

“By a Thousand Ingenious Feminine Devices”: The Ladies’ Land League and the Development of Irish Nationalism

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During the late nineteenth century, for a brief eighteen-month period at the height of the Irish “Land War,” an organization named the Ladies’ Land League (LLL) mounted a considerable challenge to the authority of British colonial rule in Ireland. Led by Anna Parnell, a member of the Anglo-Irish Protestant elite, but rallying in support of Catholic tenant farmers whose livelihood was threatened by poor harvests, the organization cut across divisions of social class, religion, and Irish nationalist persuasion. Thanks to the activities of the LLL, Irish nationalists such as Anna’s brother, Charles Stuart Parnell, secured a number of important concessions from the British government. What is remarkable however, is not only did these women engage in such public political agency – but that the crucial role they played has been at best, relegated to a historical footnote. Ignoring the history of political activism by such Irish women contributes to a situation today in which they are woefully under-represented politically in the Republic of Ireland, as evidenced for example by the fact that of the 166 TDs (Assembly Delegates) most recently elected to the *Dáil Éireann* (Irish Parliament), only 21 were female.¹

In this article, I explore the activities of the LLL during this important chapter in Irish history, one that I find particularly intriguing because its dimensions suggest that nationalism in particular may not always develop in quite the manner proposed by such prominent scholars as Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger.² In fact, their now-dominant conceiving of nationalism as a politico-cultural and economic *raison d’être* whose development is only really feasible through an attendant and respective state does not lend itself easily to explaining Irish nationalism’s growing popularity in the late nineteenth century. While their critical insight remains nonetheless invaluable, over the course of the last three decades a number of scholars have added more complexity and nuance to furthering understandings of how different nationalisms might develop in different ways. For example, of particular significance to this article is the recent work of Robert Wiebe, a historian

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who illuminates channels of nationalist communication which may run alongside what Anderson terms "print capitalism."³ In particular, Wiebe points to the power of the spoken word, a medium which he contends is especially crucial to the development of those nationalisms which have not yet achieved statehood.

Another scholar whose recent contributions to the study of nationalism are also useful in assessing the significance of an organization such as the LLL (whose activities cannot be considered purely nationalistic) is David Lloyd. Notably, he argues it is essential that processes of articulation and conjunction between nationalism and other emancipatory movements be illuminated, since it is through these that nationalism develops.⁴ Such historical interconnections remain largely occluded, he believes, because scholarship focusing on the development of nationalism has yet to break fully free from the spell cast by states, whose agents continue to regulate what is considered history. Typical, therefore, is the teleological manner in which pasts remain "streamlined" within triumphant nationalist narratives, culminating in the realization of states. It is an all-too-common story in which the historical significance of other emancipatory movements such as feminism or socialism is downplayed, assuming that they are either trumped by, or absorbed within, an ultimately superior nationalist cause.

Taken together, Wiebe and Lloyd's scholarship suggests that nationalisms therefore develop in a much more contextual manner not solely aligned with states and not always particularly unified around common goals—unfolding instead across a complex and constantly shifting social terrain, featuring an array of social movements and overlapping allegiances. What is particularly significant however, is that both scholars point to Ireland as a case study which might reveal how this unfolds, with nationalism developing in conjunction with agrarian, labor and suffrage movements at the grassroots level. Uncovering and assessing the political agency of Irish women during the Land War can therefore potentially reveal how nationalism develops in the manner that Wiebe and Lloyd both advocate, while also more specifically illuminating the multifaceted participation of women—not only in the struggle for Irish national independence, but in overlapping causes.

Although a number of feminist scholars have begun the process of excavating the history of female political agency in Ireland, it has proceeded fairly slowly since 1979, when historians Margaret MacCurtain and Donncha Ó Corráin "fired the first shot" by sensationally claiming in 1979 that Irishwomen had been "hidden from history."⁵ The slow pace is no doubt a product of the paucity of surviving primary sources detailing female contributions to Irish politics, but it is surprising when one considers that a scholarly project tagged "revisionism" has recently engaged in an extensive critique of various chapters of the Irish nationalist historical narrative.⁶ Nonetheless, over the course of the last thirty years feminist scholars have focused in particular on the marginalization of Irish women following the realization of Irish statehood, with stereotypical gender roles

not only being legislatively enshrined in the Constitution, but also retroactively applied to a re-envisioned past.⁷

