

Paper Title: Public Women in Rural Ireland: Exploring the West, c1880-c1918¹. Mary Clancy

Panel: 6.1 Authority, agency, autonomy? Change for rural women in Europe 1850-1914. Panel organiser: Caitríona Clear, History, NUI, Galway. Comment: Nicola Verdon, Reader in History, Sheffield Hallam University.

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Introduction

The period c1880 to c1918 was one of transition and change. In Ireland, as elsewhere, there was growing democratic expansion in electoral franchises and local government institutions. The democratic power to break with the imperial Westminster parliament and achieve a home parliament in Dublin was evident from 1886. There was trade-union organising and socialist influence, especially in towns and by the early 20th century, a distinctively Irish perspective, in line with cultural revivalist discourse and practice. In rural Ireland, the land campaign forcing landlords to reduce rents and, later, to sell property, similarly reconstituted relationships between tenant and landlord, a period, in effect, of social revolution. Equal rights, tenant rights, worker rights and national independence, therefore, were defining influences in undermining notions of aristocracy and imperialism and in determining the shape of a new, democratic politics.

Agrarian

What makes this period of interest, too, is the extent to which women, across all social classes, were visible in public effort. In Ireland, in the defining agrarian campaign of these decades, women participated as tenants – resisting police and military during eviction, supplying funds, organising in Leagues, hosting public meetings in hotels. This type of effort was sometimes dangerous - even publishing donor names in the press revealed political sympathies– and police and military did not discriminate when firing on political crowds. The Ladies’ Land League (1881-’82) is associated mostly with urban middle-class women who travelled to rural areas –to assist evicted tenants or imprisoned organisers - though local rural women also organised branches of the Ladies’ League. When the Leagues were proclaimed by government, this left these middle-class women open to arrest and imprisonment. The agrarian conflict also provided interesting scope for English women who sympathised with the aims of Irish nationalists. Women and men associated with Radical and Home Rule associations travelled to act as witnesses during evictions, high profile court cases and made public speeches.

Women also participated as landowners; mostly these were widows or single women, but also married women. This is an interesting generation to study; upper-class women who lived through Ireland’s transition to national democracy and tenant ownership. In facing down the Land League, as some did, they were open to boycott, assault on property, animals and person, and excoriation in nationalist speeches. The case of Caroline Blake (c1835-1919) of Renvyle, a prominent opponent of

¹ This paper is based on on-going research. The information is drawn, in particular, from: newspapers, poor law and rural district council minute books, family papers, census returns. For earlier versions, see M. Clancy, ‘The “Western Outpost”: Local Government and Women’s Suffrage in county Galway 1898-1918’ in G. Moran et al, (eds.), *Galway: History & Society* (1996). Useful websites: www.landedestates.ie (re sources for landed estates under discussion); www.nationalarchives.ie (re digitised searchable census returns for Ireland, 1901 and 1911).

the League, illustrates something of this. A resident landlord and a widow, Blake was intent on keeping the estate intact for her family and refused to meet the demands of the League to reduce rents. In turn, the League campaigned against her and effectively ruined her, forcing her to turn her house into a hotel – a public statement of loss if not defeat - and later to accept public charity. For Unionist observers, she emerges as heroic and steely, especially after publication of her testimony against the Land League during the Parnell Commission enquiry in the Royal Courts of Justice in 1888. The writers, Somerville and Ross, in their travels through Connemara, convey something of the awe that Blake inspired, meeting her when they stayed at her house- hotel. Tourism, an emerging industry, was ably exploited by Blake though she does not seem to have had funds to holiday in the Riviera or Switzerland, as some landed contemporaries still managed to do.

Relief Industries

As the case of Caroline Blake shows, social class had finite scope to protect against change and a number of associations providing for impoverished landed women were set up. Mostly, however, relief was directed by landed women who set up industries on their estates, religious women who organised industries in convents and visiting philanthropists. By the mid-1880s, the work was organised through the Irish Industries Association established by Lady Aberdeen (1857-1939). Ishbel Aberdeen, who spent two viceregal periods in Ireland during Liberal administrations, exemplified the hybrid nature of late 19th century contexts, though her work in philanthropy and in feminist suffrage politics, as long-time (36 years) president of the International Women's Council. In practice, Aberdeen, though supporting Home Rule, did not secure nationalist confidence, while Unionist women objected to her politics. However, upper-class Tory women operated through the Association to market Irish produce and make annual Exhibitions for St. Patrick's Day in London².

