

A Forgotten Revolution: the 1883 Labourers' Act in County Tipperary

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Introduction

Addressing a public meeting in 1883, the well-known tenant leader William O'Brien MP, declared that the matter of housing for agricultural labourers, "should be the question of the hour". His specific appeal was that tenant farmers recognise the importance of support from labourers during the Land War by backing the provision of adequate housing for that class. It was politically convenient but not accurate that he blamed big graziers and landlords for the condition of Irish labourers.¹ There was more than enough blame to go around so that tenant farmers could have their share. Decades have their unique identities and seldom was a period so dominated by one man and his agenda as the 1880s was by Charles S. Parnell. The clamour of tenant farmers, the demand for Home Rule and the enigmatic personality of Parnell define the decade and absorb the attention of scholars. A seemingly minor piece of legislation, The Labourers (Ireland) Act (46 & 47 Vic. C.60) that passed into law on 25 August 1883, is relegated to a footnote. A faltering step certainly but this act was the first in a series of eight pieces of legislation that over the following twenty or so years changed the lives of thousands of the poorest families in the country by providing them for the first time with adequate housing.²

Improved housing for agricultural labourers came slowly, a process not an event.³ Much was wrong with the 1883 Act. It was both revolutionary and cautious. The great leap forward was in granting boards of guardians, in their capacity as local sanitary authorities, power to borrow money from the government at low interest in order to build cottages on half-acre sites to rent at reasonable rates to agricultural labourers. The great hold-back was in the reluctance of guardians, especially elected members, who in every poor law union or workhouse region, represented the prosperous farmer-shopkeeper coalition and reflecting their attitudes, were initially doubtful about using "their" rates to subsidise housing for the rural poor.⁴ It was not so much that they were against better housing in principle, it was just that (according to many of their protestations) their district did not have housing problems and consequently the 1883 Act did not apply. This selfish myopia was facilitated by the volume and complexity of red tape that issued from central government acting through the Local Government Board. It should be stressed that this reluctance on the part of guardians did not persist, most especially in Tipperary PLU.

Nevertheless, the act was greeted with hope. "Previous to this year", wrote a correspondent from around Newport, "the labourer was badly housed, badly fed and badly clad... his hovel was one an English farmer would not put his dog to dwell in".⁵ This article

looks specifically at the beginning of this process as it impacted on county Tipperary, where in fact the response was among the best in the country.⁶ Also, such an examination is of value in that it changes the more usual view of farmers at this period as victims of landlord obduracy. In this story, farmers were in positions of power, not always exercised generously. Parnell himself was in no doubt about this, agreeing with the proposition that in a great many cases labourers were "rackrented" by farmers for their accommodation.⁷ As a result of these acts the Irish countryside was changed. Travel any country road and these cottages (usually modernised if not gentrified) may still be seen.

Rural Poverty

Given how bad housing was for agricultural labourers in the late 19th century, the situation before and during the Famine is beyond imagining. Periodically the matter was officially investigated, as if there was some doubt about the problem. In 1823 an outside expert on agriculture, familiar with Scotland and Italy, told an inquiry: "I never imagined that any human beings were living in such wretchedness".⁸ A few years later the Rice Committee inquiring into the state of the poor in Ireland paid virtually no attention to the question of housing.⁹ The famous *Poor Inquiry* of the mid 1830s gathered detailed evidence about all aspects of the subject, including housing. The parish priest of Cahir described the mud walls, the absence of furniture even bedding other than straw or rushes and a few cooking utensils. The parish priest of New Inn explained that in some instances, dried cow dung was used as fuel. Occasionally, adequate housing was provided, for example slated cottages on the Putland estate in the parish of Newchapel.¹⁰

John Loughnane of Boytonrath, a farmer, giving evidence before the *Devon Commission* in September 1844, described agricultural labourers as "the most miserable men upon the face of the earth at the present day". Another farmer, William O'Flynn of Glengoole, described the living conditions of these landless men and their families: "Their huts are very miserable. There are seven or eight or nine of them upon one heap of straw and generally the clothing they have in the day is their night covering".¹¹ The commissioners, in their report, clearly found the matter intractable, describing the mere survival of labourers and their families as an "enigma" and mentioned migration, emigration and more immediately labour intensive land improvements as elements that might bring about improvements. Under no circumstances could there be "gratuitous relief" as this would bring ruin to the country.¹²

The census commissioners distinguished four kinds of housing, with the fourth class the most basic, essentially one-room mud cabins. The third class was also of mud but had up to four rooms and windows. From the census returns before and after the Famine, something of the housing situation across the county may be understood.

Third and Fourth Class Housing in County Tipperary, 1841, 1851 & 1861

Barony	Third Class (%)			Fourth Class (%)		
	1841	1851	1861	1841	1851	1861
Clanwilliam	49	53	51	34	24	16
Eliogarty	39	45	42	31	15	8
Iffa & Offa East	37	40	33	16	9	5
Iffa & Offa West	41	52	49	37	17	11
Ikerrin	41	49	47	29	14	6
Kilnamanagh Lower	44	52	46	39	21	15
Kilnamanagh Upper	36	51	45	44	22	17
Middlethird	41	49	46	33	19	13
Ormond Lower	40	53	49	34	11	8
Ormond Upper	36	52	48	46	20	14
Owney & Arra	46	52	48	34	17	12
Slievardagh	42	49	44	33	19	14

In 1841 the greatest concentrations of fourth class houses were in Upper Ormond, Kilnamanagh Upper and Iffa & Offa West. Looked at another way, percentage-wise the best showing for superior housing was in Iffa & Offa East (Clonmel and district), Ikerrin and Eliogarty. The co-relation between land values and housing quality is general, except perhaps in Clanwilliam (Tipperary town and district) which had a surprising amount of bad housing.¹³ Looking forward many decades, it was this same region, then Tipperary PLU, that responded best to the 1883 legislation.