In their attempts to redress the balance, scholars such as Mary Cullen and Maria Luddy, for example, seek to recover a marginalized history of Irish female political agency by extending the boundaries of what is considered "political" beyond "formal" activity taking place in the public sphere, so as to include that which might be considered more "informal" taking place in the private sphere.⁸ Such an approach entails moving beyond simply recovering the contributions made by more prominent Irish women to male-dominated institutions, and instead re-evaluating much of what has so far been considered historically significant.⁹ An important step in this direction was taken with the recent double-volume publication of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, an attempt to make amends for the fact that earlier volumes had ignored gender and overlooked the experiences of Irish women.¹⁰ Edited by scholars from a range of disciplines, it provides evidence of the writings of Irish women spanning fourteen centuries. Through its continuous deconstruction of gendered stereotypes, combined with a refusal to abide by the standard chronological periodization of Irish history, it succeeds in greatly destabilizing the accepted Irish historical narrative.

While such contributions to the field of Irish Studies are important, very rarely are they made from a geographical perspective, this most recent *Field Day Anthology* being a case in point as it contains no contributions made by geographers. This is surprising because given its engagement with both nationalism and gender (although admittedly not necessarily the two together), one would think that the discipline of geography might be well-suited to the task of uncovering and assessing the history of Irish female political agency. In recent years, a number of geographers have made important albeit under-acknowledged contributions to furthering understandings of political activity from a feminist perspective.¹¹ Their work builds on that of John Agnew, who terms nationalism the "most territorial of all political ideologies,"¹² in addition to that of a number of other political geographers.¹³ Nonetheless, this feminist geographical perspective broadens the focus of inquiry by locating political agency in the private space of the home, for example, rather than solely in the public sphere, at the hustings or the ballot box.¹⁴ Additionally, this feminist geographical perspective builds on the work of feminist scholars in other fields, revealing not only how women's involvement in political struggle is constricted within certain parameters, but how women did not always stand quite as passively and symbolically "on the sidelines" as their typecast roles within state-promoted national narratives might suggest.¹⁵ Such complexity has led feminist geographers such as Meghan Cope, Eleanore Kofman and Linda Peake recently to propose that the so-called "separation of the spheres" might be considered instead a sort of "continuum," in which political agency is shaped by the spaces in which it occurs, *spaces* which incidentally might also enable actors to simultaneously negotiate dominant norms of gender.¹⁶ Acknowledging the "separa-

tion of the spheres" in this manner, while also realizing that it may not have been particularly rigidly enforced, is a perspective employed in this article so as better to illuminate and assess the political agency of the LLL during the Land War.

Amongst the handful of geographers who are already making significant feminist contributions to the field of Irish Studies, notable is the work of Catherine Nash, who illuminates the manner in which the national construction of various social subjectivities—in particular gender and class—is a historical-geographical process.¹⁷ The work of Gerry Kearns is also important, in particular for revealing the contradictory manner in which Irish women were allegorically cast as symbols of the Irish nation, thus overlooking their role as crucial participants in Irish nationalism.¹⁸ Additionally in his work, Kearns approaches Irish nationalism in much the same vein as that advocated by both Wiebe and Lloyd, considering its development in terms of sometimes conflicting and competing dimensions, and involving a rescaling of political identities in accordance with some quite disparate social visions.¹⁹ Overall, these geographers and others expertly demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of the development of Irish nationalism is long overdue, and that a feminist geographical perspective can contribute greatly to the task at hand.²⁰ Following their lead, this article illuminates the crucial political agency of Irish women belonging to the LLL during the Land War, as an example of how nationalism can develop "on the ground" and in conjunction with a number of other social subjectivities.

