

The Big House in the North of Ireland: land, power and social elites, 1878-1960

Olwen Purdue

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Singing of the beleaguered stately homes of England, Noel Coward observed:

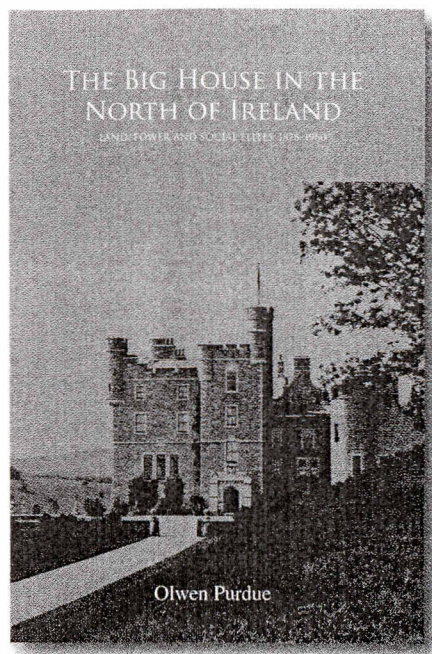
Though the fact that they have to be rebuilt
And frequently mortgaged to the hilt
Is inclined to take the gilt
Off the gingerbread,
And certainly damps the fun
Of the eldest son'.

Coward's lyrics, typically pithy and prescient, succinctly captured the unenviable fiscal pressures besetting the British upper classes.

Property maintenance, punitive taxation, impecunious forebears and the expense of keeping up one's place in society were all factors working against long-term economic viability. Indeed, the disposal of 'Gainsboroughs and Lawrences/Some sporting prints of Aunt Florence's' was, by the inter-war years, an all too common occurrence. Aristocratic decline, within a British and Irish framework, has generated much interest in recent years and has been amply covered by historians, with Cannadine and Dooley producing the leading works on their respective jurisdictions. Surprisingly, the downward trajectory of Ulster's landed elite has received little scholarly attention. Happily, Olwen Purdue more than redresses the balance in this well-researched new book.

Purdue observes that Irish landlords 'were bound to the state rather than being in control of it'. The later nineteenth century was an unpropitious time in which to be an Irish landlord, holding as they did a less than esteemed position locally, with increasingly limited powers of patronage and financial resources at their disposal. Legislative challenges emerged with the 1881 Land Act and the Ashbourne Act of 1885, Gladstone's response to the Land League's successful campaign of rural unrest. Given the shared religious and political outlook of many Northern landlords and their tenants, land agitation was initially less pronounced in north-eastern Ulster. Nevertheless, when the prospect of acquiring better terms from one's landlord was thrown into the mix, some Anglican and many more Presbyterian tenants became less obsequious.

While the chapters dealing with property legislation are at times technical, Purdue does not lose sight of the human element, with the relevant sections interspersed with 'case-studies' of the families affected. A notable theme running throughout these vignettes is that of money. While aristocrats are reputed to consider the discussion of cash vulgar, at its core it is the lifeblood of the 'Big House'. For those families burdened with the debt of previous generations and ongoing pecuniary commitments to dowagers, daughters *et al.*, the financial predicament could be overwhelming. Many did not survive, abandoning their homes to either the elements or the state. The contrasts between the Antrim and Annesley families are striking. The former prospered, in part, through shrewd financial planning and the exploitation of their estate's natural resources. The Annesleys, conversely, saw their income shrink through the loss of rural rents and an inheritance tax burden. A series of belt-tightening initiatives merely granted the



residents of Castlewellan Castle a generational reprieve. As Lady Mabel Annesley recounted, 'I lived in a few rooms and ate potatoes for supper-with a silver fork off a large heraldic dinner plate'.

The political role of the Northern upper classes is deftly handled by Purdue. Tempting as it may have been to allow the narrative to become a history of the Ulster Unionist Party, the author instead utilises events to illustrate how the landed interest retained some form of political status and continued relevance. With Irish unionism becoming more Ulster-centric by the beginning of the twentieth century, control appeared to pass from the landed classes to Belfast's mercantile elite. The Londonderry and Abercorn families certainly played a prominent role within the unionist movement before and after partition, but their function, along with other aristocratic figures, tended to be more emblematic than substantive. While the 'symbolic capital' that the upper classes bestowed upon the unionist movement was undisputed, they retained a largely secondary rung within Northern public life, occupying the red benches in the relatively benign Senate at Stormont, playing a role in local government or representing rural Westminster constituencies. And while the social background of three of the latter Northern premiers may have run contrary to this trend, their cabinets were stolidly bourgeois in composition.

Local history enthusiasts will find this book an invaluable resource, rich as it is in regional detail and character. The author skilfully traverses the myriad of land legislation, and her forensic analysis of its provisions is accessible and comprehensive. In assessing the fate of the landed elite in the 26 counties, who may have wondered whether things could deteriorate further and justifiably felt a tad *contra mundum*, Purdue demonstrates how their Northern brethren were dealt a comparatively better hand by a more sympathetic polity, one which they fortuitously had helped to shape. While the Big House declined dramatically, it did not disappear entirely. Indeed, quite a few are still occupied by the original families, although gone are the trappings of power, with many of their number playing but a peripheral role in Northern society, leading an existence that barely registers with the public. *The Big House in the North of Ireland* charts the course of this decline and illuminates a subject that remarkably, until now, has largely been neglected. ■

Mark Coalter is a writer and reviewer based in New York.