The Famine changed everything and nothing. Families living in these fourth and third class houses or more accurately cabins, were the most affected. The change in absolute numbers was dramatic, especially with respect to the worst housing. A report on the 1851 census noted the disappearance of 355,689 mud cabins from Ireland. In Tipperary county, the change was equally dramatic: 22,819 hovels in 1841, 8,201 in 1851. However, this reduction of 64%, after Kerry's 60%, was almost at the bottom of the league within Munster. (Top of the league was Clare where fourth class housing declined by 77%.) Even after the enormous changes brought about in the late 1840s, in 1851 nearly 17% of families in Tipperary were still in fourth class accommodation.

Within the county, in 1851, the mid-west (Clanwilliam) continued to be a particular problem, with nearly fourteen hundred mud cabins and just over three thousand class three houses. No other barony in the county came close to Clanwilliam's situation with regard to the persistence of class four houses. Next was Middlethird (Cashel and district) with 950. Comparing north and south Tipperary, while the south was more prosperous, in 1851, 18% of its housing was class four, compared with the north's 15.5%.¹⁴ The persistence of fourth class housing in Clanwilliam had to do with various factors such as the level of sub-division on land out of landlord control because of leasing arrangements; the pattern of agriculture; the determination of cottiers and labourers to get a foothold and while many vanished during the Famine, to the grave or the workhouse (these were not the kind of people who emigrated), even the most determined effort at clearance was not enough to bring about an effective reduction. Also, the 1851 census was taken while the clearances in the county were still being carried out.

Going forward another decade and while the situation with reference to the very worst housing improved everywhere in the county, there were regional variations. For the county as a whole class four houses constituted around one-third of the total in 1841. By 1851 this had been halved and a decade later the figure was about eleven percent. The point about class four houses (and allowing that precise definitions of what constituted such a dwelling may have changed from census to census), with the kind of agricultural prosperity enjoyed in Ireland during these post-Famine decades, mud cabins should have been bad memories from the past and not contemporary reality. In 1861 there were 1,940 of these hovels in North Tipperary and 2,716 in the south of the county. Clanwilliam continued to be a blackspot. Whatever about percentages, in absolute numbers, with 793 class four houses, that barony stood alone in the county.¹⁵

In fairness, before the first step to bring about meaningful change was taken in 1883, there was widespread noise to the effect: "Something must be done".¹⁶ But what? Ideally, farmers who employed agricultural labourers would have assumed responsibility for their adequate housing but they had their own conflicts with landlords. More to the point, the evidence suggests that this was not something with any priority. Labourers employed directly by landlords were far better off than labourers employed by farmers. John Heffernan of Cuckoo Hill a very substantial farmer near Cahir told a government inquiry in 1880 that while it would be very advantageous if farmers could be encouraged to build labourers' cottages, the reality was in his remark: "I suppose the farmers do not like to be giving the straw too much for thatch".¹⁷

Dr Thomas Laffan (compiler of *Tipperary's Hearth Money Records*, published in 1911) medical officer to Cashel PLU, whose work brought him into daily contact with the consequences of poverty, exploitation and bad housing, also gave evidence to the *Bessborough Commission* set up to investigate landlord-tenant relations. "The occupiers (farmers) have been activated by too keen a lust for land and too exclusive a regard for their own interests, to trouble themselves much about the unfortunate labourers" he told the commissioners in November 1880, admittedly a time when tenant farmers were under severe pressure because of an economic downturn and the consequent land war. Since 1874 a member of Cashel town commission which had an estate of some three thousand acres, Laffan had some responsibility for labourers' housing but was prevented by vested interests from promoting improvements on that estate, such as giving agricultural labourers half acre plots.¹⁸

The moral dimension of what was a blight on the landscape both literally and metaphorically might have been expected to exercise the tongues of the catholic clergy. They of course were part of the farmer-shopkeeper interest group but as James O'Shea has indicated, no more than 22% of the county's priesthood in the period 1879-91, showed an interest by word or deed in a public capacity.¹⁹ (Individually and privately in their pastoral roles, many priests may have been very exercised about the labouring classes.) When priests did take an interest, usually the next life came ahead of this one. Fr Patrick O'Keeffe, curate in Fethard, was in no doubt that labourers lived in cabins "scarcely fit for savage men" but his advice with respect to what should be done centred on labourers staying off the bottle and thereby demonstrating that they deserved their half-acres. Sober, labourers would also see that their interests lay in not rocking the boat for farmers.²⁰