The Land War and the Ladies' Land League

The Land War (1879-1882) is typically cast as a key stepping stone on the path towards Irish national independence, and a period dominated by the political maneuverings of two male nationalist actors, Charles Stuart Parnell and Michael Davitt.²¹ In recent years, however, revisionist scholars have illuminated class dimensions of the conflict previously cloaked by nationalist rhetoric, although there is still very little inculcation of gender into the debate.²² While some at least now mention the LLL in positive terms,²³ scholars predominantly continue to trust the recollections of male nationalists of the period, who typically characterize the women as reckless and radical fanatics.²⁴

The task of recovering female agency during this period is, however, a difficult one, especially given the fact that the records of the LLL are believed destroyed. Nonetheless, feminist scholars have begun to piece together a much more complex picture of the important role played by women. They have been assisted in this task by the long-overdue publication of a manuscript written in 1909 by Anna Parnell who, because she challenged the official version of the Land War based upon the recollections of male nationalists such as Davitt (who actually spent the entire period in prison), could not find a publisher at the time.²⁵ Drawing from this long forgotten publication, Jane Côté for example has written a number of

exhaustive biographical studies of the women she refers to as "Ireland's Patriot Sisters," Anna and Fanny Parnell.²⁶ Maria Luddy has also published historical documentation of the activities of the LLL, while Beverly Schneller has provided extensive primary evidence of Anna Parnell's political journalism.²⁷ The historian Margaret Ward also details the activities of the LLL and Irish women such as Anna Parnell, whom she describes as "unmanageable revolutionaries," and has recently even helped transform her struggle into a play, *The Ladies' Cage*, produced by Rebecca Mordan and recently staged in the United Kingdom.²⁸

As Pauric Travers recently commented, however, "Despite this resurgence in interest, significant gaps remain: we lack a full-scale history of the Ladies' Land League."²⁹ In particular, there is a dearth of critical scholarly analysis of the role played by the organization. In fact, Maria Luddy and Margaret Ward are among the few feminist scholars who have actually analyzed the significance of the LLL. Both consider the organization a crucial first link in a chain of female political agency which stretches forward into the early twentieth century to connect with other feminist, nationalist and suffragist organizations such as *Inghinidhe na hEireann* and *Cumann na mBan*.³⁰ Although the LLL can certainly be considered a forerunner to these organizations, the problem with this interpretation is that given the lack of any other critical analysis, gender is thus privileged over the LLL's unique nationalist and class dimensions. Additionally, there has been no feminist geographical analysis of the activities of the organization. While both Luddy and Ward, for example, comment that members of the LLL transcended the "separation of the spheres," this remains an abstract point, devoid as it is of any analysis of whether these spheres were ever clearly separate, or if some contexts provided women with greater degrees of negotiation and transcendence. By focusing on the activities of the LLL during the Irish "Land War," therefore, it is the goal of this article to illustrate how a feminist historical geographical perspective can provide a very different perspective on where political activity can take place and how nationalism can therefore sometimes develop, running in multiple streams, intersecting with other emancipatory social movements, and depending greatly upon particular spatial contexts.

The Land War (1879-1882)

Much like the year before, the summer of 1879 was wet again. For millions of tenant farmers who eked out a precarious existence in the western counties of Ireland renting their small holdings from colonial landlords and their agents, the poor weather again ruined the harvest of potatoes upon which their livelihoods depended. As the summer progressed amidst real fear of impending destitution and starvation, thousands attended a series of mass-meetings designed to illuminate their plight. Here, these tenant farmers were addressed by individuals such as Michael Davitt and Charles Stuart Parnell (MP), nationalist politicians who argued that their predicament could be remedied only if the larger "Irish Question" were

addressed. To this end, the Irish National Land League was founded in October 1879. The League incorporated a number of organizations under one national platform and advised tenant farmers to resist paying what were considered in the dire circumstances to be unfair rents, at least until faced with eviction “at the point of the bayonet.”³¹

During this period the Irish nationalist cause was being recast by the president of this new Land League, Charles Stuart Parnell. As a Member of Parliament and the principal proponent of “Home Rule” for Ireland, he hoped to capitalize on the agrarian unrest so as to gain concessions from the British government in order to advance his particular brand of constitutional nationalism. Under Parnell’s leadership, however, the Land League actually united a much broader spectrum of Irish nationalists, some of whom considered it to be but a stepping stone to overthrowing the entire colonial system of landlordism and achieving national independence – by physical force if necessary. These more “advanced” nationalists (or Fenians as they were more commonly known) included Michael Davitt and members of *Clan na Gael*, an American Irish nationalist organization which facilitated Parnell’s very lucrative 1880 U.S. lecture tour during which the American Land League was established.³² Not only can nationalism therefore be seen developing contextually and in conjunction with other emancipatory movements such as the campaign for agrarian reform, but contrary to how this crucial chapter in Irish history is typically portrayed, neither is there any one recognizably dominant stream of nationalism. Instead, at this particular juncture a “marriage of convenience” exists between two different streams: constitutional nationalism on the one hand, as represented by Parnell, and revolutionary republicanism on the other, as represented by those aligned with *Clan na Gael*. The two streams coalesced in the momentum of the agrarian struggle.

