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‘Short skirts and strong boots’: The pioneering feminism of Anna Parnell

Anna Parnell led a generation of women in the 19th century and inspired another in the 20th

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The publication in 1986 of Anna Parnell’s *The Tale of a Great Sham*, scrupulously edited and annotated by [Dana Hearne](#), was a landmark event in Irish women’s history. For the first time the general reader was able to read an account of the Land War written by the woman who at the time had been hailed as the Irish Joan of Arc.

Parnell’s own desire was that future generations would realise that she and her colleagues had “set a noble example to all the women of Ireland”. It was the only the legacy she hoped for.

How did this woman from the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, a product of the landed gentry, become a woman whose strategic and organisational skills would receive international acclaim?

In 1879, in response to the threat of famine following a succession of wet summers and poor harvests, a Land League was formed in Co [Mayo](#). This was a new departure in Irish politics, combining as it did the parliamentarian and the Fenian in a joint fight for tenant

rights. [Charles Stewart](#) Parnell visited America soon after in order to fund raise. His sister Fanny suggested that women in America should form an organisation in order to raise funds to support the land agitation in [Ireland](#). This was the genesis of the Ladies' Land League.

Anna left America and moved back to Ireland. On January 26th, 1881, as the men realised that imprisonment was imminent, they agreed to what they termed a "most dangerous experiment", allowing [Michael Davitt](#) to invite her to set up a Ladies' Land League in Ireland.

It was intended the women would do no more than organise a holding operation, dispensing charity to evicted tenants until the men were released. The assumption was that the women would be incapable of doing more. However, Anna and the team of women she gathered around her began to work to fulfil aims which the men had already decided were unachievable.

Under her leadership it became a militant force, determined to challenge landlord rule. She succeeded in developing an organisation where none had existed before; encouraging women who had never taken part in any political movement to participate in a crusade requiring courage, dedication and an ability to face physical danger.

[Anna Parnell](#) trained rural women to come out of their homes and play an active role in withholding rent, boycotting and resisting eviction. They were now in the position of being able to use their domestic role for definite political ends as they were urged to pay for groceries with cash so that their men folk would not use the money to pay the rent to the landlord.

Not long after taking up her position as secretary she left [Wicklow](#) to travel to Mayo, holding her first public meeting in [Claremorris](#) on February 13th. In March, she was in [Tipperary](#), [Thurles](#), Cork and Meath. In May she went west, and in June travelled to Clare and [Limerick](#). By July she was in Sligo, [Leitrim](#) and King's County (Offaly) before, in August, returning to Cork.

From her earliest speeches she made it plain that she expected men to respect the women's organisation. This was crucial both in ensuring that women heard what she was saying and in building their confidence as political actors. Newspapers reported that men were urged to move back as women previously had "only been able to stand at the outskirts of your meetings, at a respectful distance and pick up the crumbs from your table".

Parnell urged women to work independently of the men to whom they had been accustomed to "trust and to look for help". She exhorted them: "learn to depend on yourselves and to do things for yourselves and to organise yourselves". The traditional

gendered assumptions of passive female and active male were challenged. Parnell expected her members to attend evictions and to seek out shelter for families.

In one week the central committee reported on 30 evictions, 19 threatened evictions, 21 imprisonments and prosecutions. Each case was detailed, giving the names of those evicted, the amount of money owed, the valuation of the holding, the length of time the family had leased the farm, and whether they had any additional sources of income. This meticulous attention to detail led them to name their ledger *The Book of Kells*.

While clerical criticism of the women came from both Protestant and Catholic quarters, the harshest condemnation was contained in a pastoral letter issued by Archbishop McCabe of Dublin, who fulminated: “[Women] are asked to forget the modesty of their sex and the high dignity of their womanhood by leaders who seem reckless of consequences.”

McCabe did not support the land campaign, and his intemperate remarks were greatly resented. Clergy in local areas continued to appear on platforms with Ladies’ Land League speakers and Croke, Archbishop of *Cashel*, threw the weight of his office behind the women, challenging the “monstrous imputations” that had been cast upon them.

Unease concerning the situation in Ireland spread as far as the *Vatican*, but was not acted upon once the League was disbanded.