The Irish Agricultural Labourers' Union, established in County Cork in 1873 was an attempt to do what the title implies: advance the interests of labourers by organization and

solidarity. To promote this in Tipperary, a large-scale public meeting was held in Thurles in September that year. Around ten thousand people attended but the absence from the platform of "persons of note" was remarked on. Much had to be made of the "blessing" of the archbishop (Leahy) but there was no clerical presence. In order not to frighten potential support, solidarity between farmers and labourers was emphasised.²¹

This was precisely the organization's weakness and led to its rapid disappearance, its subordination to the dominant nationalist agenda which reflected the interests of tenant farmers. Another organization in the 1880s, the Labour League, was no more successful. At a meeting in Moyne in June 1882, a speaker who very much was not a labourer, emphasised how farmers needed the help of labourers to defeat landlordism and he encouraged what he called "servant boys" in the parish to join the "labour movement", which of course would not be allowed to subvert the interests of farmers.²²

Agricultural labourers faced another problem, their declining number. On the other hand, when and where there was a demand for agricultural labour, their bargaining position was strengthened. In the forty years from 1841, one scholar (interpreting difficult data) suggested that while farmers as a percentage of the adult male agricultural labour force increased from forty-two to sixty percent, labourers declined from fifty-six to thirty-eight percent.²³ According to David Fitzpatrick, "while the number of farmers declined between 1841 and 1911 by just over one-quarter, that of farm workers (including assisting relatives) fell by nearly two-thirds". In County Tipperary, between 1851 and 1881, the ratio of farm workers to farmers declined by around one-third. This was less dramatic than some other Munster counties but everywhere the overall trend was clear. In Tipperary in 1851 there were 293 farm labourers to every 100 farmers but by 1911 the figure for labourers was 165.²⁴ In the actual Irish countryside as distinct from lives reduced to statistics, the distinction between farmer and labourer was not always clear. It was not unusual that farmer's sons from time to time worked for wages outside their father's farms. Such men would not have thought of themselves as labourers. Equally men with tiny amounts of land, while they may have earned their living doing agricultural labour for wages, would have absolutely rejected designation as "servant boys".

In 1870 poor law inspectors reported on issues connected with agricultural labourers. The inspector whose region included part of South Tipperary noted wide variation in wages. In Clogheen PLU optimum weekly wages without being fed was nine shillings, whereas in Clonmel PLU, at worst, wages were as low as four shillings, again without being fed. Around towns, the inspector explained, there was a surplus of labour and there was widespread discontent, especially about the lack of housing contiguous to where employment was available.²⁵ With respect to other parts of the county, another inspector was highly critical of relations between farmers and labourers. In his judgement, farmers wanted labour as cheaply as possible, while labourers wanted to do as little as possible. Wages had increased but not enough to make any real difference to living standards. Weekly wages varied but were around seven to eight shillings. With wages too low and housing so bad, this inspector could not see how labourers could be contented.²⁶

The land war during the few years from 1879 was waged in the interest of farmers but there was a pretence that the cause of agricultural labourers was also being served. The Land League needed the support of all the farming community, those who rented land but also those who worked that land for wages. How things would be was made clear at a national

convention on land reform held in Dublin on 29 April 1880. A proposal that every farm should have one labourers' cottage, of at least three rooms and with a half acre of land attached, was ruled out of order by the chairman.²⁷ Earlier that year the PP of Clogheen, the Rev Thomas McGrath, had written to the Mansion House Committee, a relief organization in Dublin led by the Lord Mayor and described visiting part of his parish where the labourers were "in absolute want", living in hovels without windows, to all intents and purposes, holes in the ground. From the other end of the county, a magistrate in Nenagh described visiting labourers and made the devastating comment that even with his experience of distress in India, he had never seen anything like it.²⁸ Several decades on from the Famine and class four housing was clearly still in use.

During the last months of 1880, public meetings organised by the Land League were held all over the county: Cloneen, Mullinahone, Clonmel, Ballingarry, Carrick-on-Suir, Cahir, Templemore, Hollyford, Tipperary and Thurles (to mention quite a few). In most, labourers were ignored. In a few, there were nods in their direction. In Templemore on 10 October, a resolution declared that there should be no "final settlement" (whatever that was), without them. In Ballingarry on 14 November, a similar resolution (invariably the last) to the same effect: no final settlement without "due provision being made for this very hard working and most deserving class". On that same date, at a meeting in Thurles, Fr Power went out of his way to connect farmer and labourer, at least in his rhetoric. Any advantage to the farmer would naturally benefit the labourer.²⁹

A public meeting in Nenagh on 3 January 1881, attended perhaps by 40,000 people, passed standard resolutions, clearly indicating what mattered. The first resolution was that farmers should be "proprietors of the soil"; the second was that farmers should pay no more in rent than Griffith's Valuation; the third resolution was that evicted farms should not be taken by new tenants. Finally, the fourth resolution lumped together the condition of agricultural labourers, the reclamation of wasteland and the reform of county boards. Fr O'Leary parish priest of Toomevara told the meeting how for forty years he had been in contact with labourers and that "the condition of the children of toil was that of hardship and privation". They were badly fed, clothed and housed, matters resulting from landlordism, which was the common enemy of farmer and labourer. "The Land League has made brothers of us all."³⁰

The point about this empty formula is that it worked. The interests of tenant farmers carried the day. At another Land League meeting in Nenagh in May 1881, while Gladstone's land legislation was going through parliament, there were complaints about the proposed act having no provisions for the "wants of suffering tenants". While tenants and their leaders had their problems with the 1881 Act, once it was passed it served their interests and they got over the fact that agricultural labourers were no better off.³¹ Early in 1883, around the time the *Labourers Act* was being introduced in the Commons, National League (replaced the Land League and was the grassroots organization of the Irish Parliamentary Party) branches in different parts of the county, appeared to be addressing not quite the housing issue but the wider problem of rural poverty.

