless of his improvements. Bryn Roberts, Liberal MP for Eifion (North Caernarvonshire) and sometime Methodist barrister, conceded that difficulties occurred on large estates only when sales of tenancies took place.²⁰ Some landlords like P. P. Pennant, owner of the Nantllys estate in Flintshire, recognizing the unfairness of this, called for legislative action – such as an addition to the 1883 Act – to secure compensation to the tenant.²¹

To what extent were good relationships between landlords and their tenants bedevilled – as Ellis and others maintained – by the cultural divide between landlords and their tenants? It is feasible that even on the small estates the less generous treatment of tenants stemmed from poverty rather than from any lack of sympathy spawned by religious and political differences.²² Nor did that cultural divide give rise in the last quarter of the century to the

Note 16 continued

explained not only by the fact that their independent wealth allowed this, but by their desire to improve their public image after the deep resentment harboured over their earlier policy of clearances. See here Annie Tindley, "Actual pinching and suffering": Estate responses to poverty in Sutherland, 1845–86', *Scottish Historical Rev.* 90 (2011), pp. 236–56. For treatment of tenants on large Welsh estates see David W. Howell, *Land and people in nineteenth-century Wales* (1978); Matthew Cragoe, *An Anglican aristocracy: The moral economy of the landed estate in Carmarthenshire, 1832–1895* (1996), p. 72; John Davies, 'The Cawdor Estates in south-west Wales, 1778–1914' (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Swansea University, 2009), pp. 80–1; Richard J. Colyer, 'The gentry and the county in mid-nineteenth century Cardiganshire', *Welsh History Rev.* 10 (1980–1), pp. 497–535; D. Leslie Baker-Jones, *Princelings, privilege and power: The Tivyside gentry in their community* (1999); *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 2 Nov. 1894.

¹⁷ *Cambrian News*, 11 Nov. 1892; BPP, 1895, XL, q. 46906, evidence of J. Humphreys Davies, a landlord in Llangeitho parish, Cardiganshire.

¹⁸ Anon., *Letters from Wales* (1888), p. 169. On 11 January 1893 the same correspondent wrote of Anglesey: 'By some of the small owners, but not by all, extortionate rents are often exacted', cited in *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 13 Jan. 1893.

¹⁹ Howell, *Land and people*, pp. 82–3.

²⁰ BPP, 1894, XXXVI, q. 13171, evidence of Bryn Roberts.

²¹ BPP, 1895, XLI, q. 58074.

²² For a rebuttal of the claim of the Welsh Disestablishment Campaign Committee that farmers need not apply for holdings unless they abandon their political and religious convictions, see George H. M. Owen's declaration that this was 'an allegation absurd and untrue', cited in *The Pembrokeshire Herald*, 9 Oct. 1891. Owen was secretary of the North Wales Property Defence Association.

earlier type of retaliatory political evictions to punish ‘ungrateful’ tenants. Tenants were protected by the secret ballot and the landlords’ awareness that they dare not repeat the punitive evictions that followed the elections of 1859 and 1868 because their actions were now being scrutinised by an often hostile vernacular press.²³ Hugh Hughes, a freeholder farming in the parish of Llangadwaladr in Denbighshire and a member of the Llansilin school board, notwithstanding his readiness to criticize landlords where he saw fit, testified before the 1890s Land Commission: ‘In former years many cases of hardship arose owing to religious and political differences between landlord and tenant, but during the last few years I do not think there has been any cause of complaint on this account’.²⁴ To maintain, as did Ellis, ‘Adfyfr’, and Lord Rendel, that where most tenants espoused different political and religious affiliations to those of their landlords a land question must exist as a matter of course was a doubtful claim in relation to the late century.²⁵ Even so, landlord pressure – itself sometimes in response to their being leant on by Church of England clergymen – certainly remained possible and was not surprisingly exerted in the Tithe War, although at most there only four cases where prominent farmers in the campaign were evicted.²⁶ The whole issue of landlord pressure on tenants to achieve political and religious goals is by its very nature a cloudy one. The aforementioned Bryn Roberts sought to guide the Land Commissioners in volunteering:

If I were asked whether capricious or vindictive eviction is often resorted to, I should say no, it is not, but the power to resort to it is enough, and a great deal too much. It destroys all independence in tenants, and makes them ... totally unable to resist the will of the landlord on any subject whatsoever.²⁷

To be sure, this argument has a certain plausibility, yet, if this was indeed the case, would tenants have so overwhelmingly voted against the landowners in the elections from the mid-eighties? Perhaps it was the case that they feared taking too high a profile in political campaigns? Again, if landlords by late century had come to accept that a predominantly nonconformist tenantry was unavoidable, a few like the owners of the Voelas and Cefnamwlch estate in north Wales showed a preference for Anglican tenants when letting vacant holdings.²⁸ Finally insofar as the cultural divide was concerned, there can be no refuting the criticism levelled by tenants at landlords’ and their agents’ frequent ignorance of the native language as a handicap to good working relationships, one all the more serious in those monoglot

²³ For the 1868 evictions, see Morgan, *Wales in British politics*, p. 25; for evictions in the 1859 Merioneth election, see I. G. Jones, ‘Merioneth politics in the mid-nineteenth century’, *J. Merioneth Historical and Record Society* 5 (1965–8), pp. 273–334; for a revisionist assessment, see Matthew Cragoe, ‘The anatomy of an eviction campaign: The General Election of 1868 in Wales and its aftermath’, *Rural Hist.* 9 (1998), pp. 177–93.

²⁴ BPP, 1895, XLI, q. 55539.

²⁵ Anon., *Letters from Wales*, p. 239.

²⁶ Dunbabin, *Rural discontent*, pp. 225–6; evidence of clergymen-pressure is contained in National Library

of Wales (hereafter NLW) MS 19462C (Rendel MS, 14) concerning the eviction of a farmer, W. Watkin of the Moat in Manafon parish, Montgomeryshire; also in NLW, Voelas MS C95: letter of 31 May 1887 from the rector of Cerrig-y-drudion, Denbighshire, to Col. Wynne Finch, which advised: ‘The landlords should act firmly now, and tell their tenants plainly, what they mean to do in this movement, or it will certainly end in a rent war’.

²⁷ BPP, 1894, XXXVI, q. 13170.

²⁸ NLW, Voelas and Cefnamwlch MSS, B12, fo. 415 and B13, fos. 9 and 39.

Welsh-speaking areas of the north and west.²⁹ In a telling statement, the conservative Welsh correspondent of *The Times* observed soberly on 17 January 1893 that the landowners' lack of Welsh 'is, undoubtedly, a serious matter, more serious, perhaps, than some landlords imagine, and has much to do with such success as the agitators have attained'.

Whereas fear of political eviction fell away in the last decades, complaints against game were increasing. The practice, from the third quarter of the century, of landowners letting some of their property to sporting tenants who insensitively disregarded tenants' fences and crops, added further sting to the game grievance. For one Merioneth tenant testifying before the Welsh Land Commission in 1893, the sporting tenant was 'the greatest hardship and the greatest oppression in the country'.³⁰ Arguably even more detested was the gamekeeper – a loathed official not confined to Welsh estates of course – whose infamy was denounced before the same Land Commission. If David Williams, a tenant of the Hafodunos estate in Denbighshire, was fulsome in his praise of his master, Henry Robert Sandbach, he was scornful of one of his gamekeepers: 'I cannot call him a man at all: he has a spice of the devil, whatever', and claimed that 'the keeper was the master, and not the master'.³¹

For all the criticism levelled against Welsh landlords, overall the impression conveyed by certain knowledgeable contemporaries was that they were not universally unpopular in the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s. Indeed, writing at the close of the 1870s, John Gibson, editor of the radical mid-Wales newspaper *The Cambrian News*, maintained that Welsh landowners grew closer to their communities in the late century:

The gulf between the large owners of land and the people was wide and unabridged in the old times already referred to. The landlord took no part in public business, which was altogether conducted in a language he did not understand, and therefore did not like. The spread of education among the people, the decrease of prejudice against the Welsh language, and other causes, have brought the different sections of the people nearer together. Landlords are beginning to take an interest in Sanitary and Local Boards, and their influence for good is felt in many districts on Boards of Guardians and all kinds of associations established for the advancement of the people intellectually and socially – relations are closer than they used to be.³²

Gibson remarked later, in January 1886, upon the continued existence of 'that respect, sometimes amounting to reverence, felt by the average Welsh farmer to his landlord'.³³

In response to the vigorous campaign in the press and on the political platform from the mid-eighties for land reform, there was nevertheless strong support for the Welsh Land Bill in the run-up to the 1892 election. Indeed, in the rural constituencies during that election, the Bill

²⁹ BPP, 1894, XXXVI, q.16623A: evidence of John Jones of Bala.

³⁰ BPP, 1895, XXXVI, q. 9390.

³¹ BPP, 1894, XXXVI, qq. 14366–70; for similar evidence concerning Carmarthenshire, see BPP, 1895, XL, q. 38769.

³² John Gibson, *The agriculture of Wales* (1879), p. 22.

