



SEVEN

THE IRISH NATIONAL LEAGUE AND MOONLIGHTERS

AGRARIAN VIOLENCE DURING THE HOME RULE PERIOD, 1885-6

One of the main aims of Parnell and the National League was the isolation of radical and Fenian elements within the leadership of nationalism at a local and national level. As the 1885 general election approached this had, to a large degree, been achieved throughout the country and particularly in Kerry, as was demonstrated in the county convention in late 1885. Notwithstanding the attempts of the local and national leadership to restrict the movement along a constitutional path, agrarian outrage increased in tandem with the emergence of the National League. In Kerry, the number of outrages rose from 71 committed in the last six months of 1884 to 127 for the corresponding period in 1885.¹ Kerry was the most violent part of the country throughout this period. This is demonstrated in the final quarter returns of agrarian outrages. For the final three months of 1885, out a total of 279 outrages committed countrywide, 63 were carried out in Kerry. This was by far the highest of any county. Other districts which had high agrarian outrage rates included other Munster counties including Clare (30), Cork East and West Ridings (36) and Tipperary North and South Ridings (38) along with the Connaught Galway East and West Ridings (20). The number of agrarian outrages did not reach above double figures for the four-month period in any other county. Agrarian violence was mostly a southern phenomenon in the period with limited outrages recorded in Leinster, Ulster and most Connaught counties.² In Munster, Kerry was the most violent county.

The RIC recorded 339 outrages in an 11-month period between August 1885 and June 1886. An analysis of their location demonstrates that outrage prevailed in districts where the National League was most active. As demonstrated in table 7.1, 283 outrages were committed in the RIC districts of Castleisland, Killarney, Listowel and Tralee. This area corresponded directly to regions of high National League activity (in 1885, 305 out of a total of 358 branch meetings of the league in the county were held in these areas).³



Table 7.1 Number of outrages committed in RIC districts in County Kerry, August 1885–June 1886

RIC district	Castlesland	Killarney	Listowel	Tralee	Rest	Total
Total	76	73	73	63	55	339

Note: Rest comprised the RIC districts of Dingle, Kenmare and Killorglin. *Source:* NAI, CSO RP 1887 box 3310.

Much of the motivation for these outrages was analogous to the objectives of local branches of the National League, which is illustrated in table 7.2 in a breakdown of the issues at stake behind the outrages. Of all 339 outrages, 105 were directly related to landlords, evicted land, rent strikes and enforcement of boycotts. These matters were also those that the local branches of the National League attempted to control, demonstrating a widespread use of violence and intimidation to enforce the ‘law of the league’. Thirty-nine outrages were committed relating to disputes within agrarian society, many of which came before the courts of the National League.

Although many of these outrages appeared to correspond with the aims of the National League the entangled nature of many land disputes ensured that the motives for much violence lay in complicated private disputes. The complex nature of such disputes was evident in an apparent Moonlight raid on two tenants in the Kilcummin district near Killarney in late 1885. At night, four armed and disguised men forced a tenant named Denis O’Sullivan out of his bed. The gang demanded to see his rent book, and he was forced on to his knees to swear an oath to give up possession of a neighbouring farm from which the tenant had been evicted four years previously. Although the evicted tenant had emigrated to America the local branch of the league was trying to persuade O’Sullivan to give up the land. The gang also fired a shot into the roof and asked for money for gunpowder. On the same night a neighbouring farmer named O’Callaghan was also attacked and shots were fired into his house. It was believed the motive for this outrage was that O’Callaghan and his sons had refused to join the National League.⁴ These attacks appeared to have been committed to enforce the power of the league in the region. However, O’Sullivan identified two farm servants named Leary and Coakley as his attackers. These two servants were employed by two neighbouring farmers named Fleming and Courane who had grazed the evicted farm before O’Sullivan had taken it. The police believed that these two farmers orchestrated the outrage to intimidate O’Sullivan off it and regain access to the land. They organised the attack on Callaghan while trying to disguise the outrages as part of a wider conspiracy and hide their own motives.⁵ As this case illustrates, outrages attributed to the National League were often the actions



of aggrieved individuals. As demonstrated by A.C. Murray, many such personal disputes lay behind violence during the broader outbreak of Ribbonism in County Westmeath between 1868 and 1871.⁶

Table 7.2 Objectives of 339 outrages committed in County Kerry, August 1885–June 1886

	Castleisland	Killarney	Listowel	Tralee	Rest	Total
Landlord– tenant relations	29	23	26	14	12	104
Against landlords	3	3	7	3	2	18
Holding evicted land	8	3	4	3	5	23
Grazing evicted land	10	4	4	1	0	19
Dealing with ‘obnoxious’ people	5	12	4	3	2	26
Rent strikes	3	1	7	4	3	18
Other disputes	13	9	4	7	6	39
Farmer/ labourer	4	1	0	1	0	6
Disputes between farmers/ family/traders	9	8	4	6	6	33
Non-agrarian	34	41	43	42	37	196
Elections	3	0	0	0	0	3
Against police	4	3	4	1	2	13
Robbery/ levying contributions	12	19	23	16	16	86
Other	0	5	2	8	6	21
Ordinary	15	14	14	17	13	73
Total	76	73	73	63	55	339

Source: Précis of agrarian outrages committed in Kerry, Aug. 1885–June 1886 (NAI, CSO RP 1887 box 3310).