In Silvermines, farmers with valuations in excess of £25 were called on to allow labourers use of half-acre plots. When labourers in a body visited farmers in the parish, they were apparently well received, except in Garryard.³² In Lattin parish, there was a similar plan and a similar outcome. Groups of labourers were generally well received except in particular

areas, where probably there were unreported personality clashes.³³ In this same parish there was an early indication how the question of rehousing agricultural labourers could and would be used a weapon in other battles. William Sadlier, an absentee holding several hundred acres employed two labourers and was criticised for providing two mud cabins with no attached plots.³⁴ Efforts by National League branches were all very well but even a superficial knowledge of the Irish countryside leads to the conclusion that without legislation, the problem of rural poverty, of which bad housing was but the most visible sign, was never going to be alleviated by depending on the generosity of farmers.

The Labourers (Ireland) Act 1883

This measure was introduced by the Irish Parliamentary Party in an effort to make good on their years of rhetoric about helping agricultural labourers. It was February 1883. The Liberal government saw no reason to hinder it while having no great confidence about the extent to which it would change very much. In its journey towards the statute book, various vested interests had their say. The notion of agricultural labourer had to be clearly and narrowly defined in order to prevent people like farmer's sons taking advantage of what would be subsidized housing. Landlords received protection for their demesnes and home farms in case anyone thought it might be interesting to site labourers' cottages there. Predictably, there was talk in the Lords about socialism and questions asked about where would it all end. Outweighing such fears however was the acknowledgement that the rural housing situation had to be improved and the hope that any improvement might help to make Ireland easier to govern.

The Labourers (Ireland) Bill passed into law in August 1883. A board of guardians in its capacity as rural sanitary authority could respond to the representation of twelve ratepayers that there was a specific local need to rehouse agricultural labourers. Money to build cottages, each of which had to have a half-acre of land attached, could be borrowed against the rates. All this had to be done with the approval of the Local Government Board (LGB), ever watchful for any attempt to spend public money outside the letter of the legislation. However, a petition signed by three ratepayers could stop building going ahead. There was an appeals mechanism and it was made complicated to acquire land by compulsory purchase. Like much of Britain's remedial legislation for Ireland, benign intention surrendered to endemic suspicion about the natives.³⁵

With some exaggeration but indicating the hopes engendered by the act, a Tipperary newspaper in October 1883 described it as "the absorbing topic of the day" and went on to educate its readers about what it might offer.³⁶ "In many respects" it declared, the act would be "a greater boon for the country than the (1881) Land Act". Getting carried away, the report mentioned the possibility of as much as £700,000 being spent in Tipperary, making farmers and labourers mutually supportive and stopping the tide of emigration. Poor law guardians were warned that they were expected to do their duty and "do it now". Crowds gathered before meetings of guardians. In Thurles applications were handed in for more than three hundred cottages. For example, Borrisoleigh (47), Inch (13), Moyne (20) and Templemore (80). In total 329 cottages, each costing £50, an expenditure of over £16,000. A meeting was arranged for later in the month to consider matters but guardians knew that they had to cope with a huge gap between expectation and delivery.

In Tipperary PLU the situation was similar. Their meeting heard reports from medical

officers about the existing housing situation for labourers, a litany of misery, hardly news to the assembled guardians. For example, the report for Bansha referred to the need for fifty cottages. In Cashel PLU, at their meeting on 4 October, "representation papers" signed by thirteen ratepayers were handed in for Clonoulty West. There was talk of 150 cottages. Local leaders played their part in fanning expectations. That autumn, meetings after last mass on Sunday were common, allowing priests both explain the act and appeal for co-operation from farmers. In Newport, around 200 "sons of toil" listened to Fr Meagher PP. In Cappawhite the names of thirty-eight labourers were noted and "representation papers" filled in. These were signed the following day and handed in at the regular meeting of Tipperary guardians on Tuesday.³⁷ After mass in Gortnahoe on Sunday 7 October, a public meeting was chaired by Fr Delaney who explained the legislation and pointedly declared that farmers, having gained from the 1881 Act, should support their labourers now that it was their turn to benefit from legislation.³⁸

The nationalist press and tenant farmers had a common voice. The press articulated the concerns and demands of farmers and in turn farmers and their shopkeeping brothers (often literally) supported the numerous local newspapers competing for attention. When therefore the press found it necessary to criticise farmers, it was done with circumspection. In mid-October, one newspaper, called the Labourers Act "this miserable instalment of justice", declared that unco-operative farmers were no better than landlords (harsh criticism indeed) and threatened that it would name and shame.³⁹

