

THE IRISH LAND QUESTION¹

Irish Land Question was the name given to the 18th to 19th century problem of land ownership and agrarian distress in Ireland under British rule. The long-term effect of conquest, confiscation, and colonisation was the creation of a class of English and Scottish landlords and of an impoverished Irish peasantry with attenuated tenant rights.

The blight that destroyed the potato harvest between 1845 and 1849 was an unprecedented human tragedy. An entire social class of small farmers and labourers were to be virtually wiped out by hunger, disease and emigration. The laissez-faire economic thinking of the government ensured that help was slow, hesitant and insufficient. Between 1845 and 1851 the population fell by almost two million.

That the people starved while livestock and grain continued to be exported, quite often under military escort, would leave a legacy of bitterness and resentment among the survivors. The waves of emigration because of the famine and in the years following also ensured that such feelings would not be confined to Ireland, but spread to England, the United States, Australia and every country where Irish emigrants gathered

Shocked by the scenes of starvation and greatly influenced by the revolutions then sweeping Europe, the Young Irelanders moved from agitation to armed rebellion in 1848. The attempted rebellion failed after a small skirmish in Ballingary, Co. Tipperary, coupled with a few minor incidents elsewhere. The reasons for the failure were obvious; the people were totally despondent after three years of famine, and being prompted to rise up early resulted in an inadequacy of military preparations, which caused disunity among the leaders.

The liberal purpose of Parliament in its 1849 *Encumbered Estates Act*, providing for the sale of mortgaged estates was largely foiled by speculative purchasers raising exorbitant rents.

Both Patrick and Denis Carrucan² were Catholic peasant farmers liable for the impost of tithe tax of 10% of their income as well as to tenancy rent on both house and land. Denis was shown holding 1 acre of 1st quality land and 2 roods

of 2nd quality land at Fanore Beg. This in turn brought his total land area to 1 acre 2 roods.

Patrick must have been the registered tenant c. 1850 Griffith Valuation of just a house in the village of Fisherstreet (Doolin) valuation 12 shillings — one of ~3 tenants in houses there of similar value, who must all have been fishermen. He was tenant of Capt. Francis McNamara. But he was also tenant of 17 acres 3 roods and 24 perches — £4-10-00 land valuation and 10 shillings house valuation, in the Townland of Fanore Beg. We do not know the fate of Denis' tenancies on his moving to the South of the County. However, on Patrick's death, all liability for taxes and rents passed in turn to Michael and then Denis.

The foundation of the Irish Tenant Right League in 1850, formed upon the platform of "three F's"—'fair rent', 'fixity of tenure', and 'freedom of sale' accompanied by violence arising from the response of the Feinian Movement provided the background to further the cause of the tenant. Gladstone's Land Act of 1870, protected, the tenant from arbitrary eviction while providing some compensation for land improvements.

British and Irish agriculture was to experience further depression from 1873 to 1896 constituting yet further crisis in what came to be known as the "Long Depression" with its lower prices. Cheaper and higher quality grain from America was exported to Europe in ever-increasing quantities. Meat could be sent in refrigerated ships from as far as New Zealand, Australia and Argentina. For many Irish tenant farmers this meant lower net incomes with which to pay the already agreed rents. This was particularly to affect the poorer, wetter western parts of country including County Clare. This provided the setting for the demand for further legal reforms.

The National Land League, under the leadership of Michael Davitt and Charles Stewart Parnell engaged in a campaign of civil disobedience which ultimately played an important role in influencing the passage of the Land Act of 1881, called the "Magna Carta" of the Irish farmer.

This Act recognised the three F's providing a land commission to fix a "fair rent." Thereafter land purchase by the tenant became the predominant issue. Further the Ashbourne Act of 1885 and supplementary acts of 1887 and 1891 established a loan fund of many millions of pounds to enable tenants to

purchase their lands.

A biased Anglo-Irish magistracy, favouring the landlords, frustrated the implementation of the new laws. This resulted in moves to withhold payment of unfair rents imposed by extortionate landlords which action provoked a viscous government response.

The agitation of the United Irish League, under William O'Brien, demanding compulsory sales by landlords, led to the Wyndham Act of 1903 and the Amended Land Purchase Act of 1909. The Wyndham Act, which provided loans to tenants at reduced interest for the purchase of land and gave bonuses to landlords who sold, proved, in effect, a solution to the Irish Land Question. In 1907 the Evicted Tenants Act provided for the compulsory sale of land needed for evicted tenants. By 1921 two thirds of the land in Ireland had become the property of Irish tenants, and a compulsory law transferred the remaining portions soon after the establishment (1922) of the Irish Free State.

So the scene was set for the aggregation of the Carrucan lands as noted by Anna Carrucan:³

- Following Denis Carrucan's death his son Jimmy continued farming the land eventually acquiring title absolute in 1975.
- Prior to that, legal titles were given to Michael Carrucan, in 1896 and his son Denis in 1937.
- Other parcels of land were acquired in 1950 and 1968 respectively. The total then amounting to 142 acres in 1975, thirty six of which was bog land.

¹ The following comprises a compilation of notes from entries in *The Columbia Encyclopaedia* and in *Wikipedia* under the entry: "The Irish Land Question".

² Clare Heritage Centre *Composite 'Carrucan Reports'*

³ Anna Carrucan Memoir *Growing up in an Irish Gaeltacht House*