

THE REPORTED SPEECHES OF ANNA PARNELL: WOMEN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE LAND 1881-1882: AN INTRODUCTION

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The activities of the Irish National Ladies Land League have received increasing attention over recent years as historians have re-established the importance of the role played by women during the Land War of 1881-1882. (1) Despite the lack of a full archival record of the organization and the exclusion of the women from earlier histories information has been brought together from a variety of sources. These include published reminiscences, first-hand reports, and histories written by those leading the agitation, together with some limited archival material. A more complete picture of the women's participation in the agitation comes in the newspaper reports of the period, and in particular those in the nationalist papers. Irish local and national newspaper reports give some evidence of the early involvement of women in the Land League. Later, with the advent of a formal women's organization under the leadership of Anna Parnell, the coverage becomes more detailed. The newspapers provide information on all aspects of the organization from the foundation early in 1881 through to the dissolution in August 1882; the branches formed in Ireland and on the mainland, their meetings and business, the funds raised, manifestoes and circulars, and the names of L.L.L. officers during this critical period of the Land War. Together with the surviving archival material held in the National Library of Ireland these reports document the first large-scale political organization for women in Ireland.

Most importantly, newspapers in Ireland and in England gave lengthy reports of the L.L.L. demonstrations that took place in Ireland, Scotland, and England. These large, and in rural Ireland, usually open-air meetings, were attended by thousands of women and men and became an important feature of the propaganda war conducted against the British government. They continued until the Proclamation of the Land League in October 1881 made such meetings, at least in Ireland, impossible. Although her chief work was the organization of relief, Anna Parnell, as head of the women's league, was invited to address these large gatherings, and despite her lack of experience was soon established as a leading speaker and propagandist for the Land League as well as the L.L.L. Her speeches, as reported in the newspapers, provide additional information on the aims, objectives, and activities of the L.L.L., and when brought together form another calendar of the developments and the changes in the course of the land agitation. They form an important record of the public involvement of Anna Parnell in the Land League movement.

Anna Parnell was born in 1852 at Avondale, near Rathdrum, Co. Wicklow, (Catherine Maria Anna Mercer Parnell) the tenth child of the eleven children born to John Henry Parnell and his American-born wife, Delia. The Parnells, although Protestant landowners (they had owned the estate of Avondale since 1795), did not adhere rigidly to the political beliefs of their class. (2). In particular, William Parnell the paternal grandfather, was remembered for being an anti-Unionist M.P. and a reformist. After the death of the father John Henry Parnell in 1859, the family were to move between Ireland, America, England, and later, Paris. To some degree, this movement between the varied societies mitigated against the constraints on the education of the six daughters of the family which, following the pattern for their class and time, was completed at home. Anna Parnell's attendance at art academies in Dublin, London, and Paris, was the exception amongst the sisters, she exhibited in London in 1874 and was to continue painting until the end of her life. The lack of a formal education was more than compensated for by both Fanny Parnell, the elder by four years, and Anna. Their wide reading of contemporary political and economic

material, in particular that relating to Ireland, is shown by the articles published in a number of magazines and newspapers, principally those in the United States, during the 1870's. And, from the beginning of his involvement in Irish politics, Charles Stewart Parnell was to make use of his sisters' talents for writing and analysis. (3). The writings of both women show the influence of the growing movement for women's suffrage in the United States, Ireland and England. Fanny Parnell had written two articles on the conventions of courtship and marriage serialised in five issues of the *American Register* in 1874. Although there is no record of Anna Parnell's membership of a suffrage society it is likely that she attended some of the large meetings held in the late 1870's in London and in Dublin when a number of suffrage meetings took place in the wake of the defeat of the Electoral Disabilities of Women Bill of 1876. The friendships formed with Helen Taylor and Jessie Craigen during the L.L.L. years also suggest that she supported their later work on the equal rights platform. (4)