The summer of 1880 was fairer, resulting in an improved harvest, although landlords consequently demanded rent plus arrears from small tenant farmers. Amidst a deteriorating situation in the Irish countryside, the Land League grew in strength – its leaders damning the British colonial system from podiums across the western counties and urging tenant farmers to “hold the harvest” and pay landlords only what they could afford.³³ As a result, by the close of the year members of the Land League Executive faced trial at the Four Courts in Dublin, charged by the British colonial administration with criminal conspiracy to ruin landlords financially and to incite riotous behavior.

Given these developments and fearing the imminent suppression of the organization, Davitt therefore suggested to his male colleagues that they establish a Ladies’ Land League (LLL) similar to one which existed in the United States, except that in Ireland it would take charge in the event of the men being incarcerated. According to Davitt, his male colleagues were initially resistant to the idea, fearing ridicule for asking women to perform such a public political role.³⁴ He reassured them, however, that any female nationalist activity would remain bound within the strict gender parameters of the day; he later described its *modus operandi* as follows:

There were two objects in view when this branch of the League was established. First, it would be the medium for all kinds of charity, would support the evicted tenants, and relieve all kinds of distress; and, second, it would keep up a semblance of organization during the attempted repression which I saw was coming.³⁵

Having witnessed the activities of the LLL in New York City while touring, Davitt had been particularly impressed by the abilities of Charles Stuart Parnell's younger sister Anna, whom he now summoned to Ireland to establish and lead this new organization. On January 31, 1881, twenty-eight-year-old Anna Parnell presided over the first meeting of the LLL in Dublin, Ireland. The next day, Davitt became the first member of the Land League Executive arrested and detained under new coercion measures which had greatly increased the powers of the British colonial administration to combat agrarian unrest and a rising tide of Irish nationalism.

Irish women negotiate political agency

Throughout the spring of 1881, following the publication of the LLL manifesto urging Irish women to organize and aid the evicted, Anna Parnell toured Ireland. She crisscrossed the countryside by railroad, brass bands trumpeting her arrival and her every move and word reported upon in the Irish nationalist press across the entire transatlantic Irish nation. Before crowds of thousands she spoke passionately about the cause of the Land League and its Irish American support, both moral and financial, and she visited newly established branches of the LLL.³⁶ Although Alan O'Day, in his account of this formative period, overlooks the activities of Anna Parnell, he does comment that her more famous brother was not as great an orator as historians presume, but instead preferred to use newspapers to reach an increasingly literate population.³⁷ Anna Parnell, however, appears to have realized the power of both the written *and* the spoken word. While the extensive reporting of her stump speeches certainly attests to the power of "print capitalism" in the forging of national identity, it also confirms the power of oratory and the importance of individual agency to the development of nationalism, and significantly a gendered agency.³⁸

Despite Anna Parnell's explicit intention to speak solely to Irish women, many of those who crowded around platforms to hear her speak were men, a result perhaps of the Land War escalating and fewer male Land Leaguers willing to make public speeches for fear of arrest. This placed her in a rather awkward position which she attempted to overcome by directing her oratory to the women in attendance who could actually be found at the rear of these crowds, as is evident in the following newspaper report of an address delivered in April 1881 at a rally in Charleville, County Cork:

Miss Parnell, who was received with great enthusiasm, referred to the fact that the men had so completely surrounded the platform that the ladies were unable to hear what was said. The men of Ireland, Miss Parnell proceeded to say, have had plenty of meetings. They have had plenty of people to speak to them for the last two years, and if they have not been able to profit by those meetings before now I am afraid there is not much use in their going to any more trouble now (cheers). But the women of Ireland have not had meetings—they have only been able to stand at the outskirts of your meetings, at a respectable distance, and pick up the crumbs from your table. So that I think if the men of Ireland have any chivalry they ought make it their business to let the ladies come to their own meetings.