At a "monster" meeting in Tipperary at the end of September, an array of speakers, priests and several MPs dealt with the new act by expressing sympathy for farmer's concerns while at the same time declaring confidence that farmers would take the moral high ground. Reading between the lines, there was no such confidence that they would.⁴⁰ In North Tipperary, two curates, one in Nenagh and the other in Templederry, used the press to criticise aspects of the act and official reactions to it. Causing particular upset was the posting of handbills about the place indicating that labourers would have to pay rents of around £4.50 p.a. for their cottages and half-acres. This was interpreted as a ploy to frighten labourers, reduce demand and thus save farmers their half-acres. The official line, as articulated by one PP was: "All the farmers I met were satisfied with (the act)." It may be coincidence but one of these two curates in mid-November was transferred to a parish in Clare, while the other one had to write a public letter of apology for any offence to Fr Meagher PP.⁴¹

The first PLU in the county to have a special meeting to deal in detail with the Labourers Act was Tipperary. With some thirty guardians in attendance, the board met on 11 October, amid considerable press interest.⁴² In light of farmer anxiety, the chairman went out of his way to give reassurance that labourers in the Union could be housed "comfortably" without being a drain on the rates. If cottages could be built "judiciously" they would pay for themselves. This optimism was not shared by the clerk of the union, who was obviously more aware of the complexity of the Act. The PLU was divided into electoral districts and the meeting proceeded to take these in turn, the number of cottages possible being tied to the valuation, which in turn determined how much could be raised to sustain interest payments on borrowed money. There appears to have been no difficulty in getting the required twelve ratepayers in each district but it was apparent that each district had different circumstances and needs. In Bruis the demand was for twenty-three cottages. It was claimed that such was

the shortage of accommodation that farmers had to get labourers "from the back lanes of Tipperary". Cullen it was claimed had been all but cleared of its labourers. The example was cited of four labourers having to walk a round journey of six miles each day between work and lodgings. Cullen wanted twenty-four cottages and also ten cottages needed to be repaired.

With respect to Curraheen (Hollyford), twenty-three cottages could be built except there was a difference of opinion between the guardian Thomas Stapleton who, too eagerly perhaps, reported that labourers refused to apply until they saw the scheme working and knew what rent they would have to pay. This version of events was contradicted by Thomas Ryan, prominent in the local Land and Labour Association, who told the board that it was he who pushed matters forward at the public meeting after Sunday mass in Hollyford, a meeting which Stapleton did not attend and claimed was improperly called. Clearly Stapleton was happy with the status quo, wanted cottages repaired but equally wanted "labourers to continue to live under the farmers" as was the situation for years. The chairman deferred consideration of the district to another time. It later transpired that the district on the basis of its valuation could not afford more than half the number of cottages earlier mentioned. Complicating matters further, was a subsequent letter from Vere Hunt of High Park Cappawhite, landlord of Curraheen, refusing to give any land for cottages with the usual chorus that "if" labourers' cottages were needed, he would build them himself. The board continued to consider each electoral district, arriving finally at a total of 725 cottages.

Did they think it would be that easy? All of this took a considerable amount of time. By the end of the meeting, what was always going to be a huge issue, selecting sites, was dealt with almost casually. For each district, guardians together with local priests would visit and "point out" sites for cottages. Finally the board's architect presented three rough plans for cottages: ranging between kitchen and two bedrooms for £50 or kitchen and three bedrooms for £65. The question of using the Act to repair existing cottages was to be referred to the LGB. By the following month, the LGB was more explicit about what could and could not be built and made it clear that PLUs would be tightly regulated. In case any PLUs were tempted because of costs, there had to be two bedrooms; the total area of windows to be at least one-twelfth of floor space; ceilings were to be at least eight feet high, except for roof space; there were specifications about flagging in the kitchen and floor boards in the bedrooms and there had to be a privy separate from the house.⁴³

It was not that easy. One curb on local enthusiasm was a legal restriction to the effect that expenditure could not exceed one shilling in the pound on the annual valuation of the PLU. Also some landlords were unenthusiastic and seemed suddenly converted to the value of building their own cottages for labourers, something they could have done all along with money borrowed from the Board of Works. H.H. Townsend, agent to the large Smith-Barry estate, wrote to the guardians (he could have attended the meeting of 11 October but like other ex-officio members was absent) and stating his support for the Act in theory declared his intention of building his own cottages in Cloonfinglas and Cordangan. Like Stapleton, though on a much larger scale, Townsend was afraid the Act would diminish control.⁴⁴

The following year Townsend gave evidence before a select committee on agricultural labourers. With average weekly wages around ten shillings, one shilling and sixpence a week rent was, he said, the most that could be demanded. He was very concerned about both guardians and farmers having power to get rid of labourers "of bad character".

Unsurprisingly, he was very much against targeting the land of the largest ratepayers as sites for cottages. In general Townsend was cynical about the commitment to the Act both by guardians and farmers and correctly saw that getting sites for cottages would not be an easy matter.⁴⁵ Illustrating this was the response in late 1883 by a large tenant farmer to a circular from Tipperary PLU about sites on his land. He claimed his labourers were perfectly well housed, thank you very much. They were paid twelve shillings a week and supplied with milk all year round. Guardians were welcome to come and see for themselves. His real concern was in his question: "You don't mean to force me to accommodate other men's labourers?"⁴⁶ By early November, when around one hundred individuals, landlords and farmers, had replied to the guardians with respect to giving sites, half gave "conditional assents". Few were as blunt as landowner George Hartigan who declared that no cottages would be built on "my property".⁴⁷