Anna Parnell's first documented involvement in Irish politics was in 1877 when she was in London and attending the Irish debates in the House of Commons. It was at this time that the policy of Obstruction was practised and she was involved with the planning of her brother's tactics to such an extent, that one writer, referred to her as the "Mother of Obstruction." (5). She wrote up her experience of parliamentary debates and Irish obstruction in a three-part article which mocked both parliamentary procedure and English politicians in the style she was to develop in her later speeches. (6). Anna Parnell's active involvement with the land movement was to begin in the United States, where she had returned with her mother and sister in 1878. A letter published in the *New York Herald*, 3rd December 1879 is a response to that newspaper's attack on the Land League as a potential fund-raising rival; she wrote of the threat of famine caused by the succession of poor harvests, and the need to develop a popular movement in Ireland of passive resistance to the government. Her ready acceptance of the New Departure of 1879 also suggests that she had been a confirmed land reformer for some time, and was familiar with Michael Davitt's work. Recognising his importance to the national movement, she had agitated for support for Davitt's release among the Irish Parliamentary Party members during a visit to London in 1877.(7). It is likely that Anna Parnell had met Michael Davitt on his first visit to the United States, (where he stayed from August to December 1878 after his first release from prison in England), but she was to have more contact with Davitt on his second visit to the United States during May-November 1880. Davitt had acted as secretary to the American League launched by C.S.Parnell earlier that same year. Aside from Davitt, Anna Parnell would know many among the circle of nationalists exiled in the United States and she experienced at first hand the alliances and the enmities that characterised nationalist circles in New York at the time.

The arrival of C.S.Parnell in New York in January 1880, the formation of the American Land League in March 1880, and the inauguration of the Irish National Land League Relief Fund precipitated both Anna Parnell, and her sister Fanny into the work of fund-raising for the League. Their hard work impressed Davitt but caused some anxiety amongst the men. T.M.Healy sniped at them in private letters,(8) and, it is likely, that John Dillon's later opposition to the women dated from this time. The foundation by Fanny Parnell of the I.N.L.L.R Fund in New York in October 1880, and Davitt's admiration for the women's work, led to his proposal to form a sister organization in Ireland with Anna Parnell at its head, it's purpose to take over the organization of Land League relief there. Davitt argued, against the opposition of some members of the Land League executive including C.S.Parnell and John Dillon although with the support of Patrick Egan, the treasurer, that the women had proved their capability to raise and administer the relief funds and would be needed in the

event of the imprisonment of the male leaders and officers of the League.(9). Davitt's proposal was made at the time when new moves by the Government against the League were expected following the fiasco of the State Trials in December 1880. His counsel prevailed and the official inauguration of the Irish National Ladies' Land League took place in Dublin on the 4th February 1881, with the offices for the new relief organization based in the same Upper Sackville Street building that housed the Land League.

The development of the organization was rapid as groups of women all over Ireland, who could afford the five shilling membership fee, responded to the L.L.L. circular and formed local branches. These branches were eventually to number over 400, (a third of the total number of Land League branches), and with yet more in Scotland and England.(10). As with the Land League, these branches communicated directly with the centralized L.L.L. executive in Dublin; every application for relief was administered through Dublin and the records and accounts kept in a ledger, the "Great Book of Kells" as it was to be described within the organization. The funds raised by the branches were sent to Dublin on a weekly basis, the amount raised and the names of donors published in the nationalist newspapers, *The Freeman's Journal* and *The Nation*. The central office was staffed by executive officers, for the most part young single women, and by other volunteers; the executive members attended the meetings of the Central Land League to keep up with Land League policy.(11). The officers travelled to the town and country branches to give help and advice, and to make reports and audits. In these branches married women were usually elected as honorary presidents to give respectability to the new organization. The decision to name the organization the Irish National Ladies Land League was probably taken for this same reason and as a device to make it difficult for the authorities to take action against the women. Hostile reports and editorials in newspapers and journals would use the heading "the woman's land league." (12).

The L.L.L. did have a precursor in Irish Nationalist politics. During the 1860's, at the time of the Fenian risings, Fenian women had formed a Ladies' Committee as a subsidiary body to the men's organization in an attempt to provide relief for prisoners and their families.(13). Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, wife of the Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, was secretary, Mrs Luby, wife of Thomas Clarke Luby, was treasurer and Ellen and Mary O'Leary, sisters of the Fenian leader John O'Leary, were committee members. There were to be other similarities of purpose. The Fenian women, on the imprisonment or the exile of the men, were entrusted with additional duties; travelling with messages and money between France, Britain and Ireland, and sometimes, smuggling small arms. Providing relief for such a large number of Fenian prisoners, eventually 3,000 in total, was to prove impossible for the small ladies' committee of a movement branded as treasonable. The later women's organization, as part of a large national movement, ostensibly a movement of passive and legal resistance to the government, was able to recruit large numbers of women and was in receipt of sizeable funds for relief, particularly those raised in America. The L.L.L. was also to benefit from the improvement of communications in the form of rail, telegraph and the proliferation of newspapers. Added to this was the experience gained from the greater involvement of women in the charitable organizations that sprang up in Ireland in the latter half of the 19th century, not least in those managed by the female religious orders.