The complex relationship between agrarian violence, the National League and the wider community was illuminated in November 1885 with the murder of a farmer named John O’Connell Curtin. The renewed agrarian agitation in the autumn of 1885 inevitably led to an increase in outrage. In September RIC County Inspector Moriarty reported that large sections of the county were disturbed. He stated that not only were the continuously disaffected regions of Castleisland, Killarney and Killorglin disturbed, but that ‘the spirit of lawlessness has manifested itself in portions of the Tralee district around Ardfert and Abbeydorney and the Dingle district around Castlegregory and Kilgobbin, hitherto the most tranquil in the county’.⁷ The killing and stealing of cattle, demanding of money and arms, and the sending and posting of threatening notices all occurred regularly in various regions in the county. By



November the descent into violence led Moriarty to report to Dublin Castle that 'I do not exaggerate when I say that things generally could not possibly have been worse. . . . Nothing but lawlessness and sympathy with crime prevails [in] the rest of Kerry.'⁸ The number of outrages reported rose from 34 for the month of October to 44 in November. Of these outrages the most violent and significant was the murder of John O'Connell Curtin by a band of Moonlighters at Firies, which was located between Killarney, Castleisland and Tralee. Curtin belonged to the gentleman farmer class and was one of the largest tenant farmers in the county with a farm of over 160 acres. Born in County Limerick in 1820, he was educated at Clongowes Wood Jesuit College. In 1847 he married Agnes De Courcey, the youngest daughter of Maurice De Courcey, another gentleman farmer in the Firies district.⁹ Although never a member of the Land League, he joined the National League and was appointed as treasurer to the Firies branch.¹⁰ Together with the president of the branch, Father O'Connor, Curtin led the local tenants of Lord Kenmare's estate when they sought a reduction in rent from the land landlord in October 1885.¹¹ Despite Lord Kenmare's refusal of any rent reduction and the subsequent outbreak of a general rent strike on the estate, Curtin paid his rent. Strong denunciations of those who paid rent were commonly heard at National League meetings in the weeks leading up to the attack.¹² By breaking the rent strike Curtin had violated the 'law of the league' and could have expected punishment by the branch. Before the branch took any action against Curtin, the Moonlight gang attacked him.

Although Curtin had broken the rent strike, the motive of the gang of Moonlighters appeared to be solely to demand guns and money. Demands for money or arms were the most common motive for outrage during this period. Out of a total of 339 outrages for which details are available for the period between August 1885 and June 1886, 86 involved such demands (only 18 outrages were committed in relation to rent strikes). Curtin had previously been the target of a raid for arms in 1881 when he was forced to give up a gun. These raids appear to have had a degree of legitimacy within communities. When demanding money, Moonlighters frequently sought a 'contribution' rather than enacting a full robbery. Despite the extreme violence to which Moonlighters often resorted, at times they were welcomed in the houses they raided. After a Moonlight raid on a number of farmers' homes in the Duagh near Listowel, it was reported that the Moonlighters were 'extremely jovial' and on entering a house where a 'wedding was taking place they feasted on the good things supplied to them and joined in the festivities'.¹³ Indeed, the practice of groups of men dressing up in disguise and visiting neighbouring farms under the direction of a 'captain' paralleled aspects of indigenous rural customs. When a marriage took place the younger men of the neighbourhood



who did not attend the ceremony dressed up as 'strawboys' and visited the party during the night. One contributor to the Folklore Commission, which collected information in the 1930s, described rural traditions in the Ballyseedy area, a few miles from Firies: as 'at night the [wedding] party is surprised by a large number of straw boys called "sursufs" who were disguised with 'straw helmets' and under the direction of a 'captain' and 'remained for an hour singing and dancing and taking refreshments and then they left'.¹⁴ The intersection of Moonlighting and agrarian customs was demonstrated in 1886 when a police night patrol intersected a group who they believed were a gang of Moonlighters. After a fracas the offenders claimed they were not on a Moonlight raid but were attending a wedding party. A number of young men were arrested and appeared at the subsequent petty sessions where the bench agreed with the suspects and acquitted them. However, the arrest of George Twiss, a known Moonlighter, on this occasion suggested a crossover in the personnel of the Moonlighters and those individuals who took part in such customs.¹⁵ The practice of young men joining Moonlighting gangs paralleled certain accepted roles undertaken by this social group. Moonlighting also had similarities to peasant festive customs such as the 'wren boys' which occurred on St Stephen's Day. In the Munster region groups of up to twenty disguised 'wren boys' visited neighbouring houses seeking money and drinks.¹⁶ Moreover the rise in Moonlighting activity in late autumn and early winter corresponded to the peasant feast-day of Halloween which was 'an occasion of emotional release involving numerous customs and superstitions'.¹⁷ Like the Whiteboys in the pre-Famine period, Moonlighters seemed linked to 'the cycle of peasant life and rural custom'.¹⁸ Moonlighters clearly drew on cultural practices that were common to the rural peasant agrarian society in which they lived.

The motive of the gang of Moonlighters raiding Curtin's house was most probably simply to seek money or arms. When they broke in, Curtin refused to submit and defended himself by fetching his gun and reportedly saying 'well now boys'.¹⁹ A number of shots were fired by both parties after which one of the intruders, a neighbouring farmer's son named Timothy O'Sullivan, lay mortally wounded.²⁰ A melee broke out between the remaining intruders and three of Curtin's children, Lizzie, Norah and Daniel. Two guns were seized from the attackers, one of whom lost his disguise in the struggle. As the Moonlighters fled the house, Curtin followed them and shouted 'be gone with you now boys', at which point one of the attackers turned around and shot Curtin a number of times, mortally wounding him. It was widely believed that a brother of the dead Moonlighter fired the shots.²¹

The murder had significant repercussions in national politics and quickly entered the discourse of the general election campaign. *The Times* of London commented that if the 'desperados' could not be 'restrained in [Timothy]