³³ *Cambrian News*, 15 Jan. 1886, cited in Jones,

'Michael Davitt, David Lloyd George and T. E. Ellis', p. 455; likewise, Humphreys-Owen of Glansevern informed Stuart Rendel in 1882 that 'the squires in Montgomeryshire are personally liked by the voters, so far as is compatible with the wide difference in politics and religion', cited in Morgan, *Wales in British politics*, p. 56.

allegedly influenced the voting more than did the issue of Welsh Disestablishment, Tom Ellis contending in October 1892 that 'in some respects, and to some classes of people, it [the Land Question] was more grimly urgent [than Disestablishment].³⁴ At the same time, this support for legislation to guard against what was portrayed to be an exploitive class of landlords did not prevent certain tenants on large and, indeed, small estates (whose landlords, if not so generous as those owning larger properties, were, importantly, better known on a *personal* level to their tenants)³⁵ from remaining content with their *own* landlord. While supporting legislation which would protect a tenant from a harsh landlord, W. N. Jones, a tenant on the Dynevor estate in Carmarthenshire and a county councillor, nevertheless enjoyed an amicable relationship with Lord Dynevor and commended him as a kind landlord.³⁶ If radicals like Jones and Gwilym Evans, chairman of the Carmarthenshire County Council, acknowledged that some landlords treated their tenants kindly, at the same time, however, they objected to the power a landlord had over his tenant in an age of democracy and felt that tenants were entitled, *as of right*, to what they currently received out of *grace and favour*. Evans told the Land Commissioners that what he wanted to eradicate on the liberally run large estates were the tenants' feelings of utter dependence, which he attributed to a pervasive 'feeling of fear – uncertainty' and continued: 'I believe that the fact that the farmers have had to go cap in hand to their landlords and their agents, and in many instances sub-agents, for any little improvements, repairs, or small concessions, has had much to do with the cringing, salaaming spirit of the small tenant farmer'.³⁷ Even the conservative J. E. Vincent wrote to *The Times* in 1888 concerning farmers in the Llyn peninsula, Caernarfonshire: 'But they have a not altogether unreasonable feeling that they are entitled as of right, to what they receive out of grace; they want fixity of tenure and the adjustment of rent upon a sliding scale'.³⁸

If many landlords were, therefore, generous they were feudal in their outlook, expecting their 'inferiors' to submit to their authority. Such an attitude ran counter to the democratic impulses of the time, and was one shared by the English country gentleman, of whom P. A. Graham in 1892 observed that for all his goodness and generosity to the poor he was slow 'to accommodate himself to the spirit of the age'.³⁹ Such continuing attachment to the importance of rank sat ill with the younger generation of countryman in the 1880s and 1890s. Whereas Tom Ellis's father – though wrongly evicted from his farm for allegedly infringing his landlord's sporting rights – had accepted the situation, for after all the 'master' was the 'master', not so his son. The incident festered in his mind and influenced his perception of the Welsh Land Question.⁴⁰ (Similarly it was to be the younger generation of crofters in the Scottish Highlands who in the 1870s underwent a political awakening by reading newspapers, particularly *The Highlander*.)⁴¹ That old spirit of feudal respect in Wales was slipping away, notably among the middle-class tenant farmers who, politicized by the press

³⁴ *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 28 Oct. 1892; see also *The Times*, 2 Sept. 1892: editorial entitled 'The election in Wales'.

³⁵ Anon., *Letters from Wales*, p. 4.

³⁶ Alan Bainbridge, 'The agricultural community in Carmarthenshire, c.1876–1896', (unpub. MA dissertation, Swansea University, 1975), p. 83.

³⁷ BPP, 1895, XL, q. 38764.

³⁸ *Letters from Wales*, p. 15.

³⁹ P. A. Graham, *The rural exodus* (1892), pp. 48–9.

⁴⁰ W. Llywelyn Williams, 'Tom Ellis', *Wales*, iv (May–Oct. 1913), p. 13.

⁴¹ James Hunter, *The making of the crofting community* (1976), pp. 129–30.

and nonconformist chapel,⁴² were becoming political leaders of their neighbourhoods. They would have concurred with the sentiment expressed on 14 September 1894 by *The Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald* in an editorial entitled 'The Wynnstay and Other Welsh Estates from the Land Commission':

The best possible defence of the present system of landlordism is made by Sir Watkin's agent. Those who will take the trouble to compare it with the evidence of Mr. Gee and Mr. T. E. Ellis will readily perceive, however, how inadequate it is as an answer to the demand that agriculture should be emancipated from feudal conditions, and that the farmer should in the future be a free man in a free country.

Just how widely this spirit of independence was embraced by the ordinary farmer struggling to survive is impossible to measure however; certainly it should not be overstated.

If the tenurial circumstances of Welsh tenant farmers therefore gave rise to a certain amount of irritation, what nevertheless became clear from an airing of their alleged grievances before the Welsh Land Commissioners was that there was some misrepresentation and exaggeration on the part of Liberal leaders in their 'working' the land. Kenneth Morgan observes that: 'The main theme that emerged was that the land question was basically social, not economic, the product of a growing cultural alienation between owners and occupiers'.⁴³ Ultimately the appeal of the political leaders to rural dwellers stretched far beyond mere economic and tenurial aspects. Welsh Landlordism was presented as a major impediment to the nation's development. As 'Adfyfr' wrote in 1887:

We meet Welsh Landlordism and its heavy paralysing hand at every turn in the highways and byways of Welsh life; on the Sunday as well as on the week-day; its grasp extends over cottage and farm, school-house and polling booth. It dwarfs and blights everywhere our national growth.⁴⁴

If harking back to the bad old days of oppressive Landlordism and aristocratic/gentry remoteness from their communities at mid-century, he was properly reminding his readers that Welsh landlords, culturally alien, were not fit leaders of the changed Welsh society: their pleasure-seeking lives and militaristic proclivities were at variance with those of nonconformist, Welsh-speaking, temperance-based, pacifist rural dwellers.

One instance only will be cited as indicative of Welsh landowners' failure to come to terms with the times – a failure in this respect shared by their English counterparts – namely, their frequent, though not universal, opposition to School Boards. Robert Smith thus cites the attitude of Sir Watkin Williams Wynn of Wynnstay who pronounced in 1871 that, as patron of 60 schools, he would in future support only those which would continue to be run according to the principles of the Established Church.⁴⁵ The Liberal campaign of deliverance from the

⁴² That politicization is brilliantly examined in I. G. Jones, *Explorations and explanations: essays in the social history of Victorian Wales* (1981).

⁴³ K. O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation* (1981), pp. 83–4.

⁴⁴ Hughes, *Landlordism in Wales*, pp. 3–4. Cragoe, in his "A contemptible mimic of the Irish", pp. 102–3,

emphasizes the growth of nationalist feeling among Welsh MPs. from the 1880s as having been 'so important a factor in their pursuit of the land question'.

⁴⁵ Robert Smith, *Schools, politics and society: Elementary education in Wales, 1870–1902* (1999), pp. 60–1, 64.

thralldom of a privileged landed elite was popular among the 'gwerinwr' – the common people – who registered their new allegiance at the polling booths. It is this consensus within rural communities of the new Wales that explains the rejection as political leaders of squires and aristocrats who, as *landlords*, often remained personally popular with their tenants and the wider community. The following comment in a radical north Walian newspaper precisely conveys this dichotomy. In the aftermath of the defeat of Ellis Nanney, Lord Penrhyn's agent, at a parliamentary by-election in 1891, *The Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald* could still acknowledge that:

[T]here is no more popular landed-proprietor in Caernarfonshire than the squire of Gwynfryn ... a man may be and often is something else and much more than the political creed he possesses. Regarded from a Liberal point of view, Mr. Ellis Nanney has always been a really right sort of man, but, unhappily on the wrong side of politics.⁴⁶

II

In this section a comparison will be made between the land questions of Wales and Ireland. It was the often favourable feelings harboured by Welsh tenants towards their landlords which persuaded John Gibson in January 1886 that: 'A Welsh Land League cannot have behind it that bitter experience of injustice which gave the Irish Land League its vital force'.⁴⁷ That view, however, of conditions in Ireland was somewhat simplistic: it was shaped by the anti-landlord rhetoric prevalent at the time, orchestrated among others by Father Patrick Lavelle, parish priest of Partry.⁴⁸ Paralleling trends in Welsh historiography, their conduct came to be seen in a better light in the late twentieth century by historians like Barbara Solow, James Donnelly, Paul Bew, Samuel Clark and W. E. Vaughan.⁴⁹ According to the revisionist version, tenants, far from being rack-rented, were charged merely moderate rent increases between the Famine and the Land War, such increases falling behind the rise in prices they were receiving for their farm produce; landlords were not typically absentees and, if they were in one major respect alien, namely, in their Protestantism, for the most part they shared the same language with their tenants – in contrast to their Welsh counterparts – and mixed easily with those below them in the social hierarchy; and evictions in the 1860s and 1870s had dropped dramatically since the high level of the early 1850s and were to climb rapidly once again only from 1878 with the outbreak of the Land War, many landlords, indeed, using their power of evicting tenants in arrears sparingly.⁵⁰

If Irish landlords thus bore some resemblance to their Welsh counterparts in the way they treated their tenants, they were nevertheless harsher in their conduct, as over evictions and

⁴⁶ *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 3 Apr. 1891: editorial.

⁴⁷ *Cambrian News*, 15 Jan. 1886, cited in Jones, 'Michael Davitt, David Lloyd George and T. E. Ellis', pp. 454–5.

⁴⁸ W. E. Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants in mid-Victorian Ireland* (1994), p. 5.

⁴⁹ Barbara Solow, *The land question and the Irish*

economy, 1870–1903 (1971); J. S. Donnelly, *The land and the people of nineteenth-century Cork: the rural economy and the land question* (1975); Paul Bew, *Land and the national question in Ireland, 1858–82* (1979); Samuel Clark, *Social origins of the Irish land war* (1979); Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants*.

