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‘A Few Good Canons?’: Canon Ulick Bourke and Clerical Reaction to the Outbreak of the Land War

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On a rain-soaked Sunday on 27 October 1879, a monster meeting was held in Aughamore, county Mayo, nine miles from Claremorris. This was one of a series of Land Meetings, held throughout Ireland, and Mayo in particular, since the late spring of that wet year. The clergy were well represented at the meeting with five on the platform.[1] However, no clergy had been present at any of the earlier meetings and the chair of the Aughamore demonstration, Archdeacon Bartholomew Cavanagh, parish priest of Knock, had denounced the agitation from the altar during the summer and this had provoked a massive protest in response. Tensions between the clergy and lay leaders of the movement were still apparent on the platform at Aughamore and when Canon McDermott, parish priest of Killouve, spoke in defence of ‘good’ landlords and accused shopkeepers of exploiting tenant farmers saying, ‘They have, by accumulating debts upon you, brought you to your present position’, he found himself heckled.[2] When the platform was taken by Michael Davitt he:

> did not mince matters about landlordism. He did not believe any phase of landlordism should be tolerated in Ireland (cheers). He was not there to pronounce a laudation of good landlords who might be giving reductions now, for they were only giving back the money they had robbed the people of (cheers) … When forty or fifty meetings throughout Ireland had issued a demand for a peasant proprietary they were not here in the Barony of Costelloe, to talk about fixity of tenure.[3]

MacDermott interjected, claiming that he was not opposed to peasant proprietorship, but the cost made it unrealistic if the landlords were to be compensated. He also stated that any man who pretended to be more patriotic than the priests was no friend of the country. After being prevailed upon to withdraw any insinuation upon Davitt's character, the priest assured those in attendance that he was not accusing him of any pretence. This seemed satisfactory to Davitt, who avoided aggravating the situation and told the audience that he believed the use of the word 'pretends' was 'simply a misapplication of the term'.[4]

The next speaker was Canon Ulick Bourke, parish priest of Claremorris. Bourke proposed a resolution, which called upon the government to provide funds for public works in order to create employment and drain marginal land. Bourke stated: 'there was no man [that] loved Ireland more than he (cheers) but it was not about the hills that were far off they were speaking – they were speaking of what could be done on the present occasion'.[5] In response to this, a voice from the crowd shouted: 'If we had a few good Canons we would soon blow the landlords away' and this was responded to with laughter and applause.[6] Bourke had the distinction in July of that year of having been the first priest of the Land War to chair, or be involved in organising, a mass meeting, when he convened one in Claremorris. However, then, as at Aughamore, tensions had arisen between the clergy and lay members of the movement and Bourke had his motives and sincerity questioned.

Bourke was many things; a Gaelic language enthusiast, an author, an antiquarian, an educator, a journalist, and a nationalist sympathiser, if not always a nationalist agitator. As a nationalist cleric of some standing we may reasonably expect Bourke to have commanded the respect of those agitating for land reform and indeed to have embraced the cause rather more enthusiastically. Bourke's mother was first cousin to the Archbishop of Tuam, John MacHale, a man who in the nineteenth

century, represented to many the most patriotic of Irish bishops and one of the greatest proponents of the Irish language. Figures ranging from Daniel O'Connell to Michael Davitt had noted the influence of MacHale and the esteem in which he was held. Perhaps it was no coincidence that Bourke would join the priesthood or make a contribution in the field of Gaelic scholarship. Despite the benefits derived from his relative's patronage, this should not detract from his own range of achievements.

Bourke had been a founding member of both predecessors of the Gaelic League, the Society for the Preservation of the Irish language, which was established in 1878 and, more significantly, the Gaelic Union, founded in 1880. According to the rules of the Gaelic Union as published in 1882, 'This society is instituted for the cultivation and preservation of the Irish Language'.[7] It aimed to establish a publication and prize fund to assist in the publication of works in Irish and to reward teachers and students who excelled in the language. In their 1882 publication, they claimed that there had been an increase in the number of students taking Irish exams from nineteen in 1879 to 117 in 1880, the year the prize was inaugurated.[8] Perhaps the most notable achievement of the Gaelic Union was to establish its journal *Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge* (the *Gaelic Journal*), which was to remain in print until 1909 and prove to be an important mouthpiece of the revival. In the 1850s and 1860s Bourke had a series of articles published in *The Nation* under the title 'Self-Instruction in Gaelic'. These were collected and also published under the title *Easy Lessons in Irish*. This collection and his *College Irish Grammar*, which was published in 1856, two years before his ordination, were among the best known of his works. Bourke must also receive some credit for bringing Fr Eugene O'Growney, author of the seminal *Simple Lessons in Irish*, to the attention of the public. He had established a newspaper called the *Tuam News* in 1870 and appointed his nephew John MacPhilpin as editor. Bourke also employed John Glynn as a teacher of mathematics and Irish at St Jarlath's College, where he was president, and from there employed him as editor of the Irish language column of the *Tuam News*. In the 1880s and early 1890s the *Tuam News* was the only weekly newspaper in Ireland to publish news and notes in Irish, and O'Growney became a regular contributor to this column before going on to become more widely published.[9]

