

Tale of a Great Sham,  
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# The Tale of a Great Sham: The fury of Anna Parnell at the Land League's 'great sham'

It is difficult, at this remove, to understand how it took nearly 80 years for this book to be published. The original manuscript by Anna Parnell lay in the National Library for many years. Dana Hearne, who has lectured at Concordia University in Montreal, published the original manuscript with extensive annotations in 1986. She describes in her superb, updated introduction the "exhilarating experience" at finding in the Manuscripts Room what had been labelled an "unpublishable" narrative.

The Land War is one of the most important struggles of modern Irish history and cannot be fully understood without the part played by women and, especially, by Anna Parnell and her sister Fanny.

Fanny, Anna and Charles Stewart, their brother, were part of the Parnell family in Co Wicklow. Anna subsequently lived in Dublin, Paris and London before going to New York in the late 1870s. The Parnell sisters founded the American Ladies' Land League in 1879 and it spread to 25 branches with some 5,000 members raising awareness and money for Irish tenants. Anna returned to Ireland in 1880 and by January of the following year it became evident to the (male) leaders of the Land League that they were going to be imprisoned.

At that time, her brother Charles, the president of the Land League, was persuaded to ask her to "take charge of" the Dublin office of the newly formed Ladies' Land League and, presumably, to continue the campaign while the men were in prison.



A woman of action: Anna Parnell

Over the following 18 months, Anna and Fanny threw themselves into the campaign and were far more radical than their brother, urging women to come out of their cottages and resist and fight eviction, and to withhold rent and use their rent money to buy food for their families.

In October 1881, the male leaders were arrested and issued a 'No Rent Manifesto' with stirring language. However, Anna learned to her dismay that not only had there had been no preparation for a rent strike, but also that the leaders of the Land League had no intention of calling for one. This was the "great sham". Worse yet, one of the conditions demanded by the British government in May 1882 for the release of the prisoners from Kilmainham Gaol was a pledge to ensure that agrarian agitation stopped.

As well as debts and legal matters that they had to continue to deal with, the sisters realised that they were being reduced to being mere dispensers of charity. Two months later in July, Fanny died at 33 from heart failure, leaving Anna devastated. The Ladies' Land League was disbanded. Anna writes with a clarity and directness that simply jumps out at the reader, calling the Land Law Act of 1881 a "ridiculous mouse".

In one passage, she wrote: "When [Daniel] O'Connell saw a famine approaching, he ran to the English government for help, something like a sheep appealing to a wolf to protect her lambs. The Young Irelanders wrote

poetry. The Land League went neither to the English government nor to the muses, but set about trying to stop the famine themselves."

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She went on to say that the Land League became the de facto Irish government, but then lamented, "had they only continued as they began, perhaps now there might be" an Irish government in Ireland. Hearne makes it clear in an endnote that Anna had qualified this by admitting that O'Connell was too old and feeble in 1847 to be effective.

Anna was a woman of action who takes no prisoners in her narrative, which is, frankly, probably the most anti-English, or anti-English ruling class, book that this reviewer has ever read. However, she perhaps reserves even greater scorn for the Irish leaders of the Land League who were, of course, all male, including her own brother, whose name she never utters. She is withering in her denunciation of the male leaders who were unable to treat women as equals.

Hearne dissects whether Anna's all-but completely negative view of the Land League is warranted and considers relevant historiography.

Margaret Ward, who writes a penetrating historical overview, has been at the forefront of historical studies for nearly 40 years. She tellingly relates that Anna, being lectured that the woman's place was in the home, replied publicly in this vein: "If the Tory Party would apply its powers to keep the women of Ireland in their homes, then the Ladies' Land League might then fairly be dissolved. But at present [English newspapers] teach that the roadside is the proper place for the Irish woman".

Anna, who witnessed terrible poverty and injustice first-hand, wanted more than simply a "solution" to the land question. She was a radical democrat who saw equity and national self-determination as indispensable for Ireland's future. She was remarkably prescient in predicting armed rebellion in Ireland when she wrote in 1907: "Yet in spite of its poor prospects, armed rebellion seems likely to be the next thing either tried, or played at, here."

In 1911, Anna died by drowning in England, penniless and destitute and living under an assumed name. This book goes a long way to introduce her to a new generation, and the introductory essays by Hearne and Ward, worthy of publication in their own right, are alone worth the price of admission.