Harrington's own county which has the advantage of being instructed under his special guidance, in his own [news]paper, what becomes of the claim of the league to be regarded as a peaceable and constitutional body'. The newspaper also claimed that the murder demonstrated the inability of the National League 'to control the purpose of the people and keep the nationalist movement within legal bounds'.²² The central branch of the National League condemned the murder and offered its condolence to the Curtin family.²³ Nationalists, while eager to condemn the murder of Curtin, also criticised the use of it as propaganda. *United Ireland* typified the nationalist reaction:

Captain Moonlight has again come to the rescue of the landlord faction in their sorest need. The conspiracy to represent the country as in a state of veiled massacre had completely collapsed. . . . At this dismal moment the abominable slaughter at Castlefarm in Kerry cropped up in the nick of time to cheer the drooping spirits of the landlord defence union and to give [opponents to home rule] another convenient text for preaching to England that ours is a race of incurable barbarians, and that to hand over the control of the police to such a nation would be to give the sword of justice to the masked monsters who brought death and horror upon O'Connell Curtin's peaceful home.²⁴

While the murder entered the rhetoric of the general election the situation quickly deteriorated in the Firies district. The killing of one of the Moonlighters and the subsequent identification of a number of the attackers by Curtin's children created a groundswell of local antagonism towards the Curtin family. There was considerable sympathy for the dead Moonlighter, O'Sullivan. At a branch meeting of the Firies National League a vote of condolence was offered to O'Sullivan's mother. A collection of £35 was gathered for her in 'a number of hours' and the branch called on neighbouring parishes to follow suit.²⁵ Bitterness over the shooting of O'Sullivan quickly grew and Curtin's funeral was poorly attended. When the local Catholic priest, Father Murphy, attempted to speak highly of Curtin during mass, uproar followed in the church.²⁶ The family became the target of boycotting and intimidation and Curtin's daughter, Lizzie, later said that whenever the family drove on the roads 'we were hooted and booed and called murders and informers and all sorts of things as we drove along'.²⁷ The situation reached fever point when the arrested Moonlighters were convicted at the Cork Winter Assizes, largely on the evidence of Curtin's daughters in late December 1885. The boycotting against the family became extensive and all the servants in their employment left them. In one case a herd who had worked for the family for the previous 32 years said he was too afraid to remain in the family's employment.²⁸ In January 1886, the Curtins were intimidated while attending Sunday mass.





The RIC reported that as the 'young [Curtin] ladies passed up through the chapel a derisive cheer was raised by six or eight shameless girls'. The police report stated that the 'shameless girls' took advantage of their sex 'in misconducting themselves, believing that the police [would not] interfere with them'. The authorities noted that 'though the parish priest was in the chapel while this was going on he never uttered a word in condemnation'.²⁹ After the mass the Curtin family were booed at and rushed by a crowd. Despite the intimidation the region's District Inspector Crane believed that the 'family [were] more determined than ever not to give their provocateurs the satisfaction of hunting them out of the country'.³⁰ The family again attended mass the following Sunday, but this time protected by twenty-five policemen. They were accompanied by Alfred Webb, the Quaker nationalist and member of the organising committee of the National League. During mass Father O'Connor read a letter from the Bishop of Kerry warning the parishioners that further scenes like those of the previous week would lead to the suspension of services in the church. Despite the bishop's warning, the Curtin family were again booed and hissed after mass by the sections of the congregation, leading to stone throwing and police intervention. When the Curtins left the grounds, Alfred Webb attempted to address the crowd. After being introduced by Father O'Connor, the president of the Furies National League, Webb began to say that the Curtin family had every right to defend themselves on the night of the killings at which 'he got hooted and [was] glad enough to get away'.³¹ Webb believed his 'life would not have been worth much but for the police'.³² During Webb's speech a number of women took the Curtins' family pew from inside the church and proceeded to smash it into pieces.³³ After this the bishop carried out his threat and mass at Furies church was suspended.³⁴

The events at Furies and in other parts of Kerry were in these months constantly in the focus of the wider national press and political debate on home rule. The leadership of the league tried to curtail the excesses in the Furies district. When the president of the branch, Father O'Connor, sought to gain funds from the central branch to fund litigation between tenants and landlords, Timothy Harrington refused and said that Curtin's murder 'has shocked the whole civilised world, and must do incalculable injury to the cause of the people in the district'.³⁵ Several months later the same branch applied for grants for evicted tenants in the region. Harrington refused the request stating that the central branch was 'compelled to refuse a grant, owing to the very disturbed and lawless state of Kerry at the present time'. While Harrington explained that he did associate the Furies branch with 'lawless outrages', the central branch 'wish[ed] to save the general organisation from even the suspicion of sending funds to places where outrages of this kind have been occurring'.³⁶ Sections of the movement in Kerry also attempted to distance



the league from the actions in Furies. At the county convention in November resolutions were passed condemning the attack on Curtin.³⁷ In February the newly elected MP for East Kerry, J. D. Sheehan, warned the people of Furies that 'if you wish to cripple the action of the Irish Party it is only by the repetition of those unseemly acts that you can impede the progress they are making'.³⁸ Despite this extensive pressure from both the league's county and national leadership, powerful sections of the community in Furies continued their hostility towards the Curtin family. In 1887 the family was still being extensively boycotted. Curtin's wife Agnes told a reporter that 'I can never live here in peace but they won't let me go. I tried to sell it [the farm] at auction but notices were posted that any purchaser would get the same treatment as old Curtin'.³⁹ The depth of animosity towards the Curtins was clear from comments made by 'widow' Casey, the mother of one of the men arrested and given penal servitude for the offence. She said that, 'if those boys did that thing they merely went for arms; a foolish thing, but it has been done throughout Ireland, and is done today. . . . As long as I am alive and my children, and their children live, we will try to root the Curtins out of the land, now I will do it. Wasn't the young man more the equal to that old codger?'⁴⁰ The Curtin family eventually left Furies in 1888, receiving a price that amounted to half the farm's value.⁴¹