Bourke's interest in the Irish language extended beyond its instruction and preservation; he was also interested in the origins of the language and the people to whom it belonged, leading him to publish two books of antiquarianism, *The Aryan Origins of the Gaelic Race* and *Language* and *Pre-Christian Ireland*. Prior to the advent of modern archaeology, antiquarianism had been an attempt to understand the monuments of the past, often using the Bible as a source of information and attempting to explain historical sites with speculation based upon it. Published at a time when antiquarianism was being superseded by more scholarly examinations of history, Bourke's work sought to reconcile a romanticised antiquarian view of the Gaelic past with contemporary historical research. The work of George Petrie had changed the way in which the monuments of Ireland, in particular round towers, were understood. Writings such as Bourke's appealed particularly to the Catholic middle classes who wanted to be seen to be current with scientific research methods but for sentimental or political reasons wished to retain a particular vision of a Gaelic Ireland.[10]

From 1865 to 1878 Bourke had been president of St Jarlath's College, the minor diocesan seminary in Tuam, a position described as one of the three most important in the Catholic Church in Galway.[11] This position in another diocese might not have lent itself to any support for radicalism but in the archdiocese of Tuam, under MacHale's patronage, Bourke was free to indulge many of his passions and cultural nationalism was brought to the fore of the institution. With the inauguration of prizes for results in Irish exams by the Gaelic Union in 1880, the role that the Irish language played in St Jarlath's was visible for all.[12] During Bourke's presidency, the role of drama in the institution was taken to new levels, both in its nationalism and in its use as a publicity tool for the school. The stirringly nationalist material performed in the school included an 1871 production of the play Lord Edward Fitzgerald as well as patriotic songs such as 'God Save Ireland' and John MacHale's translations into Irish of 'The Harp that Once' and 'The Last Rose of Summer'. Members of the press and dignitaries were invited to performances of patriotic plays and songs, and *The Nation* said of the college's 1870 performance that 'We say that the example of St Jarlath's, if it were to be taken as might be would cause incalculable good in Ireland'.[13]

As striking as the themes of the plays and songs performed were the participants in them. Two of the exiled Fenian leader O'Donovan Rossa's nineteen children not only attended St Jarlath's, but had their participation in school plays used as publicity for the plays and the college itself. Indeed, they shared the boards with one John O'Connor Power, a man of whom the *Tuam News* remarked 'Even now may rank as a finished elocutionist, and whose distinct and powerful utterance, joined to the grace and fitness of his gesture, marks him as one who can essay and achieve the highest flights of oratory'.[14] At the time of his attendance at St Jarlath's, O'Connor Power was an active Fenian and a member of the organisation's supreme council. Among students with militant connections was a son of Michael Larkin, one of the Manchester Martyrs, and another member of the Fenian Supreme Council, Mark Ryan. Like O'Connor Power, Ryan had returned to Tuam from Lancashire. Following the failure of the 1867 rising he decided to remain in Tuam to continue his education. He was a favourite of Bourke's due to his interest in the Irish language, and in his memoir he described Bourke as a 'Fenian at Heart' who told him, 'You know I am not against the Fenians'.[15] In *Newspapers and Nationalism*, Marie-Lousie Legg argued that Bourke was 'One of those most influential on the intellectual development of Fenians in the last quarter of the century because he had taught them in their youth'.[16] However, there is no evidence of Bourke being active inside the movement. The police closely monitored Fenian activities in St Jarlath's and opened the post of known Fenians, yet Bourke never seems to have come to their attention.[17] Bourke's support for Fenianism seems more implied than explicit and it was on the field of cultural rather than militant nationalism that he concentrated most of his efforts.

With such seemingly impeccable nationalist credentials, Bourke may have been expected to have had sympathy with the aims of those attempting to secure tenant right when the Land War erupted in 1879. Nationalists of a variety of hues were to take to platforms to demand land reform and while the 'New Departure' never had the official support of the leadership of either the Home Rule Party or the Fenian movement, the reality was that for many of their members and supporters, the land question was every bit as pressing as the national question. While the archdiocese of Tuam may have seemed tolerant of militant nationalism, Cardinal Paul

Cullen had secured Papal condemnation of Fenianism and under his leadership the Catholic Church in Ireland had attempted to prevent its clergy from becoming politically active or expressing advanced nationalist sentiments.