⁵⁰ The revisionist claims are contained in Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants*, chs. one to three.

consolidation of holdings.⁵¹ Such behaviour helps account for the tradition of conflict between Irish tenants and their landlords that was largely absent in Wales. Organized resistance, both legal and illegal, to landlordism before 1879 had occurred in the difficult years of 1849–52 – when the Tenant League influenced tenant voters to support advocates of land reform and when, in addition, local resistance grew up to the collection of rents and to evictions – and, later, in 1869–70, when, accompanying a revival of Tenant League public meetings, there occurred an upsurge of criminal activity, mainly in the form of threatening letters and of visits to neighbouring tenants by gangs warning them not to pay rents in excess of the tenement valuation. The years 1869–71 also witnessed the murder of a number of Irish landlords. Between the immediate aftermath of the Famine and the onset of the Land War in 1879, ‘agrarian outrages’ were especially perpetrated during 1849–52, 1862–64 and 1869–70, periods of economic difficulty. Significantly, during the turmoil of the land war between 1879 and 1882 when agrarian outrages rose sharply, landlords were to form as much as 36 per cent of agrarian homicides.⁵²

The Land War had its roots in the suffering endured by the peasantry of County Mayo and other areas of western Ireland who, in 1879, with potato production falling drastically and earnings from migrant labourers to mainland Britain reduced to a trickle, faced starvation.⁵³ At the beginning of that year a popular tenant movement grew up in Mayo demanding rent reductions from landlords and that they hold back from evictions; significantly, the tenants had been politicized by local Fenian influence and had been organized through an active press campaign led by newspaper proprietor James Daly.⁵⁴ This spontaneous agrarian campaign was almost immediately taken over in the spring of 1879 by the politicians of the ‘New Departure’, headed by Michael Davitt, a Fenian, and emerging Home Rule leader, Charles Parnell, who recognized the potential in harnessing the agrarian movement towards promoting the overriding cause of Home Rule. Under their stimulus the National Land League of Mayo was brought into being in August, and thereafter the movement was joined by larger tenant farmers and – valuable as organizers – shopkeepers; what united them – if precariously – was their determination to hold on to the agrarian gains made in the previous 30 years and, of necessity therefore, to force landlords to grant rent abatements. Late October 1879 saw the founding of the Irish National Land League under Parnell’s presidency.⁵⁵ Notwithstanding their earlier lenience, the harsh response of landlords to mounting tenant violence against them from 1879 ironically led many to ‘chose to live up to their stereotype’.⁵⁶ Although Parnell himself urged the League to follow a path of moderation and non-violence – famously at Ennis in September 1880 he called for the League to boycott rather than shoot anyone who flouted its moral law – the dividing line between non-violence and violence was easily crossed and, as stated, agrarian outrages mounted steeply, including assassinations, firing ‘warning’ shots into dwelling houses,

⁵¹ Cragoe, “A contemptible mimic of the Irish”, pp. 94–5.

⁵² Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants*, pp. 139–58, 177–8.

⁵³ R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (1989), p. 402.

⁵⁴ R. V. Comerford, ‘The Land War and the politics of distress, 1877–82’, in W. E. Vaughan (ed.), *A new history of Ireland, VI, Ireland under the Union, II,*

1870–1921 (1996), p. 33.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–6; Clark, *Social origins*, ch. 8; D. George Boyce, *Nineteenth-century Ireland: The search for stability* (1990), ch. 6; Alvin Jackson, *Ireland, 1798–1998* (1999), pp. 118–20; Foster, *Modern Ireland*, pp. 402–5; Donnelly, *The land and the people of nineteenth-century Cork*, pp. 249–50.

⁵⁶ Foster, *Modern Ireland*, p. 409.

and ear-clipping.⁵⁷ Even boycotting itself was not untouched by violence; as Townshend observes, 'ostracism was not an entirely new method – nor indeed was it entirely non-violent'.⁵⁸

In contrast, the Welsh rural neighbourhood was far more law-abiding. Even in the mid-1830s when recorded assaults in rural Wales reached a peak, 'the contrast between rural Wales and rural Ireland, Sicily and France ... is very marked; vendetta, feuding, warring and violence were much less common'.⁵⁹ Although rural Ireland was to undergo a dramatic fall in serious crime between 1847 and 1876 on account of growing prosperity, continuous emigration, increasing literacy and more punctual payment of rents, Irish rural communities continued to be characterized by violence, certainly to a much greater extent than Welsh ones which increasingly from mid-century were, as for some urban districts, too, 'regaining a reputation for being law-abiding and peaceful'. Besides the ameliorating influences of favourable farming conditions, out-migration and growing literacy, Welsh rural communities were being civilized by the dissenting chapels, a claim frequently made by the leaders of Nonconformity.⁶⁰ Rev. Henry Richard thus contended that it was partly the moral and religious influence of the chapels that steered Liberal-voting Welsh tenant farmers away from violent response following the vengeful evictions in the wake of the 1868 general election. In his speech before the House of Commons in 1871 calling for the secret ballot to ensure that no such thing should happen again, Richard reflected: 'We know what would have taken place in Ireland under such circumstances. The Irish people would have taken the matter into their own hands'.⁶¹

Even so, Irish methods of intimidation were certainly practised in the farming community of south-west Wales during the Rebecca years, particularly in the summer of 1843. In her self-proclaimed 'journey of doing good to the Poor and distressed farmers', Rebecca and her daughters sought to right wrongs perpetrated upon the peasantry by a range of oppressors, including turnpike trusts, landlords, bailiffs, tithe collectors and masters of union workhouses, in the process resorting to smashing gates, sending threatening letters, and, following failure to comply, putting property to the torch or administering a beating. Not only were these oppressors targeted: tenant farmers who paid rent above the level deemed fair by Rebecca or who took a vacant farm whose former occupant had been evicted were likewise sent threatening letters. Those who remained obdurate were visited by the midnight incendiary. This was boycotting, which though coming into usage as a term only from the Irish Land War, had been employed for centuries in all parts of the world, and in Ireland itself in the late eighteenth-century 'Rightboy' movement.⁶² And foreshadowing the late-century land campaign in Wales for a land court, farmers were already seeking to obtain fair rents by advocating their regulation by some form of independent assessment, thereby undermining the landowner's monopoly in this matter. That the protest in Ireland was perhaps influencing Rebecca's agenda is suggested in a

⁵⁷ Jackson, *Ireland, 1798–1998*, p. 120; Boyce, *Nineteenth-century Ireland*, p. 169; Foster, *Modern Ireland*, pp. 406–8; Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants*, ch. 6; for Parnell's speech on 19 Sept. 1880 at Ennis, see Alan O'Day and J. Stevenson (eds), *Irish Historical Documents since 1800* (1992), pp. 100–1.

⁵⁸ Charles Townshend, *Political violence in Ireland* (1983), p. 116.

⁵⁹ D. J. V. Jones, *Crime in nineteenth-century Wales* (1992), pp. 69, 240.

⁶⁰ Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants*, p. 163; K. Theodore Hoppen, *Elections, politics, and society in Ireland, 1832–1885* (1984), pp. 362–78; Jones, *Crime in nineteenth-century Wales*, pp. 239–41.

⁶¹ *PD Commons*, third ser., 208, cols. 1131–7.

⁶² Clark, *Social origins*, p. 311.



FIGURE 1. A convoy of policemen from Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire and Glamorgan on their way to Cardiganshire to assist the local constabulary during the anti-tithe agitation which broke out in the county between 1888 and 1894.

Photo: Tomas Mathias (1866–1940), copyright Dyfed Cultural Services Department.

letter of Col. George Rice Trevor to the Home Office of 11 July 1843 bearing news that there was 'a wish to establish a fixity of tenure, as advocated in Ireland'.⁶³ Later, on 21 July, a Rebeccaite meeting at Cwm Ifor, Carmarthenshire, 'asked much about news from Ireland'.⁶⁴ Now, and for the first time, Welsh rural dwellers experienced the enforcement of communal codes outside the state law, codes which enforced what was perceived as fair play for the peasantry.⁶⁵

Although in the relatively peaceful years from the 1850s onwards gangs were to attack mountain enclosures, and poachers would assault officials attempting to deprive them of their traditional fishing rights, Welsh tenant farmers and labourers would turn once again to organized violent protest only in the Tithe Wars from the mid-1880s down to the early 1890s.⁶⁶ While a degree of disorder was witnessed at most tithe sales, serious disturbances were to occur at Llangwm and even more so at Mochdre (both in Denbighshire) in early summer 1887; in the latter riot 50 civilians and 34 policemen were injured. From June 1887, too, the military were frequently called on to accompany the police at tithe sales, though the county authorities forbade them from direct confrontation with the crowds (Figures 1 and 2).⁶⁷ Notwithstanding

⁶³ TNA, HO 45/454.

⁶⁴ Ibid., letter of an anonymous correspondent.

⁶⁵ The best studies of the riots are David Williams, *The Rebecca Riots: a study of agrarian discontent* (1955) and David J. V. Jones, *Rebecca's Children* (1989). The riots resembled the 'War of the Demoiselles' waged between 1829 and 1834 by the peasantry of the French Pyrenees: Peter Sahlin, *Forest rites: The war of the Demoiselles in nineteenth-century France* (1994).

⁶⁶ David Jones, 'Crime, protest and community in nineteenth-century Wales', *Llafur* 1 (1974), p. 112; id., 'The second Rebecca Riots: A study of poaching on the upper Wye', *Llafur* 2 (1976), pp. 32–56.

⁶⁷ Donald Richter, 'The Welsh Police, the Home Office, and the Welsh Tithe War of 1886–91', *Welsh History Rev.* 12 (1984–5), pp. 59–62, 75; Dunbabin, *Rural discontent*, ch. 10; Neville Masterman, *The forerunner. The dilemmas of Tom Ellis, 1859–1899* (1972), pp. 93–5.



FIGURE 2. Constabulary and lancers at Llanfair Talhaearn during the Tithe War, 1888.