The Curtin murder and the events that followed demonstrated the paradoxes that characterised agrarian violence and its relationship with not just the broader league movement but also with communities. The Moonlight attack may have been in response to Curtin paying his rent, an act that had been condemned by the Furies League the previous week. However, the incident was more probably a regular Moonlight raid for money and weapons. That such raids had a degree of legitimacy in communities was demonstrated by the widespread hostility exhibited towards the Curtins after the death of one of the attackers and the subsequent prosecution of two others. A groundswell of sympathy for the Moonlighters and bitterness towards the Curtins soon drove the family out of Furies. Those who intimidated the Curtins resisted attempts by both the regional national leadership of the league, and by the religious authorities, to stop the hostility towards the family.

After the parliamentary party's success in the general election of December 1885 Parnellite MPs were returned in all four Kerry constituencies as the Parliamentary Party dominated the vast majority of nationalist constituencies. Parnell's subsequent alliance with Gladstone meant that the granting of home rule was a realistic aspiration. To ensure there was sufficient support for home rule, Parnell and other party leaders thought it necessary to contain the ongoing agrarian agitation and violence in rural Ireland. In spite of these efforts, the agitation intensified during January 1886 as landlords attempted to



break the rent strikes which had been under way since the previous September. *United Ireland* commented that 'we regard the state of Ireland from an agrarian point of view to be as serious today as ever it was during the century'.⁴² The situation was deteriorating in Kerry in particular. During the quarter sessions in Killarney alone 230 ejection notices for non-payment of rent were granted.⁴³ Tensions were further exacerbated with a number of evictions. In the continually disturbed Feries region a number of evictions took place in early January. The evictions were accompanied by the customary demonstrations, with large crowds assembling at eviction and large numbers of police enforcing the evictions. During the eviction of Billy Daly of Droumraig, a tenant on the Kenmare estate, 200 police and troops were at hand. As the eviction party approached, the assembled people began blowing horns, 'which were heard in every direction and attracted large crowds of people of both sexes'. Stone throwing followed and the Riot Act was read as the police dispersed the crowd with force.⁴⁴ The January evictions increased agrarian tensions and County Inspector Moriarty commented that they 'tended to a great extent in further inflaming the minds of the people'.⁴⁵ In this atmosphere outrages continued. A gang of 15 to 20 Moonlighters forcibly obtained four guns and one revolver from a number of farmers in the Listowel region. Similarly, armed men entered several farm houses at Crotta, near Tralee, and demanded guns. Cattle stealing continued around Castleisland. The most serious outrage during January occurred in Castlegregory where a 72-year-old process server, who was serving writs for eviction of writs, named Giles Rae, had an ear sliced off by a gang of Moonlighters. The Divisional Commissioner for the south-west, Captain Plunkett, reported that 'in Kerry the districts of Dingle, Killarney, Listowel and Tralee are in a most lawless state'.⁴⁶ In north Kerry a new wave of rent strikes began in January 1886. George Sandes, a notorious land agent who managed a number of properties in the area, refused to meet the tenants' demands to reduce the spring rents.⁴⁷ This was followed by a widespread rent strike in the north Kerry region, which further increased tensions.

The National League's relationship with this violence is difficult to ascertain. In the Killarney region the district inspector firmly believed that the league orchestrated outrages. In January 1886 he reported that 'it is idle to think the National League discourages outrage. It does not except in words. . . . The National League and the perpetrators are all one'.⁴⁸ A month later he was of the same opinion and believed that the influence of the league had 'rendered the detection of crime an utter impossibility'.⁴⁹ After an increase in outrages in the Listowel area the district inspector commented: 'I entirely attribute nearly all the serious outrages recently perpetrated in this district to the evil teachings of the National League'.⁵⁰ Representatives of landlordism



also believed that the league was responsible for outrage. Maurice Leonard, the land agent on the Kenmare estate, wrote to the *Freeman's Journal* claiming that all the members of the Kilmcummin branch were active Moonlighters.⁵¹ Among the violent methods used to enforce the laws of the league was the practice of cattle maiming and killing which became frequent in Castleisland in the latter half of 1885. In the Castleisland district there were 60 evicted farms on which landlords and organisations such as the Land Corporation attempted to stock this boycotted land with cattle to derive some financial gain from the holdings.⁵² A campaign of stealing and cutting up cattle on such evicted land was orchestrated to counter the landlords' actions. Again the Quinlans of Farran were apparently involved in the practice, and when cattle stocked on an evicted farm by the Land Corporation went missing in October 1885 the hides and entrails of the animals were found in a cave on the family's farm.⁵³ The police believed that because the practice did not endanger human life it was 'probably countenanced by the higher branch of the organisation [National League]. It has hitherto been planned and carried out in safety, it has not involved any tax on the people, and it is most injurious to the landlords.'⁵⁴ The police were of the opinion that the motives of such attacks were not just to uphold the agitation but also out of 'the desire to become possessed of the meat'.⁵⁵

The practice nevertheless appeared to have been supported in the Castleisland region to the extent that District Inspector Davis informed his superiors that the 'whole community are in league to have reprisals from any person be he landlord or tenant who interferes with . . . a farm from which a tenant has been evicted'. Davis went on to complain that the police had to protect such farms and declared that for the 'past six months they have acted more in the capacity of herds than policemen and the result is that the men are becoming completely worn out, disgusted with their duty and demoralised'.⁵⁶ This form of outrage also emerged in the Listowel region where in October 1885 six bullocks went missing from a farm. No trace of the cattle could be found and the police believed that 'this class of outrage is becoming prevalent in this parish and is most difficult to prevent, as the ill disposed can watch their opportunity to take the cattle over which a constant watch could not be kept except by a very much larger force of police than is available'.⁵⁷ Significantly, cattle stealing appeared to be another method of enforcing the National League policy of boycotting evicted farms.