Now, ladies, I am going to speak to you....There is a great deal of practical work for the ladies of Ireland to do now. If you do your duty, and let us know in Dublin of every writ and every process that is served in your district you will have plenty to do. I cannot imagine any more improving work for young ladies than to copy those writs, and, what is more, it will not only improve your minds, but the practice you will acquire in this way may at some future date enable some of you to earn a living as law copyers; and don't imagine that this is anything dreadful, because plenty of women are already engaged at this work. In asking you to do this I am not asking you to do anything unbecoming a woman, though some old gentleman or old ladies come down on me and tell you it is very unfeminine to be about such things. Remember that you have my authority for saying that it is not unfeminine.³⁹

Anna Parnell can be clearly seen here testing the limits of what is considered appropriate female political activity, her purpose being not to empower women necessarily, but rather to further the goals of the campaign for agrarian reform, which the Land League was then interpreting as an Irish nationalist issue. What is particularly interesting is that she does not have to draw women out of the private and into the public sphere, since they can already be found in attendance at these public rallies, albeit watching from a respectable distance. This suggests that the "separation of the spheres" was not particularly well demarcated in reality, its character instead dependent upon particular times and spaces offering various degrees of possibility in negotiating gender norms. Nonetheless, Anna Parnell had to still negotiate new opportunities for women within parameters then dominant in a patriarchal society, which is evident in the fact that she asks women to engage in public political agency only at the scale of their particular locality.

Of course, the degree to which members of the LLL were able to negotiate various degrees of active political agency depended not only upon the times and spaces in which they operated, but also on other elements of their subjectivity, and in particular here the class dimensions of

the organization played an important role. Although very little has been written on the overall geography of the Land War, Brian Graham and Susan Hood have, for example, illuminated the overlooked urban dimension of the conflict and the fact that the *petit bourgeoisie* could often be found organizing the more rural tenantry in the Land League ranks.⁴⁰ The LLL appear to have been similarly constituted; its organizational leadership was drawn from middle class and urban backgrounds, while its rank and file members included tenant farmers—although of varying means. Additionally, other than being mostly Catholic, middle class and quite young, another characteristic that many members of the Central Executive appeared to share was that they were overwhelmingly drawn from families with known Irish nationalist connections—of both the physical force and the constitutional persuasion—and usually through a prominent male family member, either living, dead or in exile.⁴¹

By March 1881 there were approximately four hundred branches of the LLL in Ireland. With the continued imprisonment of their male colleagues under new coercion measures, soon hundreds of thousands of individuals came to rely on the ability of women to perform Land League duties.⁴² In this context, it is interesting to note that the Irish Catholic Church, not the British government, was the first to publicly condemn the LLL publicly. In fact, the women incurred the wrath of none other than the Archbishop of Dublin who, in a pastoral letter to his flock, stated that:

The modesty of her daughters was the ancient glory of Ireland....Like Mary, their place was the seclusion of the home. If charity drew them out of doors, their work was done with speed and their voices were not heard in the world's thoroughfares....But all of this is now to be laid aside, and the daughters of our Catholic people, be they matrons or virgins, are called forth, under the flimsy pretext of charity, to take their stand in the noisy arena of public life....⁴³

The Archbishop's letter was widely published; his contempt for the LLL illuminates not only the threat that this particular organization posed to a deeply religious, conservative and patriarchal society, but also the manner in which Irish national identity was then being constructed along gendered lines.

Anxious to avoid what she described as these "poisoned arrows of criticism,"⁴⁴ Anna Parnell placated her male critics and assuaged female doubters, by duly reminding audiences that Davitt had instructed her "to carry his ideas out,"⁴⁵ and that her organization was an auxiliary to the Land League "in every sense."⁴⁶ This may have been true in principle, but by April 1881, following the suppression of the Land League, it was certainly no longer true in practice, with the men having increasingly withdrawn from the public political sphere to be replaced by women. This is evident from a comment Anna Parnell made at the time to an audience at a LLL rally in the town of Kilmallock, County Limerick, where she stated: "I observe that we have succeeded to-day in getting rid of the men nearly

entirely (laughter), and I am sure that we all feel much more comfortable in consequence (renewed laughter)."⁴⁷