In the first few weeks after the foundation of the L.L.L. in Ireland at the beginning of February 1881 meetings in Ireland were arranged quickly; publicity was by poster in the towns and villages surrounding the venue and by newspaper advert. The L.L.L. mass meetings, the first of which was held in Claremorris, Co.Mayo, on the 13th

February 1881, were intended to have a different function from those of the Land League itself. They were held to raise funds and to recruit membership; the existing membership was to be encouraged and inspired and the practicalities of relief business covered. From the start support for the meetings by both men and women was great and increasingly Anna Parnell was to make more general speeches attacking government policy and the actions taken against the Land League at a national and a local level. In the first half of 1881, as the number of evictions grew in advance of a proposed measure of land reform by Parliament, the L.L.L. demonstrations were to be held in affected areas, and occasionally, as with the Land League, the meetings were merged with the mass attendance at evictions to witness and to block proceedings.

Anna Parnell began her travels up and down and across the country, following an exhausting programme that included meetings, visits, and other organizational activities. Later, she was to make frequent crossings to and from Holyhead to give speeches on the mainland, these were to increase after the proscription of the League in October 1881. In Ireland she would travel down by train from Dublin, often accompanied by a Land League executive member, the towns en route forewarned by telegraph so that she could be cheered on her way. Local L.L.L.'s were asked that no demonstrations be made on her arrival at a station or a town, but on most occasions this request was ignored and she was met not only by branch members and Land League members, but by bands and a procession of wagons and cars. The reports in newspapers give some details of the hospitality received by Anna Parnell and where she stayed, on most occasions this was with the families of local Land League organizers, but occasionally she stayed at the town hotel. The public meetings were held, for the most part, on Sundays, the people's rest day, and they became the opportunity for noisy and colourful nationalist celebration whatever the weather conditions. Bands, parades, processions, flags, banners, evergreen decorations, and embroidered addresses and bouquets for Anna Parnell, were usually part of the proceedings. A variety of venues were used depending on the size of the town or village; fields, market squares and other outdoor spaces for the great open-air meetings; assembly rooms, halls and large public rooms for the indoor meetings in the towns for which admission was charged. Occasionally the public meetings would be followed by, a formal banquet or dinner.

From the first, Anna Parnell coped ably with the varied conditions and circumstances. Responding to the demands of the audience further spontaneous meetings were often held in station waiting rooms. Frequently, the meetings were difficult to control and matters of business had to be reserved for smaller private L.L.L. branch meetings. There were times when the noise of the crowd was so great that Anna Parnell would be inaudible to many of her listeners and they would have to rely on the next day's or the weekly newspaper report for the contents of her speeches. Her exasperation with noisy crowds was shown on occasion; she was there on L.L.L. business and was keen to get this across. Another difficulty were the large numbers of the military or police drafted into towns and villages at the times of demonstrations and the attendance by police and government note-takers at open meetings. As the violence between people and the authorities intensified during the agitation this presence at meetings was to prove provocative and angry scenes were to result. The public L.L.L. meetings followed the customary forms for the time as described in the newspaper reports. The platform contained the local Land League officers, other notable sympathisers, and Lady Leaguers drawn from the surrounding branches, and this area was decorated with banners of white which from early in the organisation was named the colour of the L.L.L. The chair was usually a man and most often a local priest sympathetic to the League if not actually a member; local League women chaired the private meetings. The L.L.L. was to receive the extremes of clerical

support and censure during the next months, and in many parts of the country the local priest was involved primarily for his status in the community. Resolutions were proposed and these generally called for support for the two Leagues, the release of Michael Davitt who was imprisoned again in February 1881, and condemnation of the actions of the Government and its agents in Ireland. Addresses were read and presented, and were often an opportunity to celebrate the political achievements of the Parnell family as a whole. The introductory speeches were made by the chair or some other speaker with local connections, who were rarely women, before Anna Parnell, as guest speaker, came forward to speak.

Anna Parnell notable ability as a public speaker is shown in the speeches; she spoke with authority and presumably in a voice reflective of her family's social class. The purpose was to raise morale and to raise funds for distribution to evicted tenant farmers, clarity and fluency was necessary. Contemporary events in the Land War were reported, the speeches being characterised by their immediacy. Humour, irony and sarcasm were used, especially when referring to British politicians. There were graphic descriptions of hostile government actions.

The speeches varied in length but it can be estimated that most of the speeches lasted approximately fifteen minutes long excluding audience interruptions. The tone of the speeches became increasingly militant as the crisis in Ireland developed, and as the L.L.L. took over responsibility for the continuation of the Land War on the imprisonment of the Parnell and his colleagues in October 1881. The speeches on the mainland in the major cities of England and Scotland became important for continuing to provide propaganda until the L.L.L. itself was banned in January 1882. The last major speech for the L.L.L. to be given by Anna Parnell was in Manchester in 23rd January 1882.