In October 1881 *Charles Stewart Parnell* and the other leaders were arrested. They were spared having to face in person the outcome of their flawed strategy. When in jail they abandoned the expensive and futile “Rent at the Point of a Bayonet” policy and issued a “No-Rent Manifesto”. The women were left alone to manage the consequences.



Once Anna Parnell realised that the preparations for a rent strike had not been made – despite the issuing of the No-Rent Manifesto – because there was no intention of escalating the campaign, the basis for conflict between the two leagues was established. This was The Great Sham.

The payment of rent “at the point of the bayonet” tactic, which had cost them thousands of pounds in paying legal costs, only to have the tenants resume occupancy of their homesteads, had been bad enough, but this had now been “dissolved into nothingness” and “a wholesale collapse of all resistance to rent ensued”.

The women were left only with the “poverty cases” who could not afford to pay any rent. The mass movement of the Land League had been part of a tactical calculation by Charles Stewart to put pressure on the British government to grant home rule to Ireland. He was much less concerned to achieve a radical solution to the land question.

For the women however, the programme of a “permanent resistance until the aim of the League shall be attained was the only logical one”. They continued their work although they were faced with an impossible task of trying to support tenants faced with eviction, attempting to supply evicted tenants with Land League huts, and providing daily meals to an increasing number of prisoners. Their expenses and the demands upon them continued to mount.

They smuggled *United Ireland*, the paper of the League, in their hooped skirts so that, although banned, it could still be distributed. They spoke at mass meetings attended by thousands. Some confronted process servers at evictions and fought to have Land League huts erected to shelter the homeless. Thirteen women went to jail, not as political prisoners but under legislation designed to deal with prostitution.

Apart from Parnell herself, executive members came from the small Catholic middle class: some from farming backgrounds, others from the commercial class. Anna understood why families were reluctant to let young women engage in such work. They needed to be young and strong, due to the “physical strain of the work”; they needed technical knowledge about farming and the law, and qualities of “tact, firmness, common sense...powers of observation and natural aptitude for judging character”. Her problem was that the women had been launched into a turbulent situation without being given any time to recruit and to train the numbers of organisers the situation demanded.

By the time Parnell and Gladstone came to negotiate what became known as the [Kilmainham](#) Treaty, the Ladies’ Land League had 500 branches, some with 100-200 members. There were almost 1,000 men in jail and they were spending £400 a week in food bills for the prisoners. The Liberal government, in May 1882, agreed to release the prisoners and amend the Land Act in return for Parnell using his influence to prevent further agrarian agitation.

Anna Parnell wanted more than a resolution of the land issue. She wanted national self-determination for Ireland and believed that the mobilisation of people achieved by the League could be the basis for a mass movement to that end.

As a disenfranchised woman, the political disabilities suffered by her sex moved her towards advocacy of such a mass movement as the only means by which women, a disenfranchised group, could be involved in politics. She had no belief in the promises of any British government and believed the Land League was unable to force the English to “relax their murderous grip” because it capitulated too soon.

Writing as she did in the early 1900s, she was remarkably prescient in predicting that the failure of the Land League, followed by the failure of the Home Rule movement, would lead, once again to armed rebellion. At a time when few would have believed armed rebellion in any way possible, she foresaw the Easter Rising of 1916.

Her concluding remarks in *The Tale* make it clear that she had no faith in the existing generation of Irishmen obtaining “change for the better”. Personal experience had given her an acute understanding of the gendered nature of power: “If the men of that country have made up their minds it shall not be done, the women cannot bring it about.”

Despite a life of impoverishment, led mainly in [England](#), Anna Parnell did not turn her back on the country of her birth. Neither she, nor the legacy she left, were entirely forgotten. Male politicians remembered the Ladies’ Land League and did all they could to

ensure women remained outside of the political arena. The continuing rift between parliamentarians and politically active women went deep, with repercussions in the years of suffrage militancy.

For advanced nationalists and feminists, the Ladies' Land League offered a very different legacy. There was a living link in the person of [Jennie Wyse Power](#), who had been a member of the Ladies' Land League as a young woman, attending evictions in Carlow and acting as supplier of books to the Kilmainham prisoners. Wyse-Power described Parnell as "the pioneer of the organised advanced women of Ireland".