Photo: From an album compiled by C. V. Stephens, agent to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, relating to the Tithe Disturbances in Denbighshire and Flintshire, 1886–90; Denbighshire Record Office, DD/DM/845/1, Gathering the Jewels, GTJ 15061.

that there were very few instances of brutal assault perpetrated by the rioters, that the ‘real rioters’ were not the farmers but rather the farm labourers and others who just wanted a fight, that damage to property was minimal, that no fatalities occurred, and that violence was always discriminating and especially directed at non-Welsh auctioneers – all this in contrast to more extreme Irish behaviour – the fact remains that when Welsh rural dwellers perceived injustice, as did Rebecca’s children and, later, the anti-tithe campaigners, they were – for all the civilizing influence of the chapels – prepared to embark on a course of violent confrontation.⁶⁸

Contrariwise, the campaign for Welsh land reform was conducted along strictly peaceful constitutional lines through agencies like the press, the Welsh Land, Commercial and Labour League, the North and South Wales Liberal Federations from October 1887, parliamentary election platforms and the House of Commons itself. With the deepening of the farming depression from late 1883 the land question became a big issue in Welsh elections from 1885 and, following the failure of Welsh land bills in each session between 1887 and 1892, culminated in the setting up of a Royal Commission in early 1893 to inquire into the Welsh land system,

⁶⁸ These conclusions about the tithe riots are based on Richter, ‘Welsh Police’, p. 75. Dunbabin, *Rural discontent*, p. 309, points to the ‘real rioters’ not being the farmers.

Gladstone having recognized in his celebrated speech in Snowdonia on 13 September 1892 that Wales had 'a land question distinct from the land question in England'.⁶⁹ That a Conservative administration would have stifled such an initiative is conveyed in the partisan pronouncement of Lord Salisbury in late November 1893 that 'As far as I know the land system of Wales is just the land system of England'.⁷⁰

The nearest that Welsh farmers came to organized joint action against landlords was in January 1886 with the founding of local land leagues or clubs in various counties of north Wales whose aim of persuading landlords to grant rent abatements met with some success.⁷¹ This constructive turn of events in early 1886 was rubbed in by the combative John Gibson in his *Cambrian News* for 5 March 1886: 'Mr. Michael Davitt is ostentatiously, and almost unnecessarily, repudiated, whilst the formation of a Land League on the Irish pattern is utterly disowned'. Warming to his subject, he went on to claim that most Welsh tenant farmers were 'almost morbidly anxious to express the goodwill existing between them and their landlords', their public utterances couched in 'mildness and moderation'.⁷²

Clearly, nothing came of efforts to establish a Welsh Land League along Irish lines during Davitt's visit to north Wales in February 1886 and similar inaction attended similar efforts made at a meeting held at Rhyl in Flintshire the following June and one planned for Liverpool in the autumn.⁷³ Invited to Wales by kindred spirits in the persons of the earlier Welsh land reformer, Michael D. Jones, and Dr E Pan Jones, advocate of 'the land for the people', on 11 February Davitt visited Flint – where, testifying to the pan-Celtic embrace, he was joined by Dr G. B. Clark, the crofters' champion – and addressed an audience, which, however, did not include tenant farmers, but on whom he urged the wholesale abolition of landlordism. The following evening's venue was Blaenau Ffestiniog in Merioneth where, with Michael D. Jones, he addressed an assembly of mainly local quarrymen and drew attention to the strong resemblances between Welsh and Irish landlords. By this time the young David Lloyd George, already passionately committed to radical land reform, had come to see the need for founding a land league in his district modelled on Davitt's Irish Land League so that in an impromptu speech of response to Davitt at the Blaenau Ffestiniog meeting he was to remind working men of the power of combination, exhorting his listeners: 'When a Land League was started for Wales he hoped they would all join it'.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ For a full report of the speech, see *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 16 Sept. 1892.

⁷⁰ *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 1 Dec. 1893. Salisbury was speaking at Cardiff.

⁷¹ Some landlords, however, were averse to responding to tenants petitioning in concert for abatements, as, for instance, were the owners of the Cawdor Stackpole estate (Pembrokeshire) and the Rhiwlas estate (Merioneth) in the early 1890s: see BPP, 1894, XXXVII, qq. 28952–55, evidence of George Williams; and BPP, 1894, XXXVI, q.16623A, evidence of John Jones of Bala. For landowners' response to tenants' associations in Lancashire, see Alistair Mutch, 'Farmers' organisations and agricultural depression in Lancashire, 1890–1900',

AgHR 31 (1983), pp. 26–36.

⁷² Cited in Jones, 'Michael Davitt, David Lloyd George and T. E. Ellis', pp. 475–6.

⁷³ Vincent, *Land Question in North Wales*, pp. 11–12.

⁷⁴ Jones, 'Michael Davitt, Lloyd George and T. E. Ellis', pp. 457–70; Roy Douglas, *Land, people and politics* (1976), pp. 98–9; NLW, Voelas and Cefnamwlch Mss, B 10; T. W. Moody, *Davitt and the Irish Revolution* (1981), p. 548; although an initial founder of the Welsh Land League, Thomas Gee was to distance himself from the invitation to Davitt because he felt that with Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule announced in mid-December 1885, his visit would harm Liberalism in Wales: see Jones-Evans, 'Evan Pan Jones', p. 152.



FIGURE 3. *In the wake of Ireland.* Against a background of Irish disturbances, Dame Wales asks, 'Gracious! Can the law be fought THIS way in WALES!'

Source: Cartoon by J. M. Staniforth, *Western Mail*, 16 Mar. 1894.

Lloyd George's hope was not to materialize. For all the support shown by Lloyd George and Tom Ellis for Davitt, certain of the local land leagues, especially those in the Vale of Conway and Montgomeryshire, shied away from any Welsh land League associated with the Irish land reformer.⁷⁵ For a majority of the Welsh peasantry – imbibing their opinions from the Welsh newspapers – Davitt's views, such as his urging land nationalization and his sanctioning of violent methods to protect the Irish tenants from eviction, were perceived as too extreme and so ill-suited to improving their particular situation (Figure 3). Moreover, as Nonconformist Welshmen they were naturally antagonistic towards the visit of an Irishman to teach them and were also alienated by his criminal past.⁷⁶ Again, nothing resembling the Irish Plan of Campaign of 1886–90 was to grow up in the Welsh countryside; the Plan saw tenants of individual estates combine to offer their landlord reduced rents and as part of the campaign resorted to boycott and intimidation, landlords for their part carrying out mass evictions. (Ellis's support for the Irish cause was however unflagging; having the previous day been proclaimed the 'Parnell of Wales' at a meeting in Dublin, he was to witness at close quarters the 'Mitchelstown Massacre' (County Cork) of 9 September 1887.)⁷⁷ Welsh farmers did not adopt the Irish tactic of boycotting despite being urged to do so by Welsh newspapers in 1886 and 1887 as a means of gaining rent reductions.⁷⁸ Their reluctance to do so was condemned by Y

⁷⁵ Boucher, 'Working the land', ch. 2; Douglas, *Land, people and politics*, p. 99; see *The Times*, 13 Feb. 1886 for this attitude on the part of the Vale of Conway Farmers' Club; similarly, in south Wales where such farmers' clubs or associations were less common, the St. Clears' Tenant Farmers' Association founded in Jan. 1886 disassociated itself from militant tactics like the boycotting practised in Ireland. Bainbridge, 'Agricultural community', p. 37.

⁷⁶ Jones, 'Michael Davitt, David Lloyd George and T. E. Ellis', pp. 455–9, 470–2.

⁷⁷ For the Plan, see R. V. Comerford, 'The Parnell era, 1883–91', in Vaughan (ed.), *New history of Ireland*, VI, ii, pp. 70–2; for Ellis's visit, see Jones, 'Michael Davitt, David Lloyd George and T. E. Ellis', p. 480; Davies, 'Wales and Ireland compared', pp. 7–16; and Masterman, *Forerunner*, pp. 92–3.

⁷⁸ Vincent, *Land Question in North Wales*, pp. 16, 32.

Faner of 11 December 1886 as stemming from their 'unfaithfulness' to one another, a 'common evil' in Wales but exceptional in Ireland.

Contemporary rhetoric on both countries' land questions distorted the true picture. Although there were similarities between Wales and Ireland with regard to their land systems, differences nevertheless obtained which were crucial in determining the nature of rural ethnic mobilization. Welsh landlords were more popular within their communities, often coming from ancient Welsh stock. In contrast, those Irish landlords who owned *large* estates were throughout the nineteenth century often English Protestants, a state of affairs produced by the British government's confiscation of Catholics' lands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷⁹ This dispossession in Ireland meant that the nineteenth-century descendants of the Protestant newcomers were generally perceived 'as illegitimate confiscators who had acquired their position through military conquest'.⁸⁰ It certainly invested the Land League's slogan 'the land for the people' with nationalistic overtones – urging as it did that the land should be returned to its 'real' owners – and so strengthened its appeal.⁸¹ The absence of an organized tenant movement in Wales against their landlords was also partly because there was far less poverty in the Welsh countryside. Wales, like Scotland, possessed far larger industrial sectors than did Ireland; these relieved rural poverty by providing a burgeoning consumer market for farm produce and siphoned off excess rural population into the towns, mainly those in the coalmining valleys of south-east Wales. While some of these features can be found in Ireland also, opportunities were fewer and the initial level of poverty to be surmounted was far deeper. For all the increase in farm sizes in Ireland between the 1840s and the 1870s, tenancies nevertheless remained throughout smaller than those in Wales thereby giving rise to congestion.⁸² In Wales, on the other hand, it was the contention of the Welsh Land Commissioners that there was no need for the consolidation of farms.⁸³ Moreover, far less was spent on Irish holdings in the way of improvements by landlords than was laid out on estates in England and Wales.⁸⁴ This underlying poverty especially blighted the western counties and the depth of suffering experienced there in the late 1870s was not endured to anything like the same extent in Welsh farming neighbourhoods. Certainly there was a general collapse in farm prices in Wales in 1879–80, and a more serious one in the mid-1880s and again in the early 1890s,⁸⁵ but tenants struggled on and – as shown – apart from (successfully) petitioning for rent reductions there was no upsurge of violence against landlords. Simply the agrarian crisis was not so deeply felt as to spark a mass tenant movement co-ordinated by community leaders. It was this want of a tenant organization enforcing its own moral code in determining what rents should be paid for a holding that explains the unwillingness of tenants to practise

⁷⁹ Alan O'Day, 'Rural Catholic mobilisation in Ireland, 1850–1922', in David Howell (ed.), *Roots of rural ethnic mobilisation* (1993), pp. 14, 17–18; Michael J. Winstanley, *The Irish Land Question, 1800–1922* (1984), pp. 12–13; Foster, *Modern Ireland*, pp. 107–13, 132–3, 154–5. This distinction between the landowners of Wales and Ireland was made in 1877 by E.P.C., 'The Celts of Wales and the Celts of Ireland', *Cornhill Magazine* 36 (1877), pp. 661–78.