Locating female political agency

By continuing the work of the Land League in its absence, the LLL mobilized the opportunities that particular spaces presented, including one in particular not typically mentioned in historical accounts of the Land War or the development of Irish nationalism during this period: *the home*. This particular tactic can be seen in Anna Parnell's speeches, in which she called upon her female audiences to engage in political activity which did not necessarily challenge the "separation of the spheres," but rather circumvented it through the strategic grounding of female agency in the private sphere, which was cleverly extended to also include the land upon which that sphere is dependent. By manipulating domestic ideals of domesticity in this manner, Anna Parnell argued that it was not only women's *national* duty to protect their homes and those of their neighbors from the threat of eviction, but also their *natural* duty, especially when a male member of the household could not do so for fear of arrest.⁴⁸ It was a perspective also shared by Davitt, who later justified his decision to involve women in the Land War by describing it as a fight "to save the homes of Ireland — the sacred, domestic domain of women's moral supremacy in civilized society."⁴⁹ By April 1881 therefore, in protecting their homes Irish women were engaged in hand-to-hand combat with agents of the landlord, bailiffs, soldiers, and police, as is evident in the following report from a small town in County Mayo where Anna Parnell had delivered her first speech and helped found a branch of the LLL just two months previous:

A fatal process serving affray took place yesterday at Ballinamore, Kiltimagh. A process-server named Kelly, escorted by about a dozen police, proceeded to serve civil bills. About two hundred women, armed with sticks and stones, attacked the police, who fired on them, fatally wounding a young girl of 20, named Byrne. Another girl was also wounded. Several of the police received serious injuries.⁵⁰

By the summer of 1881, it was evident to members of the LLL that the policies advocated by their male colleagues were unworkable in practice. In particular the paying of rent only "at the point of the bayonet" only exposed class divisions in the Land League alliance, since those who could afford to pay rent eventually did so, whereas those who could not were duly evicted. These divisions were widened further by Charles Stuart Parnell's endorsement of the British Government's Land Act of August 1881, in which Prime Minister Gladstone conceded to the demands of more prosperous tenant farmers by handing them a stake in land ownership while excluding landless laborers, leaseholders and those tenants in arrears.⁵¹ The increasingly desperate situation of those who found themselves in the latter categories manifested itself in a rising tide of violence. Meanwhile,

Anna Parnell's speeches became more overtly political, as she called on the Irish people to "crush Landlordism," a viewpoint which placed her closer to the revolutionary republican wing of the Land League and its Irish American financiers than it did the powerful Home Rule contingent, led by her brother.⁵²

Unlike the Central Executive of the Land League which had been arrested and incarcerated in Dublin's Kilmainham Jail in October 1881, members of the LLL fought the Land War "on the ground," detailing violence, witnessing evictions and ensuring that if tenants could pay rent, they do so only at the eleventh hour. Anna Parnell frequently accompanied local members of the LLL performing these duties, as a newspaper reporter in Mitchelstown commented: "She did wonders during the day, journeying across fields and ditches, running and walking alternately for hours in a manner than excited the wonder of all and the admiration of some."⁵³ Within a week of his imprisonment, Charles Stuart Parnell issued the "No Rent Manifesto," a call for a more general "rent strike," although it is unclear how he intended this to be implemented, given the fact that the Land League had been driven underground and more prosperous farmers no longer had any reason to risk everything now that they were successfully testing the Land Act in the courts. Taking her brother at his word, however, Anna Parnell instructed the LLL to implement the order, a decision which would set the organization on a collision course not only with the British Government, but also with the Land League itself.⁵⁴

During the winter of 1881, having taken total charge of Land League affairs, it became obvious to the women that although *their* mandate had been to provide a "semblance of organization" in the men's absence, in fact this was all the men had been doing before *they* became absent.⁵⁵ Faced with a defective address book of Land League branches, an ineffective information gathering system, and accounts in complete disarray, the LLL therefore developed their own unique administrative system in order to compete with the British State. Key to this system was a ledger which the women euphemistically termed the "Book of Kells." Held at the LLL Central Office on Sackville Street in Dublin and reputedly later destroyed, it contained details of every locality in Ireland and was updated daily with reports from various branches, providing Anna Parnell and other members of the LLL Central Executive a commanding perspective of the Land War.⁵⁶ To act on this information, Anna Parnell recruited women to serve as agents, envoys and organizers — demanding jobs which she described as requiring "considerable physical strength," and entailing "long distances to be traveled," "inevitable exposure to weather" and "poor accommodation for travelers."⁵⁷ One of these agents was Jenny Wyse Power, a young woman who would go on to pursue an active career in Irish politics. She described her job at the height of the Land War as traveling from one locality to the next, liaising with LLL branches, dispersing funds to evicted tenants, hiring solicitors to defend them, and providing shelter by purchasing accommodation or overseeing the construction of a prefabricated cabin.⁵⁸