In contrast to this increasing agrarian protest at a local level, the political pendulum further swung towards constitutionalism and home rule, and at the end of January 1886 Parnell attempted to curtail all agrarian activity in Ireland. On 21 January 1886 he told the House of Commons that tenants were combining to resist payment of rents but claimed that these movements were



spontaneous and had received neither encouragement nor financial assistance from the National League. He declared that the Irish Party was doing all in its power to stamp out boycotting and curb anti-rent combinations.⁵⁸ Despite the differences within the nationalist movement, Parnell secured support for home rule over agrarianism by assuring the party that he 'had parliament in the hollow of his hand'.⁵⁹ Parnell appeared to have succeeded in sacrificing agrarian concerns for the cause of home rule when the radical parliamentarian John Dillon publicly stated that restraint and silence within the movement was vital. He proclaimed that farmers and labourers would have to make sacrifices for the success of home rule.⁶⁰ Correspondingly, when newly elected Irish MPs arrived back from London after attending the House of Commons and meetings of the Irish Party, they condemned agrarian outrage. Speaking at the Killarney branch of the league, the East Kerry MP, J. D. Sheehan, appealed to the people 'to desist once and for all from those foolish and senseless outrages'. He contended that if they continued they would 'tie our hands and wreck us and cripple and damage the National League which embraces a plank for legislative independence as well as land reform'.⁶¹ The central branch continued to threaten branches that were involved in conflict that could result in extreme actions. When in late January 1886 the Glenbeigh branch of the league in south-west Kerry consulted the central branch over a land dispute, Timothy Harrington warned:

we must take strong measures to put an end to the discussion of extreme subjects of this kind in our local branches. . . . I am directing the presidents not to receive any notices upon discussions of this kind; and if these instructions not be carried out, we shall deem it our duty immediately to dissolve any such branches. Strong measures of this kind are absolutely necessary, if the great cause of the country is to be allowed to succeed.⁶²

Soon after, when the Knocknagoshel branch published a resolution threatening anyone who did not join the movement, Harrington excoriated the branch for publishing such a resolution that would 'do the organisation and the national cause serious injury. . . . We [central branch] are determined to suppress branches that are a danger to the organisation'.⁶³ The central branch also began to stop sending money to local branches to assist evicted tenants. The Scartaglin branch applied several times for grants but received no reply.⁶⁴ The central branch appeared to have, to some extent, curtailed the excesses of local branches. In early March, the Killorglin branch resolved to meet only monthly on the grounds that 'in such an emergency [home rule] silence is recommended to us as good'.⁶⁵ The district inspector for the region commented that although five branches existed in his division they were now far





less active. He believed that the 'executive' of the local branch hardly ever met 'owing to the central branch having directed' the branches to 'meet as seldom as possible' and to refrain from 'topics that might provoke discussion'. He also stated that the central branch instructed that branch if any divisions did 'prevail . . . they were not to meet at all'.⁶⁶

Branches also tried to prevent outrages. The Firies branch resolved to 'fight within the lines of the constitution, felonious landlordism'.⁶⁷ After a Moonlight raid resulted in the robbery of money 'under the guise of nationalism' in Ballyhar, the local branch condemned the action and offered £5 from the funds of the branch to bring the culprits to justice and the police authorities.⁶⁸ The Duagh branch condemned the 'misguided and reckless men who are . . . propping up the enemies of this country, by taking arms, or doing any other act that could be termed an outrage'.⁶⁹ The Castleisland branch, previously renowned for its radicalism, further condemned outrage when it stated that 'the person who committed a crime now meant to ruin this poor and unfortunate country'.⁷⁰ The Ballyferriter branch similarly condemned all outrage and resolved that 'the branches of the league in these districts should exert their whole influence against the commission of these dastardly acts'.⁷¹

Many outrages were still committed despite these attempts. Those who committed Moonlighting ignored the intense political pressure to prevent outrages. Michael Davitt, on behalf of the central branch of the league, spoke in Castleisland town in February 1886 to condemn violence. The police drew attention to his ineffectiveness when reporting: '[Davitt] denounced outrages in very strong terms but there were very few persons in attendance at the meeting – about 500 – and most of the bad boys went away while he was denouncing them. I am afraid at some of the districts they are not under control.'⁷² In Killorglin, the district inspector commented in March 1886 that despite the decrease in league activity the district continued in a lawless state. This was 'owing to the operation of a regular organised gang which it is almost impossible to break up'. He believed that the people were 'afraid of their lives' to give the police the slightest information concerning those who committed agrarian outrages.⁷³ During the same month the district inspector in Listowel contended that a new secret society 'exists for the perpetration of crime and that it has been extensively joined by farmers' sons and on pain of death to carry out the orders of the heads of the society'.⁷⁴