⁸⁰ Samuel Clark, 'Landlord domination in

nineteenth-century Ireland', in *UNESCO Yearbook on peace and conflict studies* (1988 for 1986), pp. 7–29.

⁸¹ Boyce, *Nineteenth-century Ireland*, p. 167.

⁸² O'Day, 'Rural Catholic mobilisation', pp. 13–14, 18–19; Cameron, 'Communication or separation?', p. 659 for Irish farm sizes.

⁸³ BPP, 1896, XXXIV, p. 357.

⁸⁴ Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants*, p. 123.

⁸⁵ Howell, *Land and people*, pp. 8–9.

boycotting whenever farms became vacant, rather than that they were 'unfaithful' to each other as *Y Faner* maintained.

Welsh landlords were certainly more popular than the clergy of the Established Church. Contrasting with the sympathetic response of the former to farmers' difficulties in the 1880s, it was the refusal of the clergy to grant tenants tithe reductions during the economic hardship of the mid-1880s that unleashed the tithe disturbances and, doubtless encouraged by their nonconformist leaders, led tenants to refuse to pay tithe on principle that it went to an alien church. The *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald* for 17 January 1890 reflected that:

To their great credit be it said, most Welsh landowners were prompt to sympathize with their suffering tenants and to relieve them by abatements of rent. Tithe abatements, on the other hand, had to be forced and wrung from the clergy – from the very men who should have been foremost in evincing sympathy from their hard-pressed parishioners.

Yet the tithe issue damaged the standing of Welsh landowners in the late 1880s through their becoming drawn into the dispute. Significantly, the Anti-Tithe League established in September 1886 was to broaden out a year later to embrace disestablishment and land reform – seeking fair rents, fixity of tenure, compensation for improvements and land courts – under its new title of The Welsh Land, Commercial and Labour League. Tom Ellis observed in 1892 that the question of disestablishment and the land 'were strikingly interwoven; the clergy and the landlords had fought into one another's hands, and the people had to strike against both'.⁸⁶ He made similar comments at a speech at Camarthen in late 1894 (Figure 4).

These tensions arising from their stance over tithe notwithstanding, their often continuing personal popularity as lenient landlords meant that no campaign of violence against them occurred. Absence of organized disturbance arguably sprang also from the wish of the Welsh in the late nineteenth century to be seen as law-abiding and respectable and to consciously dissociate themselves from their more troublesome fellow Irish Celts, thereby courting the approbation of the English and so be considered worthy of an imperial role. Significantly, one of the reasons for the Welsh people's antagonism towards Robert Ambrose Jones, 'Emrys ap Iwan', was his championing of Ireland and his efforts to undermine the Welsh veneration for the English; in *Y Faner*, the Welsh-language newspaper, between 1880 and 1882 he was to defend Davitt and his campaign.⁸⁷ An instance of this Welsh tendency to emphasize their disdain of Irish violence occurred during the Commons debate in 1872 on the appointment of Welsh-speaking judges, Osborne Morgan appealing to the Home Secretary 'Whether any portion of Her Majesty's subjects had given him so little trouble? We do not shoot our landlords. We do not require to be kept in order by Peace Preservation and Coercion Bills'.⁸⁸

Even so, the Welsh campaign for land reform was directly influenced by Irish events; Matthew Cragoe argues that the Welsh land question 'was, as always, taken more seriously when conditions in Ireland were volatile – the growth of Michael Davitt's "plan of campaign"

⁸⁶ *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 11 Nov. 1892.

⁸⁷ Information provided in conversation with my friend, the late Professor Hywel Teifi Edwards.

⁸⁸ *PD Commons*, third ser., 209, 8 Mar. 1872, cols

1657–58, cited in David Howell, 'A "less obtrusive and exacting" nationality: Welsh ethnic mobilisation in rural communities, 1850–1920', in Howell (ed.), *Roots of rural ethnic mobilisation*, pp. 73–4.

FIGURE 4.

Words of encouragement.

Tom Ellis's speech at Camarthen: 'the passionate revolt of the Welsh people against the Anglican Establishment and tithe system – a revolt not spasmodic or intermittent, but determined and implacable'.

Source: Cartoon by J. M. Staniforth, *Western Mail*, 29 Nov. 1894.



formed the background to a new upsurge of political activity in Wales'. Welsh Liberals, he contends, were ready to 'play the Irish card', hoping to persuade English opinion that if Welsh social problems were not addressed then the region would slide into Irish-type disorder.⁸⁹ Crucially, too, the Irish Land Act of 1881 – just as it furnished an 'important model' for the Crofters Holdings Act of 1886⁹⁰ – influenced Welsh reformers towards seeking legislation guaranteeing security of tenure and fair rents.

Once again, however, the different circumstances of the Welsh agrarian system meant that the land campaign there differed from Ireland's in two respects. First, far greater importance was attached to tenant right in Ireland. The core of tenant right there lay in the right of free sale which allowed tenants to 'sell' an 'interest' ('whatever that was', Vaughan observes) in their holdings thereby peaceably – this stipulation in itself mirroring the tendency towards violence – making way for their successors. This was an important custom, for in the 1870s amounts paid for tenant right in its stronghold of Ulster gave many outgoing tenants as much as twenty years' purchase of the rent of their farms. It thereby introduced the notion of dual ownership, for tenant right accorded tenants 'as substantial an interest in their land as the landlord'.⁹¹ The Ulster Custom operated, if to a lesser extent, elsewhere in Ireland.⁹² It differed markedly in scale from the right to compensation for unexhausted improvements that obtained on English and Welsh estates.⁹³ Accordingly, free sale was to be one of the three celebrated 'three Fs' which tenant righters had called for since mid-century, an aspiration which would be granted in Gladstone's Act of 1881 which gave tenants 'a form of co-ownership of their holdings'.⁹⁴ In contrast, Welsh land reformers did not desire the implementation of free sale; for tenants did not pay goodwill upon entry to their farms in the Irish manner nor did they carry out the

⁸⁹ Cragoe, "A contemptible mimic of the Irish", pp. 100, 102.

⁹⁰ Cameron, 'Communication or separation?', p. 634.

⁹¹ Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants*, p. 71.

⁹² For its operation in County Cork, see Donnelly, *Land and the people*, pp. 212–18.

⁹³ Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants*, ch. 4: 'The tenant right custom'; K. Theodore Hoppen, *Ireland Since 1800: conflict and conformity* (1989), p. 89.

⁹⁴ Comerford, 'The Land War and the politics of distress, 1877–82', p. 47.

bulk of the permanent improvements needed for the maintenance of their holdings as did Irish tenants, the two crucial practices which gave the latter an interest in the soil.⁹⁵ Tom Ellis was to complain in 1892 that whereas down to mid-century the custom whereby tenants used to sell the 'goodwill' of their tenancies to incoming tenants had operated as a 'modified form of Ulster tenant right', it had thereafter been withdrawn by their landlords.⁹⁶

In the second place, while the call for a peasant proprietary by means of land purchase had been an aim of the Irish National Land League – a process set in train by the Ashbourne Act of 1885, which would eventually lead to the eradication of the large landowner class – no such objective was pushed for by the generality of Welsh land reformers.⁹⁷ (Similarly, while the Ulster Orange Order sought to exploit the opposition to landlords among the peasantry to enhance its influence, there was no perception of the landowners as alien interlopers and no propaganda about the land not being rightfully theirs.)⁹⁸ Nor was peasant proprietary widely desired among the Welsh farming community; when landed estates came up for sale late in the century, tenants were anxious that, rather than have to purchase their own farms, the entire property would be sold to another landowner under whom they could continue their tenancy. In 1890 a telling exchange of views between Edward Jones of Velindre, a Carmarthenshire magistrate, and Tom Ellis, arose from the latter's having pronounced in a speech at Bala, Merioneth, that 'Wales was beginning to ask landlords by what title they hold their lands in Wales'. Jones informed Ellis that at the recent sale at Aberystwyth of a large property, those present, rather than hoping that the estate would be purchased by its rightful owners 'the people and the nation', were delighted when the entire property was purchased by a popular local landlord.⁹⁹

III

If not generally perpetrating the agrarian terrorism dealt out by their fellow Irish Gaels,¹⁰⁰ the Scottish crofters – merely intensifying a tendency to protest already familiar in earlier

⁹⁵ Howell, 'A "less obtrusive and exacting" nationality', p. 75. The Welsh Land Commissioners in their *Report* of 1896, p. 917, pronounced with regard to free sale: 'We do not think that it is just or expedient to give a tenant the absolute right of assigning his holding'. Importantly, the Welsh estate system resembled England's insofar as landlords did the permanent improvements.