By the 1890s, the state provided funding for local industries, under a provision of the 1891 Land Act³, thus enabling certain stability in the context of working-class short-term employment. Locally, industrial relief work had its own momentum and style; in a shift away from the authority of landed women, it drew in organisers from outside the locality, including English women, local rural girls who supplied labour, local Catholic priests who supplied advice, and likely interpretation in Irish-speaking areas. The established practice of viceregal support, particularly associated with Lady Aberdeen, continued more or less until the first world war. Aberdeen, for instance, visited industries in convents and industrial schools, bought local produce and included girls from Connemara as exhibitors in the 1893 Chicago Exhibition⁴. The viceregal woman best remembered, however, is Rachael Dudley (1867-1920). Lady Dudley, in Ireland during a period of Tory administration, established district nurses in the west, a successful venture that saved money for local rate-payers and provided nursing for the rural poor.

The continuing context, therefore, was one of mixed political and philanthropic strands of effort providing visible employment for rural girls and public roles for organisers in a series of short-lived, though locally important, relief industries. Some were significant and indicative of socially

² For some further detail about Irish girl workers see, M. Clancy 'Occupied and earning: Child, Girl and Women Workers in county Donegal' in C. Breathnach (ed) *Framing the West: Images of Rural Ireland 1891-1920* (2007).

³ Purchase of Land (Ireland) Act, 1891. 54 & 55 Vict. Part 11 to provide for the setting up of the Congested Districts Board for Ireland (1891-1923).

⁴ International Exhibitions were an important feature of 19th century industrial development and Aberdeen established an Irish Village in Chicago (in competition with another philanthropist, Mrs. Hart).

progressive endeavour, such as the industry established in Carraroe in the late 1880s by Miss Southern from Manchester, with the help of a prominent priest organiser, Fr. Flannery, a Manchester relief organisation and C.P. Scott of the *Manchester Guardian*. Also in the late 1880s and similarly reflecting progressive thinking, Sophia Sturge arrived in Letterfrack, the village built by members of the Society of Friends during the mid-century famine relief effort. Sturge, from a wealthy Quaker background, spent seven years in Letterfrack, building up a basket-making industry – finding a site, building a factory, travelling to England and France to find materials, organisers and markets, seeking government funding. This industry trained young men from the area, situating Sturge in an interesting position of authority, with the support of the male manager. These efforts, as numerous others, e.g. Leenane Tweed and Foxford Woollen Mills, involved intricate enough negotiating across social class, gender, religion, age, accents, though the evidence suggests a generally smooth application.

However, for rural workers, emigration and domestic service remained a constant and most left the area; money made from lace-making perhaps helping to fund emigration, as middle-class critics alleged. As industrial workers in a rural area, they stood out even physically, according to the testimony of the dramatist John Millington Synge, who reported the factory working lace-maker as pale and unhealthy-looking. For the workers, there was the cultural change of formal workplace rules. More generally, small factories or houses spread throughout the West into the twentieth century and, as the census of 1901 and 1911 show, the lace-instructress emerged as a new woman entering rural communities, renting rooms and taking up training roles and positions of authority. This latter group of women were Irish women from western counties funded by state agencies – another shift towards popular acquisition of roles previously authorised by elite women.

Elected women

In this final section, the paper considers how local franchises helped to further define public space. By 1896, women in Ireland could contest Poor Law Boards⁵ and Rural District Councils. As the leading suffragist, Anna Haslam, claimed, the 1896 act signified a revolution in Irish women's political history. The local government act, 1898, made local franchises representative, a democratic measure that undermined the status of wealthy landowners and saw nationalists take power at local level. This signified a mixed result for suffragists, the majority of whom in the 19th century were Unionist (i.e. loyal to union with Britain) and, at least in the rural west, though who campaigned for women's local rights were not prominent among the elected. However, the local franchises opened up politics to a pioneering generation of rural women who soon began to win seats.

Local government offers an important perspective, then, for some twenty years before the winning of the parliamentary vote in 1918. As a sphere, it had its own ambiguities; anti-suffragists, for instance, were to argue that women were suited, instead, to local councils, given its general domestic and local remit. Advocates of women's suffrage held that the local would enable women to gain political experience and prove themselves fitted for the parliamentary vote. It was a politically prescribed domain yet it is of interest to consider how local councils offered rural women an

⁵ The Poor Law Act, 1838, provided for in-door relief in workhouses constructed specifically for this purpose and, increasingly as the century progressed, out-door relief. Ireland was divided into poor law unions (130 initially, increasing to 163). There were ten poor-law unions in county Galway (Ballinasloe, Clifden, Galway, Glenamaddy, Gort, Loughrea, Mountbellew, Oughterard, Portumna, Tuam).

opportunity to engage with formal politics in a way that the suffrage campaign did not and how local politics provided a space of transition for women in their progress towards full political equality.