By the start of 1886 it was clear that the national leadership and sections of the local leadership of the National League had little control over the actions of radical and violent agrarian elements. This reality was recognised by the Divisional Magistrate for counties Cork and Kerry, Captain Plunkett, when he reported that attempts by the National League 'to put a stop to outrage . . . have only partially succeeded'. He observed how 'younger members of the





community are so thoroughly demoralised that they are beyond control . . . [and] they know that the denunciation of crime lately is only because it appears to suit the purposes of the National League at present having regard to the all important measures soon to be discussed in Parliament'.⁷⁵

In league branches power struggles between radical and moderate influences were common. The police believed that 'some of the worst characters in the Castleisland branch of the National League have left in consequence of Archdeacon Irwin curbing them so much' and that they would in turn form their own league.⁷⁶ During the controversial incidents in Firies it was evident that elements, out of the control of the leadership of the local league were behind much of the intimidation of the Curtin family. The parish priest and president of the National League Branch, Father O'Connor, was the most prominent leaguer in the area during the upheaval. However, the treatment received by the Curtin family was beyond his control. During the mass, when he read the bishop's letter threatening closure of the church, he told the congregation that while he was 'on their side and was never on the side of landlords, agents or bailiffs . . . [and] that he considered that the Curtins had done the wrong [but] that the people of Firies should bear with the wrong'. He pleaded with the people to show Christian faith towards the Curtin family but his attempts at restraint failed.⁷⁷ O'Connor later revealed he could not pass a resolution condemning Moonlighters at league meetings out of fear of being attacked.⁷⁸

Edward Harrington thought that in areas where agrarian outrage was common the National League was not at its strongest. He believed that 'in some of those districts there must have been some other feeling – possibly some Moonlight or secret society – and the league used not to get a grip in those districts at all'.⁷⁹ In the Dingle branch there were tensions between moderate and radical influences which led to its suppression by the central branch. In 1886 the secretary of the branch, M. W. Murphy, a publican from Dingle town, complained to Timothy Harrington that members of the league were enforcing boycotting for 'any or every cause' and that the branch was 'ruled by force rather than reason'.⁸⁰ Murphy represented moderate nationalists who were loyal to Parnellism and informed Harrington that he only joined the movement for 'the national cause'. On the advice of Murphy, Harrington dissolved the Dingle branch of the National League in September 1886.⁸¹ An editorial in the *Kerry Sentinel* described what it believed was the relationship between agrarian radicals and local branches of the National League. It stated that 'fanatics are more formidable than ordinary disciples. . . it is certain three of these men in a branch make their influence more felt than the remaining three hundred'.⁸² Throughout the Land League period, local agrarian violence seemed to have been organised by one or two of the leading members of each



branch with little other involvement from the rest of the local leadership.⁸³ During the Land League phase this was accepted by the leadership of the movement and arguably seen as an integral element of the agitation. By 1885 agrarian violence had again emerged in parallel with the National League, indicating that at the very least it was used to some extent to enforce the 'law of the league'. Men long associated with radical agrarianism remained in leading positions in many branches; they remained a powerful and influential presence at a local level. The recent developments in parliamentary politics had placed these forces in direct confrontation with Parnellism and local moderate elements. The Curtin murder and the subsequent occurrences in the Firies district, together with the general continuance of outrages, demonstrated that radical agrarianism continued during the high point of the politics of home rule. Many local branches of the league were now divided between moderate constitutionalists and radical agrarians who were prepared to use violence.

A range of explanations have been offered for agrarian violence in nineteenth century Ireland. Much of this violence, particularly the Whiteboy movement that was prominent in the south of Ireland before the Famine, was the mode of protest of the smaller tenants and those on the fringes of rural society. According to Michael Beames, in a major study of this movement, the Whiteboys were solely the social expression of this class, with no direction and allegiance from dissident gentry or larger tenant farmers.⁸⁴ The emergence of the land war appeared to politicise such violent agrarian agitators under the middle-class leadership of the Land League. 'Radical' and 'moderate' influences vied for power within local branches of the National League. These internal divisions were not necessarily class based and many figures that were involved in radical agrarian activity were drawn from segments of the middle-class leadership of the league. Men such as Michael Power, a pig merchant and Fenian in Tralee, were pivotal to the leadership of their respective branches as well as being suspected of involvement in committing outrages. It was apparent that sections of the middle class local league leadership were committed to radical agrarianism, including the orchestration of violence to uphold the objectives of the National League. This was demonstrated in the large number of outrages committed to regulate landlord-tenant relations in accordance with the 'law of the league'. Agrarian violence in mid-1880s Kerry was evidently an important method of protecting the rights of middle-sized farmers whose interests were largely reflected in the anti-landlord rent agitations of the National League. While not all agrarian violence could be described in such terms, violence such as occurred in Castleisland to prevent the graving of evicted land was extremely close to official National League policy.