⁹⁶ *PD, Commons* 4th ser., 2 'Tenure of Land (Wales) Bill', 16 Mar. 1892; *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 13 Jan. 1893.

⁹⁷ Comerford, 'The Land War and the politics of distress, 1877–82', p. 35; Foster, *Modern Ireland*, p. 414; Cameron, 'Communication or separation?', pp. 657–8. After considering the desirability of peasant proprietary, the Welsh Land Commissioners concluded in their *Report* of 1896, p. 899, that what was best for Wales was the system of large estates, letting land on fair terms.

⁹⁸ I owe thanks to Professor Boyce for this observation as well as for his helpful comments on this Welsh-Irish comparison.

⁹⁹ *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 7 Nov. 1890, an episode also cited in Cragoe, *Anglican aristocracy*, p. 70 and in Masterman, *Forerunner*, pp. 136–7. Similar to Ellis, the *Genedl* for 9 June 1886 pronounced: 'Within less than three hundred years ago all the land belonged to the people, but by this time it has been usurped by a class of men who call themselves the lords of the land, which is hideous unrighteousness', cited in Vincent, *Land Question in North Wales*, p. 14. For the alternative claim that the tenant indeed saw land sales as a means of 'buying back the land of his people', see John Davies, 'The end of the great estates and the rise of freehold farming in Wales', *Welsh History Rev.* 7 (1974), pp. 210–11.

¹⁰⁰ Just as Henry Richard had pointed to the greater tendency to violence in Ireland than in Wales, so, too,

decades¹⁰¹ – resorted to physical confrontation with the authorities from the start of the 1880s in their campaign for land reform. They adopted tactics of lawlessness which took the form of rent strikes – copied from Irish land campaigners – the ‘raiding’ of old lands, the breaking of farm fences and the harming of livestock.¹⁰² This violent agitation was put down by the police and military, forces of law and order which were present in the Welsh countryside only during the tithe riots. As in Ireland once again, and unlike in Wales, the crofter land reform movement (if not nearly so tightly organized as the Irish National Land League and its successor the Irish national League)¹⁰³ had a well-organized political base in the form of the Highland Land Law Reform Association founded in 1883 – which became the Highland Land League in 1886 – whose various branches boosted around 7,000 crofter members and whose reform programme resembled that of the Irish Land League.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, the newly enfranchised crofters were to return five crofters’ candidates to Westminster in the 1885 election.¹⁰⁵ Vital support for their cause came from Gaelic migrants living in the lowland cities who had organized their Highland societies.¹⁰⁶ Crucial backing came, too, from the local and national press, above all (in the 1870s) from *The Highlander*, edited by the influential pro-crofter champion John Murdoch – whose outlook and objectives were strikingly similar to those of Tom Ellis – and, from 1882, the *Oban Times*, under its editor Duncan Cameron. The press, of course, operating within the context of increasing literacy, was to play a similarly vital role in both Ireland and Wales in shaping and promoting national causes.¹⁰⁷

The crofters also received the support of the clergy, a group once again involved in the land movements of all three regions. Of course, the clergy in Wales and Scotland were Protestant ministers, Welsh nonconformity being paralleled in crofting communities by the Free Church denomination which had come into being at the Disruption of 1843. Strikingly similar to what had happened in Wales in the early nineteenth century, the crofting communities of Gaeldom were converted by evangelical preachers appealing to their hearts through their native Gaelic tongue. Similarly, these preachers, both the ordained ministers and the ‘Men’ – the lay preachers – were increasingly drawn from the crofters themselves. As in Wales, also, the Highland landed gentry, the big farmers and professional families remained loyal to the Established Presbyterian Church of Scotland. In his recent revisionist study, MacColl

Note 100 *continued*

was a similar perception held by Highlanders of their own restraint compared with the violent Irish. The defending solicitor in a trial of crofters who had rioted at Bernera in Lewis in 1874 thus observed that the oppressive factor on the island would have faced far greater danger had the riot occurred in Connaught or Munster. See Cameron, ‘Communication or separation?’, p. 639.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 640; Andrew G. Newby, ‘Land and the “Crofter Question” in nineteenth-century Scotland’, *International Rev. of Scottish Studies*, 35 (2010), pp. 11–14.

¹⁰² Withers, ‘Rural protest’, pp. 177, 179; Devine, *Clanship to Crofters’ War*, p. 219.

¹⁰³ Cameron, ‘Communication or separation?’, pp. 643–4.

¹⁰⁴ Withers, ‘Rural protest’, pp. 184–5; MacColl, *Land, faith and the crofting community*, p. 104.

¹⁰⁵ John MacLean of Balemartin, Tiree, and his namesake, John MacLean of Mulbuie in the Black Isle, each wrote a song depicting them as victorious warriors in the traditional heroic mould. These appear as Poems 29 and 30 in Donald Meek (ed.), *Tuath Is Tighearna; Tenants and landlords* (1995), pp. 38, 248–51.

¹⁰⁶ I. M. M. Macphail, *The Crofters’ War* (1989), pp. 88–92.

¹⁰⁷ Hunter, *Making of the Crofting Community*, pp. 129–30. For a discussion of the power of the press in mobilizing ethnic consciousness within Europe and Britain see Ellen Wiegandt, ‘Understanding rural ethnic mobilisation’, in Howell (ed.), *Roots of rural ethnic mobilization*, pp. 313–14.

has persuasively argued that the Free Church leaders actively supported the crofters in their struggle: 'the ministers' contributions to the success of the crofters' protests was substantial and has been greatly underestimated'.¹⁰⁸ HLLRA political meetings in the 1880s – often in Free Church premises – opened and closed with prayers, and Biblical stories of land dispossession suffered by the Jews were used by crofters' leaders to legitimize the campaign for land rights.¹⁰⁹ At the same time, MacColl emphasizes the keenness of Free Church ministers to counsel crofters to adopt peaceful means of agitation and to refrain from lawlessness and violence.¹¹⁰ Such ambivalence characterized the Welsh nonconformist preachers' stance with regard to both the Rebecca and Tithe riots.¹¹¹ For Scottish and Welsh preachers to encourage and legitimize, on the one hand, the expression of grievances against the status quo and, on the other, to expect these hard-pressed rural peasantries to keep their protest within the law was naïve.¹¹²

There were also similarities to some extent between the two communities in their attitudes towards landlords. Unlike in Wales, the massive transfer of west Highland properties to rich Lowland and English industrial, commercial and professional interests in the 1820s and 1830s saw the arrival of a 'new' landed class, a phenomenon which had a profound impact on clearances. But in contrast to Irish Gaels, crofters, confronted with an alien landed elite, for whatever reason remained attached to their individual landlords notwithstanding the earlier clearances and evictions, although understandably this was the case especially if the landlord was descended from the old Highland aristocracy. This continuing individual reverence resembled the position on many Welsh estates and, as in Wales, when the Highland landed class was harangued, 'it was usually in anonymous terms' and blame was more often directed rather at factors, tacksmen, and sheep farmers.¹¹³

And that censure was commonplace. Despite the coming of better times in the 1860s and 1870s, crofters still felt insecure and lived in fear of eviction. On many estates the factor and his underling, the ground officer, behaved as tyrants and crofters were afraid to air their grievances.¹¹⁴ Referring to the ground officer, a Scottish witness appearing before the Welsh Land Commission fulminated that crofters before 1886 were 'a great deal more afraid of him than they were of their Creator, in most cases. This menial ground officer could go home and tell a tale to the factor, and the factor could do what he liked, and get the crofter removed.'¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁸ MacColl, *Land, faith and the crofting community*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 157, 162–3.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 104, 117, 128, 132.

¹¹¹ For this ambivalence towards the tithe disturbances, see Dunbabin, *Rural discontent*, p. 294.

¹¹² MacColl, p. 104, points to the same dilemma being faced by Irish priests.

¹¹³ Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War*, pp. 58–9, 215; MacColl, *Land, faith and the crofting community*, p. 113. Cameron observes that there was an absence of the virulent anti-landlordism experienced in Ireland and attributes this to 'the greater politicisation of the Irish agitation', landlords being castigated as much on nationalist as on agrarian grounds. See his 'Communication or Separation?', p. 646.

¹¹⁴ Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War*, p. 217. Moving among them in the 1870s in his attempt to rouse them to protest, John Murdoch was struck by the fear which blighted their existence and dispirited them. See Hunter, *Making of the Crofting Community*, pp. 129–30; Cameron, 'Communication or Separation?', pp. 635–6.

¹¹⁵ BPP, 1896, XXXV, q. 76157: evidence of Alexander Mackenzie, editor of the *Scottish Highlander*. For a balanced assessment of the onerous, alcohol-inducing workload of factors in the post-clearance years, which attributes their deep unpopularity to their role as enforcers 'on the ground' of resented estate policies, see Annie Tindley, "'They sow the wind, they reap the whirlwind': Estate management in the post-clearance Highlands, c.1815–c.1900", *Northern Scotland* 3 (2012), pp. 66–85.

Although Welsh tenants were dependent on the goodwill of landlords, agents and sub-agents and were unwise to step out of line – as over the taking of game – they did not generally live in a climate of fear.