The election of 1874 and the candidacy of John O'Connor Power, who had just left St Jarlath's, was to prove to be divisive and set a precedent for clerical attitudes to the leaders of the Land War. O'Connor Power was something of an innovator, having, in 1873, persuaded the Supreme Council of the IRB to give cautious support to the Irish Home Rule League and, according to Michael Davitt, was waging a one man New Departure from quite an early stage.[18] His election committee was overwhelmingly Fenian and in his memoir, Mark Ryan lists Fenians involved in the campaign as including himself, Thomas Brennan and P.W. Nally. Matt Harris, who acted as chairman of the election committee, would go on to found the Ballinasloe Tenant Defence Association (BTDA), discussed in this volume by Brian Casey, and like many others involved in the campaign would play a crucial role in the early stages of the Land War.[19] While the clergy and Fenians had both supported Captain John Philip Nolan in the Galway election of 1872,the level of clerical interference had been abhorrent to many Fenians, including Matt Harris, and they were encouraged to provide an alternative leadership.[20] Fenians and priests were to find themselves in opposition in the 1874 Mayo election.

Although O'Connor Power was eventually elected, despite clerical opposition, he was not initially opposed by all of the clergy. Bourke and, significantly, MacHale had at first supported his candidacy. In the 1872 election for Galway, MacHale and his clergy had virtually unanimously supported Nolan's candidature to such an extent that it led to charges of clerical interference and the election result was invalidated.[21] However, MacHale was to find himself out manoeuvred by the priests of his diocese in a clear indication of his waning influence. O'Connor Power's candidacy and the support of the clergy had seemed certain, at least to himself. The clergy were to meet in Castlebar to endorse candidates and all three potential Home Rule candidates had agreed to be bound by the decision of this meeting.[22] The proceedings of the meeting were recounted (second hand) by MacHale's rival, Bishop John MacEvilly of Galway, to Cardinal Paul Cullen when he reproduced extracts of a letter from a Mayo priest, who stated that:

> The archbishop came from Tuam accompanied by his cousin, Rev. U. Burke [*sic*], to promote the candidature of madman Power, the Fenian. But thanks to the stand made by Dr Conway and all the priests of the county here, he was obliged to set him aside. He could not conceal his humiliation by his embarrassed manner, nervous and choking voice.[23]

The *schadenfreude* on display in this statement may give us some indication of the tone of the meeting. A central figure in opposing O'Connor Power had been Fr Patrick Lavelle, and the one-time radical priest alienated most of his traditional supporters, including the Fenians, the Irish in England and MacHale himself.[24] Clerical opposition to O'Connor Power proved unpopular and MacHale, as well as Lavelle, found himself 'hooted' at during the campaign.[25] In keeping with the decision of the clergy and as per his agreement with Bourke who had nominated him, O'Connor Power withdrew from the contest.[26] Thomas Tighe and George Browne were elected unopposed but O'Connor Power was to receive a second chance to stand thanks to the actions of Sir George O'Donnel, who challenged the result, feeling his nomination had been rejected by the Sheriff on insufficient grounds.[27] His appeal was successful and a by-election was called, but this time no selection convention was called by MacHale. The fact that O'Connor Power did not have to seek the nomination of the clergy did not mean he was spared their opposition. In spite of this, O'Connor Power was elected and this challenge to clerical influence in many ways set a precedent for the Land War.

In the late 1870s a succession of bad harvests had led to very real fears of another famine. With many farmers fearing eviction, or even starvation, an outbreak of agrarian agitation occurred in county Mayo. A mass meeting at Irishtown in county Mayo on 20 April 1879 is generally taken to be the start of what is commonly referred to as the Land War. In 1878 Bourke had left St Jarlath's, having been made parish priest of Claremorris. In his new parish he was situated in what was to be the heartland of the new agrarian struggle. However, Bourke's tendency towards moderation was visible from early in his tenure at Claremorris when he convened a meeting at which secret societies were denounced.[28] The fact that MacHale was seen as a patriot bishop meant that many expected him to be sympathetic to the new movement. Throughout the nineteenth century there were a number of social movements and campaigns which took place across Ireland

in which the clergy had played an active role, including the repeal movement, the emancipation movement and the anti-tithe movement. MacHale himself had played a central role in mobilising the clergy of Connaught to the repeal movement and helped to ensure widespread popular support.[29] While the vast majority of those involved in the Land League were Catholic, the clergy did not play as prominent a role in its organisation as they had in earlier campaigns.