There were other agendas. A very influential member of the board of guardians was John Cullinan, Bansha native, active as an organizer during the land war and eventually MP for the region 1900-1918. Michael Hogan a Bansha farmer holding seventy acres appeared before the board to promise he would build a second cottage if needed. His two points were that those making most noise about the plight of labourers were not rushing to put cottages on their own land (a swipe at Cullinan) and he wanted control over who would be allocated any cottage/s on his land. Cullinan hit back on all fronts: Hogan employed a good deal of labour; the cottage built was unfit and that it had been agreed that cottages would be built on the lands of the highest ratepayers. Exchanges like these were commonplace, the details of policy rows and personality clashes now beyond recovery but unremarkably the stuff of Irish life and living. There appears to have been a "history" between these two men. It was almost certainly not a coincidence when a week after this exchange, the board received a letter from a named individual in Bansha protesting that Hogan should not be able to "evade" the Labourers Act or dictate what labourers were given what cottages.⁴⁸

No, it was not going to be easy. By the close of the year, the unthinking optimism that things would happen quickly dissipated and when a "number of unemployed, wretchedly clad and emaciated" labourers appeared before the board begging for employment, the chairman could only apologise for thinking that a building programme would be underway by then. There were no jobs and no money for outdoor relief. The only option was admittance to the workhouse.⁴⁹

While Tipperary was the first Poor Law Union in the county to deal with the Labourers Act, by the end of October (with adjournments into November) the other unions held their special meetings. Much the same issues arose in unions across the county. In Thurles as elsewhere it was the clerk of the union who saw problems which the chairman and some board members ignored. For example, if a labourer occupying one of the new cottages ceased to work for the farmer on whose land it was sited, that labourer remained in his cottage. A board member from Moyne (Ryan) was wonderfully sanguine. There were twenty applications and farmers with two exceptions had agreed to give sites for nothing. He personally would not mind half a dozen cottages on his farm.⁵⁰ On discussion, eight of these applications were approved by the board.

When it came to approve applications, some guardians were put off by the expenditure and were of opinion that there would be extra costs. "You must have a piggery, a privy, a pair of gates and acquire a half-acre of good land" said one and expecting the worst, talked

about the cost of repairs, the cost of collecting rents and costs arising from bad debts. It was doubtful therefore if labourers could afford to pay rent as high perhaps as two shillings weekly. Might it not be best, he concluded, to leave well enough alone, with farmers building cottages for their own labourers, if such were needed. Compared with Tipperary PLU, Thurles guardians in their discussions about applications were much more financially cautious. From Borrisoleigh for example, there were forty-seven applications and while no one denied that housing there was very bad, guardians passed just four applications. By far the largest number of applications was from Templemore (80), regarding which decisions were postponed. In all, seventeen divisions were discussed, a total of 345 applications, of which sixty were passed.⁵¹

In Nenagh, some guardians convinced themselves that around thirty cottages could be built in Nenagh E.D. and including the purchase of thirty half-acre sites, that the whole would not cost more than one farthing in the pound on the rates. Including sites, the cost of construction was estimated at about £2,500, on which interest payments to the government would be £141 p.a. Labourers would pay one shilling and seven pence per week rent. Other voices doubted this and reference was made above to the suspicion in some quarters that talk of this kind of week rent was a ploy to frighten off labourers. Illustrating a certain mindset was the declaration by one guardian that some of the applicants had houses as good as his own.⁵²

In Clonmel PLU where about 230 applications were passed, some applications for cottages were made on behalf of specific labourers, it was explained that while the volume of applications indicated the level of need in an area, cottages would have to be built and then allocated. As elsewhere, there were exchanges between guardians about likelihood of sites being provided free. Another issue was the difference of opinion between MDs and guardians as to what dwellings were unfit for human habitation. Some dwellings were passed by medical opinion to the surprise of the chairman who declared: "I am perfectly prepared to say there is hardly a labourer's house in the Union that is sanitary."⁵³ A specific example, from Mylerstown, was a labourer who lived with his wife and five children in a one-room cabin with no window or chimney. This was passed as fit by the MD.⁵⁴ From today's perspective, one of the things that is extraordinary about this time and this topic is the degree to which the middle classes looked at labourers and regarded them as almost another species, certainly as people whose needs were far inferior to their own.

By 1884, reality intruded. In Cashel PLU, a scheme having been adopted on 15 November 1883, the clerk reported with respect to procuring half-acre sites from landowners and farmers. Whatever about earlier talk many farmers refused, prompting the suggestion that their names should be posted on chapel gates. There was particular reference to New Inn and Knockgraffon.⁵⁵ In March, as in many PLUs, a local inquiry by the LGB was held. Each district was examined in turn, local needs assessed and objections heard. Regarding Ardmayle for example, one farmer from whom a site (and of course a half-acre plot) was being taken, protested that because he was boycotted during the Land League period, he was being targeted. The poor law inspector conducting the inquiry was uninterested. "It is for you to prove either that the site is unsuitable or that it is unnecessary." Proposals to build cottages near Cashel itself aroused considerable objections from landowners who claimed that this was demesne land and thus exempt from the Act. One guardian painted a picture of agricultural labourers living in bad conditions in the town, walking distances each day to farms "with their people going after them with food". On the other hand no objections were raised to

cottages in many districts including Cooleagh, Drangan, Fethard, Gaile, Graigue, Graystown, Killenaule and Kilpatrick.⁵⁶