It was the greater degree of suffering endured by the crofters in previous decades and in the depression of the 1880s in comparison to the less painful experience of the Welsh peasantry which also partly explains the different level of lawlessness between the two regions. Welsh peasants had suffered none of the trauma of famine, clearances and mass evictions which had afflicted Highland communities between the 1820s and the 1850s. These evictions of crofters and landless cottars were undertaken to turn land into large sheep farms – in response to a collapse in wool prices many by the 1880s had been turned into deer forests – the dispossessed who had not emigrated having been resettled in congested townships along the coast, a relocation which failed to achieve its aim of providing the small tenant with a more secure livelihood.¹¹⁶ Although mass clearances petered out from the 1860s, a bitter memory of these dispossessions persisted and helped stoke the resentment against Highland landlordism that erupted in the 1880s.¹¹⁷

Scottish crofts were organized on a township system which involved a degree of communal farming and were far smaller than the general run of Welsh holdings. The resulting congestion which afflicted crofting communities was entirely absent from the Welsh countryside, congestion which in both the west of Ireland and – though less acute – the Scottish Highlands prompted the government to establish Congested District Boards in both regions in 1891 and 1897 respectively. Their small-size holdings meant that crofters were of necessity part-time farmers only, their livelihoods – far more so than was the case with Welsh farmers – dependent on by-employments, in the late century particularly from the earnings derived from migration to the east coast fisheries. When depression struck at the beginning of the 1880s they were severely hit, to an extent not experienced by Welsh farmers; following the havoc inflicted by the severe storms of the winter 1881–2, especially on fishing boats, the winter of 1882–3 saw acute suffering when the potato crop was badly affected and the vital income from the east coast fisheries fell drastically.¹¹⁸ In all likelihood this subsistence crisis drove crofters on Skye and elsewhere to take up no-rent campaigns for, just as Irish peasants had felt at the close of the 1870s, crofters having grown used to better times in the 1860s and 1870s may have felt frustrated expectations upon the reversal in living standards.¹¹⁹ Their resort to direct action was heavily influenced by events in Ireland. Crofters read in their newspapers, especially *The Highlander* (whose editor had lived in Ireland), about happenings there. Of even greater importance was the close knowledge of Irish events and tactics like rent strikes gained by Skye men through their annual summer migrations from the mid-seventies to work on Irish fishing boats.¹²⁰ Even so, for all this awareness of Irish methods, there was no general disposition to

¹¹⁶ The failure of the resettlement policy in Sutherland is demonstrated in Tindley, “Actual Pinching and Suffering”, p. 239. For evidence of sheep farms later in the century being turned into deer forests, see BPP, 1896, XXXV, q. 75737, evidence of Donald Macrae, for seven years the secretary of the HLLRA, and qq. 76116–18, evidence of Alexander Mackenzie.

¹¹⁷ Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War*, p. 207.

¹¹⁸ Cameron, ‘Communication or separation?’, pp. 642–3 and 658–9; Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War*, p. 221.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 221–2; MacColl, *Land, faith and the crofting community*, p. 101.

¹²⁰ Devine, *From Clanship to Crofters' War*, p. 223.

emulate Irish violent tactics. Apart from the support given by *The Highlander* for what was happening in Ireland, other newspapers condemned Irish violence and, as in Wales, moderate reformers in the Highlands recoiled from images of Ireland. They consciously sought to dissociate their movement from the Irish one so as not to sully the reputation of the quiet and loyal Highlander.¹²¹

Perhaps the most striking affirmation of solidarity between the Irish and crofting communities was the warm welcome given to Michael Davitt when he visited the crofting communities in 1882 and 1887, this contrasting with the cool reception accorded him by Welsh farmers and their leaders.¹²² When he toured the Highlands in the spring of 1887 his message to rent-striking and land-raiding crofters that they should agitate until landlords were toppled was, of course, enthusiastically welcomed. He was offered a Highland Land League candidature, albeit he declined it.¹²³ But here again qualification is needed, for, notwithstanding the warmth accorded him and his likeminded associates on their visits to the Highlands in the persons of Edward McHugh and Henry George, as in Wales their ideas on land nationalization were not embraced by the leaders of the crofting movement as the way forward for the crofters.¹²⁴ For all the qualification necessary in the claims made for Irish influence on the 'crofters' war', that same influence on the land question in Wales, if significant, was felt to a far less extent.

It was the public disorder on the part of both the Irish peasantry and the crofters which won concessions from the government in the form of the Irish Land Act of 1881 and ('based firmly' on the latter)¹²⁵ the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act of 1886. Crucially, by the mid-1880s the wide public and political support that had grown up for the crofters' struggle would not have tolerated undue coercion being brought to bear on the unrest, so that it was deemed necessary to grant some of the crofters' demands.¹²⁶ In taking the peaceful route towards achieving land reform Welsh radicals, it has been shown in the earlier discussion on Irish parallels, did not manage to achieve anything resembling the politically independent HLLRA.¹²⁷ While convincing Welsh farmers of the need for land reform legislation, they failed to build up a body of sympathetic public opinion in England owing to the counter-arguments forwarded by the landowners, who hired publicists and lawyers, notably the barrister J. E. Vincent, to defend them.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, and notwithstanding Gladstone's earlier insistence that the Crofters Act was an exceptional measure born out of recognition of the past injustice Highlanders had endured, the newly returned Liberal government of summer 1892, dependent as it was on the votes of the Welsh Liberal Parliamentary Party, succumbed to pressure from Welsh Liberal leaders by granting in March 1893 a Royal Commission to inquire into all aspects of landholding in Wales. This began its work in May. The Irish and Crofter legislation clearly influenced their deliberations. Upon consideration of both Acts, a majority of the Commissioners were to

¹²¹ Newby, 'Land and the "Crofter Question"', p. 28; Cameron, 'Communication or separation?', pp. 636, 639.

¹²² Ibid., p. 637.

¹²³ Hunter, 'Gaelic connection', pp. 187–8.

¹²⁴ Andrew G. Newby, 'Edward McHugh, the National Land League of Great Britain and the "Crofters' War", 1878–1882', *Scottish Historical Rev.* 82 (2003), p. 90.

¹²⁵ Cameron, 'Communication or separation?', p. 653.

¹²⁶ Devine, *From Clanship to Crofters' War*, p. 223.

¹²⁷ Only after 1886 did the newly named Highland Land League come to be increasingly identified with the Liberal Party, which led to a weakening of the crofters' campaign: Hunter, 'Politics of Highland Land Reform', pp. 58–9.

¹²⁸ Dunbabin, *Rural discontent*, pp. 308–9.

conclude 'that the precedents afforded by the Act of 1881, and the Act of 1886 are, upon the whole, applicable to Wales'.¹²⁹ Indeed, it was the 1886 Crofter legislation that arguably had the greater impact on Welsh leaders in the run up to the granting of the Welsh Royal Commission. Thus the Crofters Act had been alluded to in the addresses of certain Welsh Liberal candidates in the 1886 parliamentary election¹³⁰ and Tom Ellis declared that he had remodelled his Land Bill of 1892 and based it 'upon the finest agrarian enactment of modern times, the Highland Crofters act of 1886'.¹³¹ The procedure of the Crofters Act was thus closely adopted in the new Bill so that a land court (in the Highlands, the Crofters Commission) was substituted for the hitherto desired arbitrators as the agency for determining fair conditions of tenancy and rent. However, the length of time – some two-and-half years – spent by the Commissioners taking evidence meant that although most of them recommended that Welsh tenants be granted legislation conferring security of tenure and fair rents, the return of a Conservative government in summer 1895 predictably saw no action being taken on the Welsh tenants' behalf.

Despite pressure being put on the Conservative government to enact legislation, nothing was achieved. Thus the Land Tenure Bill introduced in 1897 by M. Vaughan Davies, Liberal MP for Cardiganshire, calling for a Land Court to fix fair rents for five years and to guarantee satisfactory conditions of tenure was overwhelmingly defeated; it nevertheless enjoyed the support of the official Liberal leadership, Irish nationalists, including Michael Davitt, and crofter MP G. B. Clark as, too, the Glasgow Liberal and crofter-supporting MP, Charles Cameron. Similar bills brought in by Welsh MPs in 1898 and 1901 were likewise unsuccessful. Prominent in supporting all three bills was Brynmor Jones, barrister and Liberal MP for Swansea, himself one of the nine Land Commissioners in the early and mid-1890s. Rising prices after 1900, together with the easing of the social disabilities of Welsh nonconformists that followed from the local government legislation of the late 1880s and early 1890s and the Welsh Intermediate Education Act of 1889, cooled passions aroused by the land question to such a degree that it did not become an important issue in the 1906 election. Even so, down to 1920 certain Welsh farmers continued pressing the government to remedy the special problems associated with Welsh agriculture. However, despite the campaign of the Welsh Farmers' Union, founded in 1918, to provide amendments to the government's Agriculture Bill of 1920 granting separate treatment for Wales, neither a Welsh Land Court, a Welsh Board of Agriculture nor security of tenure were included in the bill which passed through the House of Commons at the close of 1920.¹³²

Whereas the tenant's right of free sale, i.e. the right to sell his holding, as granted in Ireland, was not sought by Welsh land reformers, likewise the crofters' leaders and crofters themselves did not call for free sale of holdings and the 1886 Act, while granting security of tenure, fair rents and compensation for improvements, did not grant the tenant the right of freely selling or assigning his tenancy.¹³³ Lord Napier, chairman of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into

¹²⁹ BPP, 1896, XXXIV, p. 914.

¹³⁰ Morgan, *Wales in British politics*, p. 58.

¹³¹ Masterman, *Forerunner*, p. 173.

¹³² Howell, 'A "less obtrusive and exacting" nationality', pp. 75–7; Morgan, *Wales in British politics*,

pp. 177–8; *PD Commons* fourth ser., 49, 19 May 1897; 56, 20 Apr. 1898; 89, 10 Feb. 1901.