Despite the aversion of many Fenians to agrarian agitation, due to it being seen as a distraction from the national question and an issue to be resolved after independence, the Fenian movement in Connaught had an especially strong agrarian bent. This had found expression in the establishment of the BTDA in 1876. Many of those involved in the BTDA were Fenians who had been participated in the election campaigns of Nolan in Galway in 1872 and O'Connor Power in Mayo in 1874, and there was little clerical involvement.[30] This was to provide a template for the early stages of the Land War and Brian Casey has argued that, 'While the meeting at Irishtown county Mayo on 20 April 1879 was seen to be the genesis of the Land League and the agitation that soon spread throughout the countryside, it was in Ballinasloe that the first shoots of organisation which reflected the desires of small tenant farmers appeared'.[31] In the *Social Origins of the Irish Land War*, Samuel Clark suggests that the lay leadership of Land League consisted to a large degree of shopkeepers who had an interest in ensuring tenants were able to pay their bills and were socially well positioned to provide leadership and direction.[32] This would, of course, have led to conflict with the clergy who saw themselves as the natural leaders of the people. Not only had the clergy been absent from the Irishtown meeting, a police report of the meeting stated that they had been widely opposed to it and one local cleric even offered £5 to anybody who would destroy the platform from which it was to be addressed.[33] As the Land League grew in popularity and power many clergy came to support and even participate in it; however, this was often done for pragmatic reasons. Writing to Monsignor Tobias Kirby in Rome, Bishop John MacEvilly of Galway said, 'In order to meet this evil and knock the wind out of the sails of those unprincipled ringleaders, it has been deemed prudent for the priests to formulate resolutions at meetings in the interests of order and religion, to keep the lead and keep the Godless nobodies in their place'.[34] The actions

of Bourke and other clergy of the archdiocese of Tuam who came to be involved in the agitation would seem to indicate that this was a course they were following.

The meeting at Claremorris was the largest meeting to that point and had the distinction of being the first meeting of the Land War to feature priests on the platform. Bourke played no small role in this *volte-face* but his actions in the run-up to the meeting and attitudes expressed on the day can leave his motives open to questioning. James Daly of the *Connaught Telegraph*, who had been to the fore of agitation all summer, was especially unwelcoming of Bourke's new-found desire to participate in the agitation. Daly had been central to organising the meeting at Irishtown. While not a Fenian, and often professing himself to be a moderate, Daly put himself to the fore of Mayo politics. In the summer of 1879 it seemed a rift was developing between priests and people. Prior to a meeting in Westport, in June the *Freeman's Journal* carried a letter signed 'John, Archbishop of Tuam'. MacHale stated the sympathies of the clergy were always with the people but warned against 'night patrolling, acts and words of menace, with arms in hand, the profanation of all that is sacred in religion', stating that such events were organised 'by a few designing men' who 'seek only to promote their personal interests'.[35]

In reporting on the Westport meeting, the *Freeman's Journal*, after detailing the effect of the weather in keeping many away, stated: 'A more serious drawback was the letter of his Grace the Archbishop, published in yesterday's *Freeman* which came upon the committee as a great surprise'.[36] On taking the platform, Charles Stewart Parnell referred directly to MacHale's letter. He said it would 'Ill become him or, anybody else, to treat anything proceeding from a man who had stood as his Grace had between the Irish people and the exterminator, with anything but the highest respect'.[37] However, he claimed that while the meeting had been placarded throughout Mayo for six or seven weeks previously, it was only the day before that he had been made aware of MacHale's opposition. Parnell claimed that, 'During all these weeks not a single person in Mayo or out of it, no clergyman ever intimated to him that the Archbishop was opposed to the meeting'.[38]

The issue of the *Freeman's Journal* which reported on the Westport meeting also carried a letter from James Daly, perhaps not content with having only one newspaper to use as a platform for his opinions, written in response to MacHale's letter. Daly spoke of his 'astonishment

and deep regret' at reading the archbishop's letter, before going on to say that he would not attend a meeting that 'had the slightest tendency to advocating irreligion or revolutionary ideas'.[39] Daly refers respectfully to the archbishop and implies that perhaps somebody has misled him as to the nature of the movement. However, the conclusion of the letter carried a barb, which reinforced much of what was said at various meetings: 'It is deplorable to see the priests and the people disunited; but to use a phrase expressed on more than one occasion by his Grace, "It will not be the fault of the faithful people".'[40]