Although agrarian violence often conformed to the objectives of middle and larger sized tenants, those who actually committed the outrages and formed the rank and file of the Moonlighters were invariably drawn from the lower classes of the agrarian order. A number of cases where Moonlighters were apprehended by the police illuminate the background of these agitators. In January 1886, a gang of Moonlighters attacked the house of a farmer named Patrick Doyle at Brida bear Killorglin. Doyle, along with his sons, fought the attackers, and was later able to identify them; the police arrested nine men believed to have made up the raiding party. All were under the age of 30, with two of the nine under 25 years. Occupationally, the gang was made up of five farmers' sons, two servant boys, a labourer and a cabinet-maker. Six of the group, four of whom were brothers, had worked together the previous week shearing sheep on a farm, and had stayed in a two-bed dwelling. The police optimistically believed that they had arrested the 'most celebrated gang of desperadoes in Kerry.'⁸⁵ In another incident in February 1886, the police arrested 19 individuals in the district of Cordal on suspicion of Moonlighting. Cordal, which neighboured Castleisland, witnessed a high level of violent agrarian activity during the period. Like the Brida Moonlighters they were relatively young and all but three were under the age of 30 while four were in their teens. Their occupations also mirrored those of the Brida gang of nine farmers' sons with seven labourers and three artisans (a tailor, a mason and a carpenter).⁸⁶ Rural tradesmen were arrested on a number of other occasions for Moonlighting. In April 1886, two shoemakers were arrested when they were recognised as part of a gang which had raided a farmer's house at Gortatlea between Tralee and Castleisland.⁸⁷ Another Moonlighter, named Patrick Moynihan, brought before the Spring Assizes in Tralee for attacking the house of a gamekeeper at Inch on the eastern side of Dingle, gave his occupation as a weaver.⁸⁸

For the class the moonlighters came from – the farmers' sons, labourers and tradesmen – life chances were limited in the 1880s. Sharp demographic changes in 1870s Kerry limited marriage opportunities.⁸⁹ The system of late marriages often left those farmers' sons who were actually going to inherit dissatisfied with a system which required that they often remained 'boys', subservient to their fathers until they finally married.⁹⁰ Denied the opportunity to marry, this group also had little access to land. The increasing unwillingness of farmers to subdivide holdings left non-inheriting sons landless. In November 1886 Canon Griffin described to the Cowper Commission the predicament of those who took part in Moonlighting:

I do not know what is to be done with the children of the farming classes that are growing up, because the lands cannot be sub-divided, and then they are



disconnected when they are not marrying as they used. . . . The eldest is not as dissatisfied as the others, because he thinks he is to get the land by and by, but there are three or four others, the younger members of the family, who are by no means satisfied, and one thing with another they do not see why they should work when there is no final benefit in prospect for them.

He considered that such young men along with 'those who have no stake in the country' such as 'small artisans', 'shoemakers' and 'servant boys' were the principal participants in boycotting and Moonlight raids.⁹¹ Other witnesses to the commission gave similar evidence. A large tenant farmer named James Sullivan, who held a hundred acres with a government valuation of £82, claimed that the 'respectable' classes would like a return to 'law and order' and believed that those who committed agrarian outrages were 'the young fellas . . . no sensible man takes any part in it'.⁹² Another large farmer with 80 acres in the Castleisland district (his name was not published) contended that Moonlighters were 'reckless careless fellows, who have nothing to lose, who maraud from place to place. They have nothing else to do'.⁹³ The *Kerry Sentinel* echoed similar sentiments in February 1886 when it attempted to explain the ongoing Moonlight activity. It claimed that the majority of Moonlighting outrages were 'committed by unemployed labourers and young sons indicating that they are not wholly due to agrarian causes . . . [they] are only Moonlight robberies and mischievous freaks of unemployed labourers'.⁹⁴ A number of years later Edward Harrington maintained this view when asked at the Special Commission who the Moonlighters were. He replied that he presumed that they were 'working men and poor men, who under the influence of drink, or under any other influence, might be bought into it [a secret society]'.⁹⁵ He was also of the opinion that 'the respectable people of the country-were in great terror of the Moonlighters'.⁹⁶

The middle-aged and middle-class 'respectable' leadership of the National League chastised Moonlighters when the league failed to control agrarian violence during the critical home rule stage. There were several reasons for the inability of the local league leaders to control Moonlighters. The league provided middle to large tenant farmers with an avenue to further their socio-economic status within their local communities. The leading positions in branches were largely confined to the 'respectable' middle classes, a situation that was compounded by the official recognition of the role of the Catholic clergy in the movement. In contrast to these officers of local leagues, Moonlighters were young and landless. Indeed, the demand for arms and money seemed to be perpetrated against the very class of which the local leadership of the league was composed. In April 1886, a Moonlight party comprising 25 to 30 armed and disguised men raided a number of houses in



the townland of Droumcrunnig in north Kerry.⁹⁷ The gang visited 12 households in one night. Of these, six had a government valuation between £20 and £29 while four were valued between £30 and £39. Only two of the tenants raided had a valuation under £20.⁹⁸ Another instance of Moonlighting, in Kerries in the hinterland of Tralee, further illustrated that Moonlighters frequently targeted larger tenants when searching for arms and money. During April 1886 a disguised and armed party of up to 20 Moonlighters stole eight guns from a number of farmers in the district.⁹⁹ Out of five households visited in one night all the tenants raided had holdings valued at above £50, while one, William Barrett, had a tenant farm valued at £149.¹⁰⁰ These were some of the wealthiest tenants in the county. When a number of tenants were raided in the parishes of Kilmeaney and Knockanure in north Kerry it was reported that 'the people whose houses were visited belonged to the respectable farming class. . . . The Moonlighters are said to have been of the lower order.'¹⁰¹ The contrast in social status between those who took part in Moonlighting and those who were subject to raids suggests at some level a degree of tension between the two groups.