¹³³ Cameron, 'Communication or separation?', p. 655; id., 'Setting the heather on fire', p. 114.

the condition of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland set up in March 1883, had written to the leading Liberal politician William Harcourt in April 1884 that, in his opinion, conditions in the Highlands did not justify the right of free sale, perhaps thinking along the same lines of Lochiel who in the following December was to dismiss the crofter's improvements, which in contrast to those of the Irish tenant he maintained, were limited to 'the doors and windows of the miserable crofter's cabin – a species of tenant right which may be calculated in pence, not even in shillings'.¹³⁴ If not seeking outright free sale, crofters nevertheless wanted the right to sell freely within the family. Although the 1886 Act granted them the power to bequeath to members of the same family, crofters were dissatisfied with the restrictiveness of this, desiring a wider interpretation of the term 'within the family'. In their wanting the definition of family widened, they deemed the Act in this particular respect to be seriously defective.¹³⁵ The major difference between crofters and the Irish and Welsh peasantries lay, however, in their wanting more land, Highland land reformers calling for redistribution of land currently used for sheep farms and (the deeply disliked) deer forests in order to enlarge crofts and to create new holdings.¹³⁶ Girded with Scriptural sanction, crofters' leaders vilified the landlords for unjustly taking away the land from the Highland people during the clearances; accordingly, the crofting community, in particular the landless cottars, were to be frustrated by the failure of the 1886 Act to make any real provision for the restoration of ancestral land to the people which they – as had their forefathers – perceived as their inalienable right.¹³⁷ They consequently resorted to land raids and the occupation of land in 1886 and 1887, which once again necessitated the dispatch of military and naval forces to the Highlands.¹³⁸ Although they wanted more land, crofters, like Welsh peasants but unlike Irish ones, were not anxious to *own* their own land, an opportunity presented them by the Congested Districts Board established in 1897. In part, they were reluctant to take on the burdens of ownership given that the Crofters Act of 1886 provided them the security they had long sought.¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Cameron, 'Communication or separation?', pp. 654–6.

¹³⁵ BPP, 1896, XXXV, qq. 75764–6, 75771–2, 75775: evidence of Donald Macrae. Devine, *From Clanship to Crofters' War*, p. 221, nevertheless sees the power granted to bequeath to a relative as a 'big concession indeed'.

¹³⁶ Hunter, 'Politics of Highland Land Reform', pp. 49, 52; for public dislike of deer forests see BPP, 1896, XXXV, qq. 76116, 76118: evidence of Alexander Mackenzie. He vividly described the objection to low ground being taken up for deer shooting: 'some of the sportsmen sit in an easy chair with a gillie on one side with a bottle of brandy, and a fellow with a bottle of soda on the other, and shooting them in hundreds as they are driven through a narrow valley'. This invites

comparison with the decadent English battue system.

¹³⁷ For the crofters' continuing adherence to the 'ancient' belief that the land belonged to the people, see Hunter, *Making of the crofting community*, pp. 156–60; see also Donald Macrae's evidence to the Welsh Land Commission, BPP, 1896, XXXV, q. 75732: 'these people ... were sensible of an inalienable right to live on their native soil and under equitable conditions: they believed they had as good a right to live there as the landlord himself, and, if anything, a better right than the alien large farmers and sporting tenants'.

¹³⁸ Devine, *From Clanship to Crofters' War*, p. 231.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 238–9; Cameron, 'Setting the heather on fire', pp. 114–1; see also MacColl, *Land, faith and the crofting community*, p. 161.

IV

Tom Ellis was to display his pan-Celtic enthusiasm in a letter to a friend in February 1886:

We must work for bringing together Celtic reformers and Celtic peoples. The interests of Irishmen, Welshmen and Crofters are almost identical. Their past history is very similar, their present oppressors are the same and their immediate wants are the same – riddance from landlordism and ampler opportunities for developing their own genius and their own powers.¹⁴⁰

If a lofty ideal, the level of co-operation achieved between these Celtic peoples was hardly impressive. As mentioned at the outset, when Dr G. B. Clark, a leading light of the crofters' movement, convened a conference at Bonar Bridge in Sutherland in October 1886 to discuss problems shared by all three Celtic communities, the response was half-hearted. Whereas Wales sent Evan Pan Jones, Michael D. Jones and the Rev. Keinion Thomas, nobody represented Ireland; this absence can be explained variously on the grounds that either Parnell had given the initiative a frosty reception or, as Clark averred, the Irish were mounting a final appeal to the British Parliament to prevent a 'long and bloody' upheaval in Ireland. Although a motion calling for 'Home Rule all round' was carried and a Keltic League was set up, with J. S. S. Glennie as organizer for Scotland and Pan Jones for Wales, nothing came of the initiative.¹⁴¹ Yet this is not surprising given that both Clark and Pan Jones were land nationalizers, out of step with the majority of moderate land reformers in the Highlands and Wales respectively. (It will be recalled that Clark had been present in north Wales earlier in the year, joining Evan Pan Jones and Michael D. Jones on the occasion of Davitt's visit.) Yet as Newby points out, Bonar Bridge did give rise to a short-lived pan-Celtic awareness, the *Glasgow Observer* in a report on current developments in the Welsh land campaign asserting that 'the Welsh are a peaceful folk enough, but when Taffy is roused his ire knows no bounds'.¹⁴²

For all the seeming similarities between the Irish, Highland and Welsh peasantries – poverty, land hunger, rack-renting, insecurity of tenure (the last two grievances nevertheless exaggerated throughout the Celtic fringe) and 'feudal' attitudes emanating from landlords and their agents which grated on the sensibilities of the young generation of the last decades particularly those of an independent cast of mind – there were important differences in the agrarian systems and traditions between the three regions that were overlooked by the agrarian radical Tom Ellis and which shaped their separate land campaigns.

In Ireland, as the Young Ireland publicist James Fintan Lalor had urged in 1847, the winning of national independence lay through a mass peasant movement waging a struggle over the land problem.¹⁴³ Hence the New Departure's taking over the land agitation that had been initially sparked by farming depression. In the Land War the resort to traditional modes of violence was to play a crucial role.

¹⁴⁰ Cited in Jones, 'Michael Davitt, Lloyd George and T. E. Ellis', p. 450, and in Davies, 'Wales and Ireland', p. 7.

¹⁴¹ Jones-Evans, 'Evan Pan Jones', p. 153; Andrew

G. Newby, *Ireland, radicalism and the Scottish Highlands, c.1870–1912* (2007), pp. 144–5.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁴³ Foster, *Modern Ireland*, p. 381.

In the Highlands, bitter memories, deep poverty, congestion and the Irish example sparked violence, which, though not so widespread and intense as in Ireland, was an important accompaniment to the political side of the crofters' movement. And if in the Highlands the land war was not viewed in the 1880s as the vital vehicle for the attainment of Home Rule, crofters, supporters of Irish Home Rule, began to advocate Home Rule for themselves in 1886, a sentiment stoked by the government's coercive policy in 1886 and 1887. Only Home Rule, they maintained, would secure them their rights, and, predictably, the Land League leaders were to the forefront in the activities of the Scottish Home Rule Association, established in 1886. At the same time, it is necessary not to exaggerate this demand for Scottish Home rule; indeed, there was no call for a separate nation state to be established.¹⁴⁴ However, Stuart Erskine, strongly influenced by Irish developments, later sought to harness the seething discontent among crofters in 1905 and 1906, manifested in land raids, to further the goal of Home Rule, thereby following the mantra laid down by Lalor.¹⁴⁵

For all that Scottish and Welsh leaders embraced their respective, identical old proverb that 'the land is mightier than a lord', the crofters' land movement had closer similarities with events in Ireland and crofters accorded their Gaelic cousins greater support than did the Welsh.¹⁴⁶ If some tenants nursed a continuing bitterness over the political evictions of 1868, if some, too, felt that their landlord possessed too much power over them and resented the personal servility that perforce went with it, and if many disapproved of their landlord's want of Welsh, nevertheless they did not experience the deep poverty of their Irish and Scottish counterparts and were often better treated as tenants. In the absence of dire poverty and a sense of injustice stirring the peasantry, Welsh radical leaders pursued the aim of land reform peacefully and although they 'worked' the land for the benefit of Welsh Liberalism, they forged no connection between the land problem and the attaining of national independence. Moreover, if certain Welsh leaders, like Tom Ellis, T. J. Hughes and Thomas Gee, viewed Home Rule as necessary for achieving satisfactory conditions for Welsh agriculture besides other social gains,¹⁴⁷ there was no popular demand for it among Welsh people as there was in Ireland and, if to a far lesser extent, in Scotland.¹⁴⁸ As the tithe disturbances demonstrated, rural dwellers' overriding concern was religious equality, Arthur Humphreys-Owen, Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire, observing in 1890: 'Of all Welsh ideals, that of religious equality is the most widely spread and most closely embraced. What the land is to Ireland that the Establishment is to Wales'.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ Cameron, 'Communication or separation?', pp. 663–4.

¹⁴⁵ Hunter, 'Gaelic connection', pp. 187–9, 194–5.

¹⁴⁶ For the proverb in its respective ethnic setting, see Morgan, *Wales in British politics*, p. 21 citing the Welsh proverb *Trech gwlad nag arglwydd* (a land is mightier than its lord), and Hunter, 'Politics of Highland Land

Reform', p. 67 citing the Scottish proverb *Is treasa Tuath na Tighearna* (the people are mightier than a lord).

¹⁴⁷ T. E. Ellis, *Speeches and Addresses* (1912), pp. 187–93; T. J. Hughes, *Neglected Wales* (1888), p. 9.

¹⁴⁸ Morgan, *Rebirth of a nation*, p. 120.

¹⁴⁹ *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 4 Apr. 1890.