While MacHale was conducting his frontal assault on the movement, a different approach was being used by Bourke and his colleagues in the Claremorris deanery. A resolution dated 29 May and signed by Bourke, Archdeacon Bartholomew Cavanagh of Knock and Canon Geoffrey Bourke amongst others was printed in the *Connaught Telegraph* and reproduced by *The Nation*. This resolution claimed that the 'distressed state' of the farmers of the county was 'arising in part from bad seasons and partly from the great fall in agricultural and pastoral produce'.[41] It went on to call for a reduction of rents in order to promote harmony between tenants and landlords.[42] While this may not be as blatant an attempt to undermine the movement as MacHale's letter, its tone and diagnosis of the causes of the distress of farmers, as well as its extremely moderate solution, fell short of what was being agitated for by tens of thousands of people at monster meetings. A short article also appeared in the same paper that documented a meeting of around 2,000 tenant farmers in Claremorris, demanding a reduction of rent.[43] It would seem tenant right was as lively an issue in Bourke's own parish as anywhere else and, on 28 June, the *Connaught Telegraph* featured a letter from the tenantry of Charles Ormsby Blake of the district refuting accusations made by him in several newspapers that they had been sworn in to secret societies or had threatened a process officer or ejectment server. The letter states that rents had been withheld as they had nearly doubled in the space of eight years.[44] The letter was signed in the presence of prominent tenant right activists and Fenians, P.J. Gordon and J.W. Nally as well as 'others'.[45]

At the Special Commission on Parnellism and Crime, it was claimed that Bourke initially opposed the Land War and had his fences and crops damaged in retaliation.[46] If this is true at least he was spared the very public humiliation of another of the resolutions signatories. Archdeacon Cavanagh had the dubious distinction

of having a protest meeting directed at him in his own parish on 1 June. Therefore, the releasing of the Claremorris statement, just three days before the protest was to take place, was hardly a coincidence. The *Connaught Telegraph* claimed that 15,000 people attended a meeting 'to enter a solemn and emphatic protest against the language used by the Venerable Archdeacon Kavanagh [*sic*] from the altar of the parish church the previous Sunday'.[47] It was said that when the tenant farmers attempted to arrange a tenant-right meeting, Cavanagh had moved to suppress it 'for the purpose of shielding certain landlords who were not inclined to accede to the just and reasonable demands of their tenants'.[48] The language used at the meeting, while not inflammatory, was firm and underlined a commitment to the agitation regardless of the attitudes of the clergy. The chair of the meeting, Tobias Merick, 'a respectable tenant farmer', stated that 'he hoped the day would never come that the priests and the people would be found in opposite camps but if such occurs it will not be the people's fault'.[49] Conciliation was sought with the clergy, but it was the clergy who would have to reconcile themselves to the agitation.

While Daly may have dealt somewhat delicately in responding to MacHale, he had saved up a considerable amount of ammunition for Ulick Bourke and the *Tuam News*. It was dispensed in a frank manner from inside his own paper when Bourke moved to organise the meeting at Claremorris. In his weekly column, dated 28 June 1879, Daly opens by referring to rumours that Bourke planned to nominate a candidate in opposition to O'Connor Power and that as 'Father Bourke has declared in the *Tuam News* that the people of Mayo want a leader, and as he insinuates that he is prepared to give them one, or to lead them himself, it is of importance to consider what his views on the land question are'.[50] Daly goes on to accuse Bourke of 'base treachery' and 'cowardly deceit', claiming he has made reference to 'dangerous agitators'. According to Daly, Bourke is organising the meeting not 'to advocate the repeal of barbarous land laws, nor to assert the right of the people of Ireland to the land of Ireland; but as Father Burke (*sic*) has expressed it – "to unite the priests and people, tenant farmers and *those in higher positions* [emphasis Daly's]."'[51] Daly goes on to claim that Bourke aims 'to re-forge the chains of the poor, toiling, starving, tenantry' and 'proposes to hand us back, once more, captive to the power and dominion of the landlord'.[52]

However, the *Connaught Telegraph* of 5 July did not include any response to Daly's comments from Bourke, but a letter on the topic was featured by his nephew, John MacPhilpin, editor of the *Tuam News*. It accused Daly of 'dealing in no ordinary terms of severity upon the *Tuam News*'.[53] MacPhilpin denied that the newspaper was insensitive to the suffering of the tenantry, stating: 'We believe that the tenants are, as a body, cruelly and unjustly treated by the landlords; and no one will hail with greater pleasure agitation in their favour than we'.[54] After accusing the *Connaught Telegraph* of misrepresenting Bourke's words regarding the agitation and landlords, MacPhilpin stated, 'It is only the reasoning of children or of simple people who would consider any man responsible for the opinions put forward in any paper'.[55] However, when MacPhilpin stated the position of the *Tuam News* on the agitation, it is far from reconciliatory towards the leaders of the agitation:

> The *Tuam News* does not wish to see, even in the case of tenant right, a meeting held on a Sunday close by the chapel-yard gate of any parish, in opposition and counter to the expressed wish of the priest of the parish. It does not wish to see the national leaders of the people set aside and other self styled leaders putting themselves in their place.[56]

In the following week's *Connaught Telegraph* Daly maintained his offensive as he widened his circle of recrimination, and Michael Davitt waded into the mire of the conflict as yet another letter was published from John MacHale denouncing the agitation. It would seem that Victorian melodrama was perfectly capable of overflowing into the provincial press and the level of intrigue, reproach and character assassination could not have left any reader of the *Connaught Telegraph* feeling they had not gotten their penny's worth. If MacPhilpin had expected anything in the way of an apology from Daly, he was to be disappointed. Daly himself claimed to be disappointed in MacPhilpin when he stated: 'We expected some little apology for his open denunciation of the tenants' cause – a denunciation with which he has irreverently connected all that remains of the great Archbishop of Tuam'.[57] Daly referred to MacPhilpin's letter as a 'rambling document … to exculpate himself, his newspaper, and the gentleman who exploits them both'.[58] However, far from portraying MacPhilpin as an innocent who has been duped, Daly goes on to level various charges against him, including using his newspaper to launch attacks against the

Bishop of Galway, MacEvilly and attempting to charge Nolan £1,000 for coverage of the 1872 election. In response to a question posed by MacPhilpin as to why priests have been absent from platforms he said, 'The priests of this diocese are no longer free … a single individual, with what authority we know not, claims the right to put them to silence'.[59] Daly places this blame squarely on the shoulders of the Revd Thomas MacHale, nephew and Vicar General to Archbishop MacHale. Daly accused Thomas MacHale of being an outsider and a reactionary and that, 'Unfortunately his Grace, owing to the natural decay of years is no longer able to perform the functions of his high and sacred position. These functions it would appear, now devolve to his nephew, the Vicar-General.'[60]

Attacks on Bourke were absent from this column, published the day before the scheduled Claremorris meeting, and he only receives one brief speculative mention. Daly's reproaches of the previous week were now focused primarily on MacHale and he suggested:

> If the editor of the Tuam News or his interesting patron could use their legitimate influence with Dr. MacHale Junior, to restrain him from writing coercive letters on political matters to clergymen of this diocese, there would be not further occasion to comment upon the absence of the priests from the side of the tillers of the soil.[61]

Whatever compromise had been made, at least on Daly's part, it seemed no longer to encourage him to view the forthcoming meeting with suspicion or to question the motives of the clergy who would be present. Instead, Thomas MacHale is made the scapegoat for any misunderstanding between clergy and people. This is not to suggest that Daly's argument is even throughout. His dissection is turned briefly back in its original direction when he asked of MacPhilpin: 'Does the Editor, then, say that immoral combinations do exist? Does he agree with his Grace and with Lord Oranmore that Mayo is "honeycombed with secret societies."'[62]

This issue of the *Connaught Telegraph* also reproduced a letter signed by John MacHale, dated 7 July 1879, which had originally been published in the *Freeman's Journal* of 10 July. It was addressed to organisers of a meeting in Ballyhaunis who had invited him to attend and said, 'Let the tenant farmers of Mayo, as of all Ireland, act judiciously; let them be guided, as of old, by their faithful allies, the priests … Let no attempt

at severing so sacred a union, fraught with blessings to the people be tolerated'.[63] This letter gives a good indication as to why Daly would not want to believe, or at least would prefer others not to believe, that it was written by John MacHale. The author goes on to say:

> In some parts of the country the people, in calmer moments, will not fail to be astonished at the circumstance of finding themselves at the tail of a few unknown strolling men who, with affected grief, deploring the condition of the tenantry, seek only to mount to place and preferment on the shoulders of the people; and should they succeed in their ambitious designs, they would not hesitate to shake aside at once the interest of their advancement as an unprofitable encumbrance.[64]

While Daly was obviously aware of this letter, reprinting it as he did in his newspaper, he made no allusion to it in his own column. Instead it was published on the same page as a letter from Michael Davitt, written in response. Davitt's letter was addressed to the editor of the *Telegraph*, perhaps the most logical place to send it as MacHale had heaped praise upon the editors of *The Nation* and the *Freeman's Journal* in his own letter. Davitt trod lightly, saying:

> There are few men among our seemingly destiny-divided people who would not prefer to lie under an unmerited rebuke or remain silent to even uncalled for aspersions upon their motives or actions rather than utter a single word in defence that might irritate or offend the venerated Archbishop of Tuam.