The job of being an LLL agent became even more hazardous when the authorities began to arrest and imprison members of the organization for their role in aiding tenants resist eviction. Unlike their male counterparts, however, the women were not arrested under the new coercion measures, which would have afforded them special rights as political prisoners, but rather under legislation designed to combat prostitution, which enabled the authorities to forcibly detain and inspect for venereal disease *any* woman found to be in the public sphere.⁵⁹ At least thirteen LLL members were charged in this manner; a report by the British Attorney General in Ireland at the time justified this action by accusing the women of “unsexing themselves” by virtue of their involvement in political activity in the public sphere.⁶⁰

In response to the suppression of the Ladies’ Land League, the Central Executive barricaded themselves in their Dublin headquarters for a week and ordered their agents on the front lines of the Land War to exercise more discretion in their advising tenants of their legal rights.⁶¹ In open and direct defiance of the British Government, Anna Parnell directed all branches of the LLL in Ireland (now numbering at least five hundred) to organize public meetings and protests. An image of the women resisting intimidation subsequently appeared as a cartoon, published in the official organ of the Land League, *United Ireland* (Figure 1, below). In it, a clearly irate Chief Secretary for Ireland, William Edward Forster, can be seen brandishing warrants for their arrest and threatening the women with the full coercive power of the British State. The women nonetheless resist, brandishing banners which read “Branches Forming Everywhere” and “Prison Sustenance Fund,” the latter referring to the crucial role the LLL also played in ensuring that their imprisoned male colleagues were fed and clothed and their families supported. Accompanying the cartoon was a caption which read:

Mr. Forster sets up his Buggabow to intimidate the Ladies of the Land League, but they march steadily onwards in their good work, their courage daily increasing, as well as their power.⁶²

As the year drew to a close, it was Irish women therefore who were prominently engaged at the local level in what had become a desperate battle to fight unfair rents and to prevent the eviction of poor tenants from their homes. Although this Land War was being interpreted as a nationalist struggle by individuals such as Parnell and Davitt, for many the immediate fear of eviction, homelessness, destitution and emigration were no doubt more paramount concerns. During this period, LLL political activity continued to take place at a range of different spaces and scales, for example the space of the home, as evidenced by Anna Parnell reporting in October 1881 that “a young girl was deliberately shot in her own parlor by constables in Limerick.”⁶³ Additionally, women were killed protesting outside their homes; for example, in December 1881 Anna Parnell reported that the Royal Irish Constabulary was using “bullets, buckshot, swords



Figure 1. "More and More Puzzled." (source: *United Ireland*, December 17, 1881, p. 1)

and bayonets" to disperse women and children protesting evictions, and that in Belmullet, County Mayo, "a young girl named Ellen McDonough was killed by a sword thrust."⁶⁴ Meanwhile, in small towns throughout Ireland, women also engaged in passive resistance, as is evident in the following report from a small town in County Cork:

Miss Hodnett, of Ballydehob, daughter of a man who was arrested under the Coercion Act, was arrested by the police this morning for persistently exhibiting in her shop window the 'no rent' manifesto, and refusing when ordered by the police to do so, to remove it.⁶⁵

Another Land League duty inherited by the LLL, was the task of writing, printing and distributing the nationalist newspaper *United Ireland*. Testament to the power of "print capitalism," the newspaper was read around the world, yet orthodox theorizing of nationalism rarely mentions any gendered dimensions to this particular phenomenon.⁶⁶ In December 1881, following the newspaper's suppression, the editor of the *Freeman's Journal* commented that he considered it "absurd to think that a handful of girls can defy the government,"⁶⁷ yet this is exactly what the LLL proceeded

to do. Under the direction of Hannah Lynch, *United Ireland* was subsequently printed in a succession of cities. It moved from London to Liverpool to Glasgow to Manchester to Paris, each time successfully staying one step ahead of the pursuing authorities.⁶⁸ According to William O'Brien, the jailed editor of *United Ireland*, these "sweet girl graduates foiled police raiders by a thousand ingenious feminine devices."⁶⁹ For example, the women smuggled copies of the newspaper into Ireland in everything from barrels of flour to boxes of millinery, and they would even reputedly conceal copies in their clothing so as to avoid detection by police and port authorities.⁷⁰