The success of the L.L.L in continuing the Land War by prolonging resistance contributed to the end of the government policy of Coercion. The release from prison of Parnell and colleagues following the Kilmainham Treaty in May 1882 saw the beginning of moves to disband the L.L.L. By July 1882 the accounts of the funds raised were settled and the Irish Parliamentary Party regained control of the movement. For Anna Parnell the punishing schedule of meetings combined with the executive responsibility for the L.L.L. over the eighteen months led to a breakdown in health. This was compounded by the news of the sudden death of her sister Fanny in July 1882. From the first the value of the L.L.L. was to be disputed. Gradually, it has been established that the women's contribution was of crucial importance for the brief time that they managed with great efficiency the relief funds. Anna Parnell's own much later history of the Land League *The Tale of the Great Sham*, first serialised in William O'Brien's newspaper *The Irish People* in 1907, was an attempt to put the record straight for the work of women as well as being a critique of the Land League itself. Contemporary estimations of her as a personality, especially those made by male contemporaries, were very varied, although her intelligence and management expertise could not be denied.(14). Anna Parnell was to make a further reported intervention for the nationalist cause, giving a platform speech in support of Charles Dolan, the Sinn Fein candidate at the North Leitrim election of 1908. She continued also to show her support for women's suffrage, with her friendship for Helen Taylor and attendance at suffrage meetings.(15). For the most part, after 1882, Anna Parnell retired from public life and resumed life as an artist often living and working in English coastal resorts.

There is a prophecy made at the end of the Rathdowney speech given on 20th March 1881.

“Perhaps it is to be hoped that when we are dead and gone, and another generation grown up, that the children of all those people against whom we are working now will, by the change of things in Ireland, smile at and approve of us, and that perhaps they will point to us as having set a noble example to all the women of Ireland. Whether that happens or not, we cannot expect to live to see it, so we must be contented, for our part, with the approval of the friends of Ireland now (hear, hear), and I hope that we shall deserve it.”

Anna Parnell is now viewed as an important figure in modern Irish history for her work as a nationalist, a republican and anti-imperialist, as demonstrated by the contents of the speeches made during 1881- 1882.

Notes:

(1) The acronym L.L.L. will be used throughout the document for the Irish National Ladies Land League

(2) Foster, R.F. Charles Stewart Parnell: the Man and his Family .Hassocks, 1976, p.14.

(3) It is accepted that Fanny Parnell wrote The Irish Land Question in *The North American Review* cxxx, April 1880, for her brother. Fanny Parnell also published The Hovels of Ireland in New York in 1880.

(4) Helen Taylor, stepdaughter of John Stuart Mill, member of the London branch of the L.L.L.; Jessie Craigen, member of the English Democratic Union. Anna Parnell gave an address supporting Helen Taylor for the Liberal Radical candidature in North Camberwell, London, in 1886.

(5) Mc Wade, R.M. Fanny Parnell in *Celtic Magazine*, v.1.n.2, September 1882, p285.

“Her sister was always her companion in these studies (on the Irish question), but Anna’s work looked more in the direction of the Irish members in the British Parliament than Fanny’s, because the latter was from infancy a pronounced rebel to British rule in Ireland. In this way Anna became of the greatest assistance to the Irish members of Parliament...”

(6) Parnell, Anna. *How do they do in the House of Commons: notes from the Ladies’ Cage*, published in three parts in *The Celtic Monthly* between May and July 1880.

(7) see Kettle, Andrew J. *The Material for Victory*, Dublin, 1958.

(8) ibid

(9) ibid

(10) Palmer, N.D. *Ireland and the Land League Crisis*, New York, 1978. p.280. see also Cote, J. *Fanny & Anna Parnell: Ireland’s Patriot Sisters*. Dublin, 1991.

(11) Moody, T.W. *Davitt and the Irish Revolution*. Oxford, 1981. Appendices p.578.

(12)The attack in a circular by Archbishop McCabe, the Catholic archbishop of Dublin had to be countered and was referred to in the Rathdowney speech of 20th March 1881.

(13) Devoy, J. *Recollections of an Irish Rebel*, London,1929.

(14) Foster, R.F. *Parnell and his People in Paddy and Mr Punch*. London, 1993, p.73 Charles Stuart and his sister Anna are described as archetypically Anglo-Irish, “The characteristic arrogance persisted and was found in his sister Anna too.”