



Petticoat Rebellion

The Anna Parnell Story

Patricia Groves

In the late nineteenth century, before women had the vote, a group of respectable ladies operated outside the law to fight for the rights of the landless poor in Ireland. They were the Ladies' Land League, founded in January 1881 by Miss Anna Stewart Parnell. When the male leaders of the original

Land League were imprisoned by the British, the Ladies League took over their work. Exploiting loopholes in the law, they soon became more successful than the men, establishing over 400 branches in Ireland. But when Anna started questioning the men's political strategies instead of merely distributing alms, she became a threat to more than the British – she became a threat to the Republican movement itself. There was only one man who could silence her: her brother, Charles Stewart Parnell. And he did.

'This is a long overdue biog of an energetic and feisty lady.'

The Sunday Tribune

'It is fitting that she be remembered for the significant contribution she made to the aspiration for, and the development of, a more just and caring community.'

Mary McAleese - President of Ireland. Extract of a message from President McAleese to the Parnell Society on the occasion of its visit to the grave of Anna Parnell, 05 April 2002.

Extract: (Pages 169 - 173)

At the first meeting of the executive of the Ladies' Land League in February, they prepared a letter to issue to their fellow countrywomen. The letter exhorted the Ladies to take swift action to relieve distress, and emphasised the urgency of their work. They also knew that the presence of members of the Ladies' Land League and the local press at evictions was absolutely necessary to avoid the violent confrontations, which were widespread around Ireland. 'You cannot prevent the evictions,' said the statement, 'but you can and must prevent them from becoming massacres.'

The *Irish World* described Anna at her first public meeting in Claremorris, County Mayo on 13 February 1881, as 'burning with patriotic fervour, a tongue of forked lightning, a very Joan of Arc is she'. The subtitle for the article read 'Ireland's Women Aroused and At Work. Anna Parnell in the Field, Sounding the Keynote of the New Movement Against Landlordism: Relief not Charity the Motto.'

One of the philosophies behind having a Ladies' Land League was so that their work would be complementary to the men's. Anna said that 'while the men fight about orange and green, the ladies do their work in peace'. The Ladies' Land League therefore adopted white as their official colour. And at Anna's first public meeting in Claremorris, there was a white banner across the front of the platform, which read in gold letters 'Miss Parnell to the rescue'. She said in her speech, which was reported verbatim in the *Irish World* that their mission was 'to relieve the evicted families, and that is the really difficult thing to do – that will tax all your brains because you will have to provide them with shelter and food as well. In order to carry

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out this object, you will require organisation. Now, the women of Ireland have never been organised before.’

Anna reminded everyone that the male leadership was likely to be arrested like Michael Davitt and be imprisoned for some time ‘so you must learn to depend on yourselves. You will have to keep a sharp eye on the landlords (laughter) and you will have to know, and tell us in Dublin, when the landlords have evicted a family, and you will have to tell us who is going to evict a family ... and you will have to be very energetic about it, so that no one shall be left to want, even for a single day.’

The nascent Ladies’ Land League soon found itself with even bigger problems. Rather than being given clear instructions and guidance in what to do – the tidy list Michael Davitt had described earlier – the Ladies were left to work out what they should do by themselves:

We were supposed to be instructed in our work by the Land League, but their assistance confined itself to showing us the minute book in which they kept an account of their meetings, and allowing us access to their branch book, where the names and addresses of the principal local officials were written and – lastly but not leastly – finding fault with everything we did.

Frustrated by this, Anna asked the male executive for guidance. She almost regretted doing that, because she received mixed messages and confused instructions, with conflicting opinions:

What one allowed ... the other objected to, each one did not always even agree with himself at different times as to the nature of our duties. The upshot of these divided counsels, naturally, was that the only course left us was to do what we thought best ourselves, though it was some time before we left off trying, more or less, to please everybody, when the

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fact was that we could please nobody.

She grew increasingly frustrated with the contradiction between what the Land League said and what they actually did, and she complained that, 'I have described myself as sometimes having felt uneasy about the conduct of the Land League. My uneasiness now deepened into dismay.'

She stated her reservations like a schoolteacher would describe an unruly class of students who were not obeying the rules:

Seeing all these grown-up men, who did not, apparently, know enough to understand that they were all individually responsible for the acts of the executive so long as they remained members of it, or even to understand that they were bound by the public resolutions passed at their own meetings, and who could find no better use for us than to quarrel with us ... was enough to make even the stoutest heart fail.

By this stage, there were bitter and frequent arguments between Anna and the leaders of the Land League about how to run the Ladies' Land League. Anna, totally unafraid to state what she felt to be the truth, would no doubt have told them in no uncertain terms exactly what they were doing wrong.

Her criticisms were not well received and the relationship between the two Leagues began to deteriorate: 'As time went on the hostility manifested towards the Ladies by the authors of their being [the Land League] increased instead of diminishing.'

Anna suggested a reason for this growing hostility, using language she would no doubt have used in their presence too:

I think now that, added to their natural resentment at our having done what they asked us to do, they soon acquired a

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much stronger ground for their annoyance in the discovery that we were taking the Land League seriously.

This was the point at which Anna realised that the two Leagues could not possibly continue to work together. Their views about the work of the Land League were so different, and working conditions were so difficult that Anna suggested that the Ladies' Land League should be closed. There was no one more surprised than Anna by the response of the men to this proposal:

The proposal was received with something like fury. Notwithstanding our unhappy inability to please them ... it still required a great deal of diplomacy on our part to sever our connection with our creators without an open quarrel.

History would later write that it was Charles who wanted to put an end to the Ladies' Land League, but this exchange reveals that in fact it was she who proposed ending it, and at a much earlier stage than had previously been thought. Anna was eventually persuaded not to dissolve the Ladies' Land League, although she came to regret her decision later. She considered it a great 'blunder' to have withdrawn her threat to shut down the Ladies' Land League:

One penalty for those who make an initial blunder of great magnitude in any matter of importance, always is that nothing done by them thereafter ever seems right ... So we stayed where we were, and the long squabble went on.

The turbulent relationship between the Land League and the Ladies' Land League was set to continue, but now the Ladies were in a weaker position than before, as they had backed down from this confrontation. The Land League knew that the Ladies

would continue to comply with their instructions, as all good Victorian women were expected to do.

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About the author

Patricia Groves lives in Maynooth, County Kildare. She was inspired to write this book by a fingerprint in the dust of history – a small plaque high on the wall of the AIB Bank in O’Connell Street, Dublin, at the corner of Parnell Square. Standing in the queue in the bank in 2006, she spotted the small, circular plaque which simply says ‘Ladies Land League (1881–1882)’. Intrigued, she began researching, and this book is the outcome. She works in Trocaire as a Campaigns Officer.

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