In April an inquiry was held into the schemes put forward by Clogheen PLU, some fifty cottages. Maps and plans were prepared and on hand. Each cottage would have a kitchen and two bedrooms, together with a space over the kitchen and of course its half-acre. It was estimated that each unit would cost around £95. For some districts, Burncourt, Tullahorton, Newcastle, schemes collapsed because many of the signatures needed to initiate things, were not of resident ratepayers. One farmer near Cahir who objected to having a cottage on his land was told that a number of cottages had been levelled on his land some years earlier, that the lanes of Cahir were overcrowded and that the cottage was going to be built for a labourer employed by him. Originally twelve cottages were mentioned for Clogheen district. This was now down to six, replacing six condemned cottages but on different sites and costing £600 which would mean an extra penny farthing in the pound on the rates. Two of the cottages would be on a 200 acre farm, one each on farms around 150 acres and one each on farms around 65 acres.⁵⁷

In 1883 guardians in Tipperary PLU had been very ambitious and at the LGB inquiry lasting for six days in the Spring of 1884, both guardians and objectors were legally represented. Not all landlords were obstructive. Major Massy in Rathlynin regretted any delay as cottages were very much needed and he approved the ten costing £1,000 being proposed. In Thomastown on the other hand there were various problems: Lord Dunsandle objected that sites were being proposed for demesne land; there were problems with ratepayer's signatures and adding to these difficulties, the guardian for the district was not present. In Tipperary district, Townsend the Smith-Barry agent was as reluctant as ever to loose control.

The chairman Michael Dalton described how it was "unpleasant and perhaps invidious" for guardians to visit the holdings of particular persons, "questioning their circumstances and fixing sites". He admitted that the process was calculated to "arouse personal prejudice and jealousy regarding neighbours and friends". This seems an understatement. Even the most superficial understanding of the dynamic of rural life points to the potentially toxic nature of this undertaking. Dalton also had a strong personal prejudice against agricultural labourers living in town. It was "unnatural". "Healthy peasants" could not be reared "in the lanes of Tipperary". Labourers reared and living in towns and their children might not want to do agricultural labour. Improving rural housing for labourers was therefore a matter more economic than moral. There was little by way of argument that living conditions should be improved because it was the right thing to do.⁵⁸

In September 1884, a year after all that confident talk about a new deal for agricultural labourers, the more radical press were calling attention to the fact that nothing had yet been build, that regulation was choking progress and that farmers were mainly to blame. "We feel called on" declared an editorial in one newspaper, "to remind the farmers of their duties and the labourers of their rights" and went on to warn that "guardians that can move and won't move, must be made to move".⁵⁹ A difference of opinion on the Tipperary board between the chairman Dalton and Cullinan (later MP) illustrates some of the difficulties. While Dalton seemed reasonable: "Why put cottages where they are not wanted?," Cullinan was interventionist. To a farmer's complaint why his farm was chosen when there were neighbouring larger farms, Cullinan simply fell back on the statement that "guardians have

to exercise their discretion". And when another guardian suggested both landlords and tenants give sites "to the poor labourers for nothing", the response was general laughter.

In spite of being forceful (or perhaps because of this), Cullinan did not necessarily get his own way. In October, together with two colleagues, two sites were "marked out" in the Glen of Aherlow (Ashgrove), one on the land of a "dissenter", the other on the property of an "assenter". When this was discussed at a board meeting, other guardians wanted sites charged to the largest ratepayers and on a vote Cullinan and his two colleagues were totally isolated.⁶⁰ Cullinan was in no doubt that there were at least two issues: the obvious one of providing better housing for agricultural labourers and probably just as important, patronage. Landlords who owned sites or farmers who had to give up some of their farms, were not the people to decide such matters. Providing labourers' cottages not only accommodated labourers, it could be used as a stick to beat farmers who perhaps did not toe the nationalist party-line.⁶¹

Within the county, Tipperary PLU is of particular interest because it was one of the most proactive boards in the country. Speaking in July 1884, Henry Robinson a top official in the LGB, told a government inquiry that of boards in Ireland, Tipperary PLU had submitted papers for the largest number of houses, twenty nine schemes comprising 376 cottages.⁶² Nevertheless, towards the end of 1884, their frustration was clear as was their demand for the 1883 Act to be amended. Listening to Cullinan's complaints, Dalton the chairman could only say: "I am quite aware how unworkable the act is".⁶³ At the final meeting of guardians in 1884, Horace Townsend influential local estate agent and someone at the other end of the political spectrum from Cullinan, shared in this frustration. As he said, the matter had occupied them for two years and yet "they had not one cottage erected". He saw no point in their board being satisfied with just two cottages in each E.D. and that the very contentious matter of picking sites be left to a small sub-committee. A counter proposal wanted the board to push for 310 cottages, a figure earlier agreed. The point is that the year ended amid a welter of contrary proposals, a clear and pressing need that was not going to go away and a divided sanitary board.⁶⁴ Also unresolved was the number of years purchase landlords should be paid for giving up their land for sites. Speaking to a select committee in London during this same period, Townsend explained how the Tipperary board had offered landlords ten years purchase (the amount of rent the site and half-acre would realise over ten years as farm land) but that in all cases it had been refused.⁶⁵