However, Davitt then goes on to defend himself from the accusations in the archbishop's letter and denied being a 'strolling' or 'unknown' man, pointing to the fact that his own family had been evicted from Mayo. Davitt also points out that he has been convicted of treason felony and is on ticket of leave so continued imprisonment is the only 'advancement' he was likely achieve for his efforts on behalf of the tenantry.[65] The column next to Davitt's letter carried another opinion piece attacking MacHale's letter, where tellingly the author said, 'The resolutions of even some of the deaneries are a sham for has not the place hunting spirit before now affected the priesthood'.[66] Davitt did not think that a mere letter was an adequate response to MacHale's attacks and, in what could be interpreted as a direct challenge to him, a protest was organised

in Tuam that September without consulting either the religious or civic authorities. Writing in *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland*, Davitt says the purpose of this was 'to put an end to the idea that an Irish archbishop or English chief secretary was strong enough to frown down such a movement or turn its leaders from the object upon which they had embarked. This was, for the time being, an end of clerical opposition'.[67]

When the Claremorris meeting took place it was not without its drama, and while Bourke shared the platform with some of the 'strolling men', he did attempt to impose his own agenda. IRB supreme council member John Devoy, who was in exile but was secretly visiting Ireland, attended the meeting incognito, despite Davitt's repeated efforts to dissuade him from doing so. He was also present in the hotel where the organising committee met the preceding evening. Devoy did not participate but he claimed to have overheard much of it from the next room and that he was in receipt of regular updates on proceedings. The substance of Devoy's report on it was that Ulick Bourke attempted to have resolutions tabled on Catholic education and the temporal power of the Pope, which were not accepted by the others present, as they sought to build a movement which would be inclusive to Protestants. According to Devoy, Bourke had been instructed through letters and telegrams to table these motions by Thomas MacHale and that 'poor old Archbishop MacHale, then in his dotage, was being used by a group around him to stem the torrent'.[68] Devoy's account stated that when Bourke threatened to withdraw from chairing the meeting if these resolutions were not accepted, he was told that the meeting would have to proceed without him, resulting in Bourke capitulating and agreeing to chair.[69]

Despite these differences of opinion, much was made of the fact that priests were finally taking part in land meetings. In reporting on the Claremorris meeting and another held in Borrisleigh, Tipperary, on the same day, the *Freeman's Journal* said, 'At both, the grand old union which has done so much for Ireland was exhibited in all its ancient strength and vigour, for at both priests and people stood on the same platform to advocate the same just reforms'.[70] However, the *Connaught Telegraph* was more circumspect in its attitude to the clergy, stating: 'Owing to the action of his Grace the archbishop and the Priests of this diocese (Tuam) with regards to the previous meetings at Irishtown, Westport & c., it was feared that some disturbance would take place'.[71] In his opening statement, Bourke said:

> Some six months ago a meeting of the people would not have excited much attention, but the continuousness of these meetings and the effects already produced on society and the tone they are imparting to the minds of Irishmen have at length arrested the attention not only of persons in high positions but of the British Government.[72]

Certainly, it seems that the attention of the clergy had been arrested and in referring to their new-found role Bourke went on to state: 'Hitherto for the past six months the clergy have not, owing to some misunderstanding, been on the same platform as the people. Today, however, the priests and the people of Mayo are as one'.[73]

Bourke did not elaborate on the exact nature of the misunderstanding or on whose part it was but his presence on the platform did not necessarily mean that the 'misunderstandings' were over. He used the speech to call for restraint, telling the crowd to 'perform not a single act, utter not a word that could give an opportunity to your enemies and the enemies of your race to say that you are unworthy of the rights of freemen – unworthy of those land rights which tillers of the soil throughout Europe enjoy'.[74] He then went on to warn against the 'senseless challenging' of the British government and said, 'The explosive fury of a few untrained or unthinking men tend to injure very much a good cause'.[75] Bourke called for the landlords whose rents were too high to come to the relief of their tenants and called for the tenants to be rooted in the soil. He suggested the buying out of the interests of the landlords but stated the granting of perpetual leases was: 'The easiest, the most reasonable, and the best for tenant and landlord, for after all, say what you will, there is a certain mutual attachment between the kind landlord and his tenantry'.[76]