The inability of the National League local leadership to restrain the Moonlighters could also have been due to age differences between older tenant farmers and the younger landless agitators. The secretary of the Killarney National League, 'a respectable auctioneer', explained the attitude of many within the local leadership towards agrarian violence: 'When Moonlighting first began it was difficult not to sympathise with some outrages that were excited by injustice . . . but now they are absolutely opposed to any outrage, as they are sure of getting their ends by legal methods.'¹⁰² Indeed, divisions existed between the younger and older members of families. One example was the Quinlan family in Farran, Castleisland. After the PPP Act was introduced in 1881, their father, Maurice, refused the three Quinlan brothers money to escape to America, which led to their imprisonment.¹⁰³ Maurice Quinlan was a 'respectable farmer' with a long history in nationalist politics tracing back to the 1872 home rule by-election when he was a public supporter of Blennerhassett.¹⁰⁴ By 1882 the local RIC commented that 'though Quinlan's sons [are] very bad characters, Maurice Quinlan himself is a very respectable man'. He also gave the police 'information' concerning the murder of Herbert in 1882.¹⁰⁵ Undoubtedly the younger generation of farmers' sons were prone to more radical action than the older landholding generation.

The Moonlighters appeared to have been rooted in local communities and networks based on personal relationships such as families and co-workers. Much of the violence committed in the Castleisland area originated from the younger members of neighbouring families, the Quinlans and Husseys, who were also related. As we have seen, nine young men, six of whom had spent





the previous week labouring together on a farm and living in the same accommodation, committed the Moonlight attack on Patrick Doyle. The similarity between Moonlighting and certain peasant customs suggests that these gangs provided to some extent an opportunity for the interaction of young male members of agrarian society. Like those who joined the IRA in County Cork during the later revolutionary period of 1916–23, ‘the “boys” who “strawed”, played, worked, and grew up together became the “boys” who drilled, marched, and raided together’.¹⁰⁶

Despite the differences between Moonlighters and the leadership of the league, and the fact that this leadership derided those who took part in secret society activity as being social idlers, Moonlighters appeared to have wielded much power and influence within their local communities. The events in Furies demonstrated that the mass of the people sympathised with the dead Moonlighter and the men who were subsequently prosecuted for the killing of Curtin. This popular support for Moonlighters was apparent on a number of other occasions. When the crown solicitor, Murphy, went to a magisterial inquiry in Killorglin town after the arrest of a number of Moonlighters he intended to ‘remain there until the inquiry closed but having been twice “interviewed” and observing that a concourse of people remained about the court house, displaying their sympathy with the defendants when the opportunity occurred’, he returned to Tralee.¹⁰⁷ Considine, the resident magistrate for large parts of north Kerry, believed that there was ‘a very widespread sympathy of an undefined character’ for Moonlighters among the people. He contended that ‘they have it in their mind that Moonlighting helps them to withstand the landlord’.¹⁰⁸

Although Moonlighters and the mainstream local leadership of the National League were disconnected, known radicals remained in the league. During the Land League period, elements of this radicalism seemed to have emanated from a network of Fenians working inside the movement. By 1885, whatever organisation of Fenians existed in provincial Ireland appeared to have been completely superseded by the National League. In Kerry this was best illustrated when Fenian elements of the Tralee League broke from the central authority of the movement in 1885. Their attempts to gain support from other regions utterly failed, although known Fenians were at the time active in other local leagues and the Tralee branch soon fell into line with the central branch of the National League. The National League had superseded Fenians to the extent that during September 1885 a police spy in north Kerry expressed astonishment that the most extreme members of the IRB in the area had fallen into line with Parnell’s policy and joined the league.¹⁰⁹ Although, as Owen Magee has demonstrated, leading IRB figures such as John O’Leary had attempted to prevent the organisation’s members from participating in





agrarian outrages since the winter of 1880–1, there is some evidence of Fenian complicity in a number of outrages by 1885.¹¹⁰ A rifle seized from Casey, one of the Moonlighters who had attacked Doyle at Brida, was believed to have been part of shipment of guns sent to Kerry from London by Fenians a number of years previously.¹¹¹ During the land war period the IRB had purchased and imported 4,018 firearms. The loyalty of many members of the movement was dependent on their continuing to receive arms in return for their subscriptions.¹¹²

Some anecdotal evidence suggests that some Moonlighters considered themselves Fenian in outlook by 1885 and 1886. When a jury at the Kerry Spring Assizes acquitted Patrick Moynihan of outrage offences in March 1886, despite compelling evidence against him, he shouted out the Fenian catch cry 'God Save Ireland' as he left the dock.¹¹³ On another occasion a group of Moonlighters informed a farmer from whom they were demanding a gun that they believed that 'they were doing [their country's cause] immense good'.¹¹⁴ During this period, this feature of agrarianism was inspired by Fenianism although it was characterised by little coherent objectives or leadership beyond the local. Considine was of the opinion that the practice of robbing arms was partly based on a 'vague idea that at some future time there will be occasion to use these arms for their national aspirations'.¹¹⁵ However, Fenianism remained popular with certain social groups despite the apparent success of the National League and Parnellism. In November 1885, a monument to the Manchester Martyrs was unveiled in Tralee. A large procession of 8,000 marched to Rath graveyard in a procession 'as the bands played the dead march in Saul'. Michael Davitt gave a speech that was loaded with republican rhetoric. He said that 'we are assembled to honour three men of the people who proudly died and offered up their lives as sacrifices on the altar of Irish liberty'. He further evoked republican sentiment when he said that it was the people's 'holy duty to emulate them and prove if necessary that death alone will be welcome to you in the cause of Irish liberty'.¹¹⁶ No reference was made to the National League movement, or to the 1885 general election, which was to be held the following week. The Fenian members of the Tralee League were present although the clergy and leading leaguer in the county, Edward Harrington, did not attend. The meeting demonstrated that even at the height of Parnellism, Fenianism remained popular at a local level, especially amongst tradesmen. As Matthew Kelly has recently posited, the 'Fenian Ideal' of separatism transcended the small and limited organisation of the IRB and attracted a large degree of sympathy in Ireland.¹¹⁷