Clear evidence regarding the complexity of the 1883 Labourers Act was the fact that in Borrisokane PLU, the Local Government Board returned all the documentation because it was incorrect.⁶⁶ In fact nine procedures had to be followed between representation from twelve ratepayers to the desired outcome, a labourer receiving his cottage. Not surprisingly, all over the country, especially outside Munster and Leinster, matters never advanced beyond the initial enthusiasm. In those two provinces, seventy sanitary authorities (PLUs) promoted over 700 improvement schemes that would have resulted in the construction of some 6,000 cottages. Promotion did not result in realization. The countryside did not resound to the sound of hammers on nails.⁶⁷

What happened in Nenagh illustrated how landowners could exploit the Act to hinder its purpose. During a sworn inquiry before one of the poor law inspectors, a procession of witnesses, landowners, farmers and some hired "experts" gave evidence why sites could or would not be given. A supporting argument used was that labourers did not want new

cottages because rents would be too high and in many cases, their existing accommodation was free. Also, in some instances it was claimed labourers wanted to wait and see how the legislation worked out. More unexpected was the notion that labourers had sentimental attachments to existing cottages. In Ballinaclough, landowner John Bayly declared that he had twelve cottages unoccupied on his estate and that moves to get sites on his property was intended to injure him as much as possible. Against this was the claim that labourers living in Nenagh had to walk distances to work each day.

The most determined opposition came from Lord Dunalley, owner of an estate of 21,000 acres centred on Kilbooy near Nenagh, whose solicitor claimed that efforts were being made to "transplant objectionable (men) to Lord Dunalley's property". Fourteen sites in Kilmore had been decided on by Robert Gill and Fr Cunningham curate in Silvermines.⁶⁸ The LGB agreed but Dunalley had the resources to fight the matter all the way to London and a committee of inquiry in the House of Commons dealt with the question in June 1884. The PLU had to be represented at this by the clerk of the Union, R. Gill and one of the elected guardians, which cost ratepayers about £150. At issue was the specific matter of three cottages and Dunalley's wish that the guardians would purchase three dilapidated cottages on his estate, repair them and allow him exercise control over labourers on his estate. These cottages would not have the required half-acres as mandated by the 1883 Act .

In their evidence there was an interesting difference of opinion between Gill the engineer (he was assistant county surveyor) and Joseph Ryan member of the board of guardians for the district in question. According to Gill, the opinion of labourers was sought as to sites. This was denied by Ryan who said only farmers and ratepayers were consulted and that labourers were consulted as to the need for housing but not about its location. No doubt Ryan was correct. The generality of farming opinion would not have conceded that labourers should have an input with respect to the disposition of land. The outcome was that Dunalley would not have to give sites as required by the board of guardians and approved by the Local Government Board.

The issue was not so much about the housing of labourers as a landowner reacting against what he clearly considered outside dictation about what he did with his property and indeed "his" labourers. Fr Cunningham (CC Silvermines) was probably correct in his view that Dunalley was able to call on an "old boy's network" in parliament, in spite of the fact that everything had been done according to the complicated 1883 legislation. Nenagh guardians fulminated about "this obnoxious decision" and voted twenty-two to eight to ask the Commons reverse the decision. Not surprising, among the eight were landowners such as Finch, Gason, Poe and Twiss. While the guardians were having this discussion, Fr Cunningham, against protocol, entered the boardroom and warned the meeting against anything that would cause more delay, even if it meant accommodating Dunalley.⁶⁹ Months later and Dunalley was still trying to exercise control by offering to rebuild a few cottages on his land, attach half-acre plots, install labourers at a rent of £4 p.a. on leases of fifteen years. Such labourers would of course be under his control, the only mitigation being the leases. Nenagh guardians were unsure about how to respond. For one thing such a programme would save them money.⁷⁰

Delay was an universal complaint about the 1883 Act, prompting an amendment two years later (48 & 49 Vic. C.77) which allowed sanitary authorities some powers of compulsion, reduced the capacity for objections, changed the rules about repairing dwellings,

made the financial provisions more appealing and generally cut through some of the red tape.⁷¹ In Nenagh PLU for example, as 1884 drew to a close, guardians were divided between responding to rising frustrations about delays and going ahead even if they were unsatisfied about their title to sites for cottages and on the other hand waiting for amending legislation. Their decision was signalled by the large number of contractors who had tendered for the work and who were waiting for a decision, being called before the board and informed that for the moment their tenders would have to remain unopened.⁷²

Conclusion

This article has looked at the background to the problem of housing for agricultural labourers in Tipperary and the immediate impact of the 1883 legislation. Over a two-year period, nothing appeared to happen. The Irish rural landscape was not resounding to the happy sound of contented families in their newly erected homes but improvements were intended, especially in Tipperary county and most particularly in Tipperary PLU. As the 1884-85 annual report of the Local Government Board makes clear, in spite of all the politics and posturing, a quiet revolution was about to get under way, waiting to transform countless lives.

Response to the 1883 Labourers Act in County Tipperary⁷³

PLU	Number of Houses Sought	Number of Houses Approved
Carrick	26	17
Cashel	204	172
Clogheen	64	36
Clonmel	45	15
Nenagh	107	71
Tipperary	677	376

To be continued

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