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New Tipperary: A Centenary Perspective

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On 2 December 1889, when Michael O'Brien Dalton was evicted from his business premises in Main St. Tipperary, he became the first casualty of what has become known as New Tipperary — or rather the second casualty; the first being common sense. Most elements of the New Tipperary episode do not conform to the norms of landlord-tenant relations. For example, the eviction of O'Brien Dalton and subsequent evictions were formalities, as the tenants had already cleared out and prepared to occupy New Tipperary, first mentioned the previous September.

Also, the Tipperary tenants had no personal quarrel with their landlord A. H. Smith-Barry of Fota, and had remained quiet during the Land League struggle a few years earlier. Their move against their landlord was remarkable therefore. It was, in fact, a sympathy strike.

The larger background to the whole affair has to do with bad weather and falling agricultural prices during the late 1870s. These, together with individuals like Davitt and Daly, gave rise to the Land League, which focussed nationalist attention on landlords as authors of the country's ills. While Smith-Barry's Tipperary tenants avoided confrontation with him during the 1879-82 period, they did not escape the atmosphere of landlord vilification which survived the Land League itself, as it was altogether too useful a mechanism of nationalist solidarity.

The second round of the land war began, like the first, in response to worsening economic conditions; but this time both sides drew on their experiences of the earlier conflict. For the nationalists, the National League (which had replaced the Land League) could be used to organise tenants and, as the Plan of Campaign focused on individual estates rather than parishes or townlands, perceived injustices of particular landlords were spotlighted.

On the landlord side, lessons had also been learned. With the encouragement of a Tory government, they organised themselves in a way that had not happened during the Land League. Central to this was A. H. Smith-Barry, who became actively involved in a landlord combination to defeat the tenant's combination. From Tipperary's point of view as both sides faced each other over the Ponsonby estate in Cork, tenant expectations and nationalist propaganda made it increasingly difficult for the Smith-Barry tenants to remain on the sidelines.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1889, both on public platforms and in the nationalist press, Smith-Barry's Tipperary tenants came under increasing pressure to react against their landlord and 'punish' him for his temerity. Among the most important voices articulating this point of view were William O'Brien M.P., John Dillon M.P. and Archbishop Croke.

There were three crucial flaws in this attitude. Unlike many Irish landlords whose estates were laden with debt and might be expected to capitulate to tenant demands, Smith-Barry, with some 27,000 acres in three counties and a substantial estate in England, had the resources and determination to resist nationalist demands.

Secondly, as Parnell's sister pointed out in 1907 (in *The Tale of a Sham*), it was a mistake to 'meddle' with towns — something avoided during the Land League — as the 'expense of rent-resisting . . . would have been out of all proportion to the loss incurred by the landlord'. Thirdly, the Tory government in place from July 1886 to July 1892, in the person of the Chief Secretary



A. J. Balfour, had no scruples about using any and all means to smash what was seen as a criminal conspiracy.

Between 1889 and 1891 New Tipperary was a huge drain on nationalist finances. In the end it was broken, not by government action (though this weakened tenant solidarity), but by the O'Shea divorce case and the fall of Parnell. The immediate importance of New Tipperary was that it provided a cause for the nationalists in the struggle against an inimical government, and at a time when their alliance with the Liberals was the foundation of nationalist policy as they waited for a Liberal victory in the next general election.

Liberals, including Gladstone, responded favourably to the New Tipperary cause. In the longer term new Tipperary was a dramatic lesson which the Tories eventually learned — that the landlord cause was not worth the agitation it caused and that tenant purchase was better politics if the Union was to be maintained.

John Dillon, speaking in 1894, gave a reasonable summing up of the whole New Tipperary episode.

'And when the time comes to write the history of what I hope will be the grand and the crowning struggle for the freedom of Ireland, the impartial historian who studies the forces which had gone to make success of these great fights, will in my judgement give to the Smith-Barry tenants of Tipperary, a considerable share of the credit of the struggle ... (because) these men, without counting the cost, went into what seemed an almost hopeless and mad fight.'

NOTES

1. For a detailed account of New Tipperary see D.G. Marnane: Fr. David Humphreys and New Tipperary, in William Nolan (ed.), *Tipperary: History and Society* (Dublin, 1985), pp. 367-378.
2. It is hoped to unveil in December 1989 a memorial in New Tipperary to mark its centenary.