In 1900, when [Maud Gonne](#) found women who, like herself, "resented being excluded, as women, from National Organisations", Inghinidhe na hEireann came into being. Gonne was president, Wyse-Power one of its vice-presidents. Anna Parnell, who had remained in contact with Wyse-Power, had sent a donation of £1 to the Patriotic Children's Treat Committee, the forerunner of the Inghinidhe, an indication of her continued attention to Irish affairs.

Parnell also telegraphed the Inghinidhe her congratulations after their involvement in a protest against King Edward's visit to Dublin in 1903. She had urged a protest of Queen Victoria's visit to Ireland in 1900, which drew praise from the Freeman's Journal as "the clarion voice of Anna Parnell, long silent, rang out in the bold fearless tone of old, calling the people to their duty".

In February 1908 Anna Parnell campaigned in the North Leitrim by-election. CJ Dolan, an Irish Party MP, had resigned his seat to stand for Sinn Féin. It was the first election to be contested by that party and she had returned to Ireland to give them her support. On one occasion she, Dolan, [George Gavan Duffy](#) and a newspaper representative were met by a threatening crowd on the outskirts of Drumkeerin. Police accompanied them for protection. Eggs, mud and a variety of other missiles were hurled at them:

"[Miss Parnell](#) being apparently nothing daunted...mounted a box outside a shop door and commenced to address the people. The box was pulled from under her feet, and just about the same moment she was subjected to the further indignity of having the contents of a jug of water thrown over her. This rough usage made little or no impression on the spirited lady, who appeared ready at all costs to carry out her purposes."

It was at this period that feminists from Inghinidhe na hEireann and the Irish Women's Franchise League had the opportunity to hear from Anna Parnell herself the history of the Ladies' Land League. [Helena Molony](#), editor of *Bean na Eireann*, hearing that Parnell was staying in Bray, wrote to ask her to address a group on this subject:

"We were all terribly excited, and we had a very large audience, as the name of Parnell still had some magic although it had been in the shadow for nearly twenty years. She was a frail elderly figure of a woman. She had an intense quietness – an impassive steeliness about her that was almost repellent, but on the other hand queerly attractive. She spoke

for three hours, but no one grew impatient, her story and method of telling it were so fascinating.”

In 1909 Hanna Sheehy Skeffington gave an address to the [United Irish League](#) on the history of women and the national movement which strongly echoed the words of Anna Parnell:

“The part played in the constitutional fight by the women of the early Land League is not so well-known to the men and women of the present generation...partly because of the unheroic end of the early Land League visions in the ignoble Kilmainham Treaty, which proved the death-blow both to the Ladies’ Land League and to the forward fighting policy as advocated by Davitt, in contradistinction to the more cautious opportunism of Parnell...it will be a matter of wonderment to a future historian of Ireland to note the silence imposed on Irishwomen from the early eighties down to the dawn of the twentieth century.”

In October 1915, a few months before the Rising, [Constance Markievicz](#), in a speech to the Irish Women’s Franchise League, analysed the part that had been played by women in the national cause:

“The Ladies’ Land League, founded by Anna Parnell, promised better things. When the men leaders were all imprisoned it ran the movement and started to do the militant things that the men only threatened and talked of, but when the men came out, they proceeded to discard the women – as usual – and disbanded the Ladies’ Land League. That was the last of women in nationalist movements, down to our time.”

It was in that speech that she included her famous exhortation for women to “dress suitably in short skirts and strong boots, leave your jewels and gold wands in the bank and buy a revolver”. She added: “don’t trust to your ‘feminine charm’ and your capacity for getting on the soft side of men, but take up your responsibilities and be prepared to go your own way depending for safety on your own courage, your own truth and your own common sense.”

In Markievicz’s urging of women to take up their responsibilities and go their own way, we hear once again the voice of Anna Parnell, a woman who not only inspired a generation of women in the 19th century, but who also influenced women activists in the first decades of the 20th century. Anna Parnell was a new woman – a radical, a feminist, and the first modern, militant Irish woman activist.

The Tale of a Great Sham is published by UCD Press. Available on the ucdpress.ie website and all good bookshops