Mostly, over the period, elected women were from families who had existing status in local councils, the church, commerce; some were widows co-opted on the death of a husband. The first woman to successfully contest a seat, Sophia Grattan-Bellew (c1862-1942) was a landed woman – the woman of leisure with a title that suffragists initially expected to contest. Sophia Grattan-Bellew held the position from 1905 until 1920, one of the longest-serving women councillors in Ireland. The Grattan-Bellew family seems to have managed the changes of the period by acceding to tenant demands and adopting a pro-Home Rule stance. She and her husband, Henry, were now sitting as equals with elected tenant councillors. The family, through an 18th century forebear, Henry Grattan, had certain political status, they were involved with local agricultural development and enjoyed the support of the local clergy. Sophia, also from a privileged family, was aged about 43 at the time of her first election in 1905 and the mother of eight children. The family enjoyed the support of an extensive household of domestic servants. Sophia already had expertise as a workhouse visitor and was part of a local upper-class network of philanthropic causes, such as temperance, war-relief (Boer, and later, WW1), local Industries, public health. She, initially at least, supported the women's anti-Home Rule association led by her neighbour, Lady Augusta Clonbrock⁶. During her time as an elected councillor, Sophia attended most meetings, advocating for improved conditions for those living in the workhouse, in line with contemporary arguments about the humanising role of women.

Another rural district, Clifden, also provides interesting information about gender, agency and authority. The building of this new town, in 1812, was to reconfigure this rural area along urban lines; its shops, hotels, churches, convent, industrial school, orphanages and workhouse generating numerous roles for women. Later, between 1908 and 1925, an unusually high number of women entered local politics. Josephine McDonnell, the first woman elected in 1908, as a rural district councillor, had responsibility for roads, wells, labourers cottages, public health and sanitation. She was aged c50, attended regularly over the six years and, in 1910, was appointed vice-chairman, the first woman in the county to attain such office. McDonnell was especially interested in public health, established a branch of the Women's National Health Association⁷ in the area and organised a visit to Letterfrack of a travelling health caravan – a method used to inform the rural public about TB in humans and animals. McDonnell was also involved with the United Irishwomen, the rural reform organisation set up in 1910 - and thriving today as the Irish Country Women's Association - as the women's strand of the co-operative movement. In September, 1911, Clifden women organised an agricultural and industrial show, the railway offering cheap fares from Galway.

Clifden Union also saw another important layer of public woman emerge and these were the women Relieving Officers. Winifred Canavan was, likely, the first woman elected to this position in Ireland and worked in this role for over twenty years. These positions, filled by working-class rather than middle-class women, were crucially powerful in determining the conditions of the poor. One of the first tasks facing Canavan, for instance, was the organising of relief works during the local famine of 1904, including identifying people who were eligible. The role also involved attending to public health regulations in order to prevent fever and officials worked to end, for instance, manure heaps

⁶ Augusta Clonbrock (1839-1928) held authority as wife of the Lord Lieutenant of the county, an imperial administrative function.

⁷ Established by Lady Aberdeen in 1906 during her second term in Ireland.

outside door, animals in houses, dirty water. The work had an authoritarian and prescriptive edge and regulations were not always easy to impose, especially when dealing with councillors who were themselves owners of insanitary dairies and milkshops. These then, were challenging roles; from questions to do with children (boarding-out, mothers not married) to the awarding of contracts and jobs, to the holding of Sworn Enquiries, these public positions were tough. The boards remained important public platforms for passing nationalist resolutions, such as welcoming the Home Rule bill (1912) and condemning those who voted against it. In 1920, the two women who were co-opted to Clifden Rural District Council were prominent nationalists, their election reflecting yet further political change, one, Alice Cashel, later Vice-Chairman of the county council. As local councils started to pledge allegiance to the new Republic, instead of to the existing Local Government Board, this era was at an end.

Conclusion

This was a time of transition and change, involving a democratic re-defining of rural life. Women, as well as men, helped to shape and sometimes to resist these changes. The setting up of representative local structures forced the landed class to yield its authority as purveyors of relief to the poor. The measuring out of local rights to women, offering franchises on lesser district bodies initially before progressing to superior councils – women were barred from contesting county councils until 1911 and 1920 in practice - suggests that the boards in question had limited political weighting. Further, there was no certainty that the proving of women's competence at local level influenced the granting of the parliamentary franchise or strengthened local status; of more value was the passing of resolutions in favour of the franchise by local councils. However, the roles in organising relief work and, in particular, the new titles of Poor Law Guardian and Rural District Councillor, helped to define new public and political spaces for women. Few women, unless they were part of the nationalist revolutionary constituency, were returned in 1920 and by 1925, the system was centralised, district boards were abolished and women virtually disappeared from local politics for generations. The abiding impression of the period is of multiple voices pushing to be heard. Some have left a good imprint in the sources, some are ignored and some will be difficult to find. However, in order to understand how life was lived in rural Ireland at this crucial moment of political change and transition, the inclusion of women's voices, and the conceptualisation of their roles, is important to any such analysis.