

Landlords, radicals and Irish emigrants in Argentina

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In the 1880s an Irish immigrant doctor in Argentina named John Creaghe sought to build a Land League movement in his adopted home. The Irish Land League appealed to him because of its impact in Ireland, but more significant for him was the potential to deploy the same ideas and tactics to challenge the power of large landowners in Argentina, some of whom were Irish themselves. "Let it be known," Creaghe wrote, "that there are no worse landlords in the world than the ignorant Irishmen who in former years were able to buy land and are now millionaires."

The Irish Land War of 1879-1882 aroused a massive and diverse response from Irish emigrants across the world, with a level of diaspora mobilisation only seen again in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising. The Land War occurred at a time when the number of Irish emigrants was reaching its historical peak: in the 1880s more than three million Irish-born people lived overseas, with nearly two million of them in the United States. The population of Ireland itself was just over five million, meaning nearly 40 per cent of the people born on the island were living off of it.

Many emigrants paid close attention to events in Ireland, but the appeal of the Land League and the Ladies' Land League was not simply about reform in rural Ireland. Following the economic downturn of the 1870s, "anti-landlordism" and protests against high rents and insecure housing resonated deeply with emigrant urban workers in multiple locations of the diaspora.

A striking aspect of the Land League was its internationalism, spurred by connections between people in Ireland and emigrants in different locations, as well as an awareness of how the campaign overlapped with wider progressive causes, including liberal reform, socialism, feminism and humanitarianism.

The response was strongest in the United States, from where emigrants sent both material support and ideological influences back to Ireland. New York's Irish World newspaper held a large readership in the US and in Ireland, and generated much financial support for the Land League. It also sent the radical American economist Henry George to Ireland, ostensibly as a reporter but with the main aim of radicalising the agitation and advancing the doctrine of land nationalisation. Scotland and England also witnessed high levels of Land League activity. Irish emigrant Land Leaguers played significant roles in spreading George's ideas in Scotland, and co-operated with land reformers in the Highlands. In England, they shared platforms with trade unionists and socialists.

Argentina, a less familiar corner of the Irish Atlantic world, was geographically more distant and less well-connected to Ireland; nonetheless the Land War provoked ardent responses there. It also raised some uncomfortable questions about supporting anti-landlordism in Ireland at the same time as some wealthy Irish immigrant families engaged in similar practices in Argentina.

John Creaghe claimed that, in Argentina, the Land League "taught us to view many things in a different light", and he championed it as "the advance guard of the strife that will soon agitate all civilised nations". Creaghe read the Irish World and corresponded with Henry George, and he published a Spanish-language version of George's pamphlet *The Irish Land Question*. He envisioned a

radical movement for collective land ownership that would dismantle the vast ranches or estancias expanding across the country. Emigrant letters to the Southern Cross, the Buenos Aires-based Irish Catholic newspaper, agreed, claiming that the same land system that “drove us away from our native hills” was developing in Argentina. Some Irish estancieros, along with their middlemen, had become “extortioners of the poor” on sheep ranches.

This radical critique of large Argentine landlords, and the Irish families among them, received a sharp rebuke from the editors of the Southern Cross. Patrick Dillon, the newspaper’s Mayo-born founder and the chaplain to the Catholic Irish community in Buenos Aires, promoted free-market capitalism and held an ambiguous attitude towards the Irish Land War. Early attempts to foment the Land League in Argentina had come from an emigrant branch in New York, who wrote to Dillon encouraging him to build a Buenos Aires branch. Yet his response was to bring the letter to the British ambassador, Horace Rumbold, assuring him that he took no notice of it and that, in his opinion, the Irish community was generally uninterested.

Patrick Dillon saw the Irish Land War, first and foremost, as an opportunity to expand the Irish Argentine community through an assisted emigration plan that aimed to settle Irish people on frontier lands in Argentina. In 1880, with the support of president Julio Roca, he travelled to Ireland to promote Argentina as a destination for “honest and industrious emigrants”. Roca considered Irish immigrants to be desirable as northern Europeans. He also believed the plan would benefit the British government by transferring disgruntled Irish tenants and would-be agitators to Argentina. Dillon’s trip, however, turned out to be a failure. He could not convince those he met that Argentina was a preferable destination to the United States.

Dillon’s plan had envisaged new Irish immigrants settling on lands in the Pampas and Patagonia regions from where indigenous communities had recently been violently displaced. At the time of the Irish Land War, a violent conflict over land took place in Argentina. In 1878 Julio Roca, then minister of war and later president, led a gruesome campaign to kill and remove indigenous people from the plains and to grab territory for expanding white settlement. The campaign made vast tracts of land available to speculators and wealthy landowners.

One speculator who made an enormous fortune through acquiring some of these lands was Eduardo Casey, a second-generation Irish immigrant. With the help of Patrick Dillon via the pages of the Southern Cross, Casey sold off parcels of land and encouraged Irish farmers to invest, promising favourable terms. By the early 1880s Casey’s personal landholdings were larger than the land area of Westmeath, the county his parents had emigrated from. The expansion of frontier lands was cheered by Irish Argentine leaders at the same time as the agitation against landlordism in Ireland intensified. During the Land War, Eduardo Casey donated to the relief funds for Irish tenants.

The expansion of landlordism in Argentina led Creaghe to call for Irish-style Land Leagues, employing the tactics of boycotting, rent strikes and political pressure to gain reform legislation. He wrote to Henry George that “Monopoly of land has been carried to such an extreme in this country that the hope is that the very excess of it will bring about the reaction”.

In letters to English- and Spanish-language newspapers he decried the situation for tenant farmers and warned potential immigrants not to believe emigration agents’ gilded descriptions of opportunities. A debate ensued, with the Southern Cross’s editors claiming the land question in Argentina “had not assumed the shape of a great national evil as in Ireland”. Creaghe responded that the “Argentine peon (labourer) is much more degraded” than their Irish counterpart and,

echoing Henry George and Michael Davitt, he advanced nationalisation as the solution to the Argentine land question.

The debate provoked by the Irish Land War revealed tensions within the Irish Argentine community and sheds light on the complexities, and sometimes the contradictions, of emigrants' relationships with Ireland. Emigrants' activism was not just directed at reform in Ireland, but also overlapped with social movements in their adopted homes.

The Land War represented an important phase in the development of Irish nationalism, but a singular focus on nationalism has often obscured how support for the Land League was also based on collective anger regarding universal questions of housing security, sustainable rent, the value of labour and democratic rights. These issues resonated in Ireland, but also in emigrants' new homes.

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