The termination of the LLL

Over the course of five crucial months, following the imprisonment of the Land League Executive in October 1881, the LLL valiantly attempted to implement the "No Rent Manifesto," and in so doing provided a brief glimpse of a what a well-organized, more revolutionary Irish nationalism might be capable of doing, a vision so worrisome that it drove both British Prime Minister Gladstone and Charles Stuart Parnell to the negotiating table. The result was the Kilmainham Treaty, signed in March 1881, in which the British Government agreed to release from jail the Land League Central Executive and extend the Land Act to include those tenants in arrears, in return for the withdrawal of the "No Rent Manifesto," the cessation of violence, and the termination of all Land League activities. Additionally, Parnell secured an alliance between his political party and that of Prime Minister Gladstone's, an alliance which he intended to utilize to advance the cause of Home Rule.

The Central Executive of the LLL was not consulted as to the details of the Kilmainham Treaty. Instead, female members of the organization were ordered to act as clerical assistants to male Land Leaguers who would return to oversee the gradual termination of the organization's affairs. When the women refused to act in this capacity, the flow of funds upon which the continuation of their duties depended was terminated, resulting in the overdrawing of a bank account. Despite providing evidence of their meticulous accounting, detailing almost £70,000 spent operating the Land League in the men's absence, Anna Parnell and her colleagues were nonetheless publicly accused of financial mismanagement and consequently driven to accept the men's stipulation that they withdraw from the public sphere into the back office to act as clerks.⁷¹ Some years later, Anna Parnell voiced her belief that the women had been publicly disgraced in this manner because they had naively assumed that their male colleagues wished them to fight the Land War in their absence, yet when they attempted to do so, had subsequently been exposed as disingenuous revolutionaries who had used the LLL "as a perpetual petticoat screen behind which they could shelter, not from the government, but from the people."⁷²

Conclusion

During the brief existence of the LLL, Anna Parnell and her female colleagues proved that they could orchestrate and lead an agrarian relief effort and Irish nationalist campaign as ably as the men, and in the eyes of some contemporary observers perhaps even outperform them. For example, following the disbanding of the organization, the American correspondent for the *Irish World*, Henry George, commented that the women had "done a great deal better than the men would have done."⁷³ Additionally, Andrew J. Kettle, a prominent Land League member at the time, later remarked that "Anna Parnell would have worked the Land League revolution to a much better conclusion than her great brother."⁷⁴ Both of these individuals could be characterized, however, as subscribing to the more revolutionary republican stream of Irish nationalism. They speak of Anna Parnell therefore not just as a very capable woman, but more importantly as an Irish nationalist whom they believed shared *their* vision. This is an important point, that the LLL was disbanded and subsequently forgotten, not solely because it empowered Irish women but rather, perhaps, because it had also genuinely come to the aid of the most impoverished tenant farmers, for whom only a republican revolution rather than Home Rule offered any hope that they might stave off eviction and subsequent destitution or emigration.

Illuminating the activities of the LLL therefore sheds light on a number of important dimensions of political struggle, in particular the manner in which nationalism can be seen developing by way of multiple streams flowing together for a period of time despite ultimately divergent objectives, while each intersects with other elements of subjectivity such as gender and class. Significantly, though, the story of the LLL also provides a number of intriguing insights into the manner in which political activity takes place at a range of different scales and in a multitude of different locations—a perspective long overlooked by scholars who analyze the development of nationalism. While in this particular case study, the multidimensionality of Irish political activity must be considered as a response to the coercive powers of the British colonial state which was then driving the Irish nationalist struggle for Land Reform underground, such multidimensionality should also nonetheless be considered a product of ordinary Irish women realizing the political potential of their everyday spaces. The fact that they did this so successfully, albeit for only a brief eighteen-month period, owes much to Anna Parnell's significant *rescaling* of this conflict—away from the British Houses of Parliament favored by her more famous brother, to the scale of the home and the land upon which it was dependent.

Notes

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