These calls for restraint and sympathy for landlords were certainly among the least radical of proclamations made from platforms throughout the summer of 1879 and in taking his place, Bourke did seem to be acting as a restraining influence. It is certainly a long way from the 'Fenian at heart' that Mark Ryan claimed Bourke was. The first resolution of the meeting was proposed by Revd Canon Waldron, who – citing a fall in prices – called for a reduction in rents, which was seconded by Michael Davitt, who then took the floor. Davitt engaged with Bourke in as charming and as mischievous a manner as that in which he had responded to MacHale's letter. He stated:

> Canon Bourke had given them very excellent advice when he told them to deport themselves as men who were entitled to their freedom. He, though he went further in Irish politics than Canon Bourke, did not wish to add a word to that (applause). They had been told that inflammatory language had been used at previous meetings; but he asked the government to point to any outrages that had resulted from it. They had been called 'Communists' and 'Fenians' because they asked the right to live in Ireland; but they may retaliate, and asked what right landlords have to the soil, and they would find it very difficult to get convincing proofs from Lord Sligo, Lord Lucan, Sir Roger Palmer, or Lord Oranmore (groans). They had up to this been too moderate. They had simply asked for a reduction in rents which it was utterly impossible for them to pay.[77]

However, Bourke's understanding nature towards the Irish landlords did not extend to the English. When J.J. Louden of Westport spoke and alluded to support for Irish land reform among the Radicals in England stating the movement was 'not without allies, for they had the English democracy at its back',[78] Bourke felt compelled to use his position as chair to interject, saying:

> As chairman I am bound to listen to all that has been said, but there are two propositions which have been uttered by Mr Louden to which, as chairman, I must necessarily object. One was that we unite with the democracy of England. I hope we never shall. We are a religious people. We have never united with the English people, particularly with the democracy, and I hope we never shall (loud applause).[79]

Bourke also disagreed with Louden's assertion that no landlord should be sent to the English parliament, pointing out that Parnell was a landlord, as was Joseph Biggar, who, according to Bourke, also happened to be a 'Whig'.[80] Louden then backtracked somewhat on his statements and said that he had been referring to Irish exiles living in England. Once Bourke had been assured of this he supported what Louden had said but stated: 'He was only afraid that word English democracy did not mean the Irish in England'.[81] Speaking afterwards, James Daly made reference to the archbishop's letter when 'he said they were no strollers. They could count back four or five generations to their forefathers in

this country'.[82] At the close of the meeting, a vote of thanks was proposed for Canon Bourke by Fr Killeen. Davitt seconded this and, describing Bourke as eloquent and patriotic, said, 'It would be like painting a lily or attempting to gild refined gold to say anything in praise of Father Bourke'.[83]

While the clergy and tenant right leaders may have been suspicious of each other, the eventual involvement of clerics in the organisation could be seen to bring mutual benefits. As the movement grew, for reasons of organisation and in order to expand, it became advantageous to allocate the clergy positions and they in turn were able to gain a stake in the organisation which a large number of their flock were part of. However, according to Samuel Clark, 'It is essential to recognise that they were primarily motivated by a fear that the struggle between landlords and tenants would create an irreparable gulf between themselves and their people'.[84] Clark further states that the clergy formed a less vital part of the local leadership of the Land League than they had in previous movements.[85]

Ulick Bourke's track record in cultural nationalism and in the education of Fenians certainly makes it appear he should have been a likely candidate to become involved in the mass movement that sprung up around him. However, while some credit must be given to him for being one of the first clerics to take an active role, like many of his clerical colleagues, he was in its most conservative wing. The solutions he advocated were always of the more moderate sort, and any initiative he did take seems to have been motivated by external forces such as the impending protest against Archdeacon Cavanagh or the broadening gulf between the clergy and the people. During the summer of 1879 the land campaign gathered momentum and by the following year had become a fully-fledged national movement. Throughout the course of the Land War, priests took their places on platforms up and down the country and Bourke himself became one of the fourteen priests on the committee of the Land League when it was formed in October of 1879. The more involved the clergy became the more moderate the demands and proclamations became and the less of a role the Fenians played. As the Land League grew into a national movement initiative was wrested away from local organisers, lay and clerical, but from the 16 August 1879, when the Mayo Land League was formed, conscious efforts were made to involve the clergy.

Ulick Bourke demonstrates that professions of romantic nationalism did not necessarily lend themselves to political radicalism. While being unwilling to accept the support of or be associated with 'English Democracy' he showed himself more than willing to accept that landlords had a place in Irish society. Furthermore, despite his perceived relationship with Fenianism, and his willingness to exploit this association in order to promote St Jarlath's, his own actions show him to have been conservative and inclined towards caution. It would seem, however, that Bourke was one of the first to realise that the clergy would have to, as McEvilly stated, 'keep the lead and keep the Godless nobodies in their place'.[86] Bourke's statements and actions would suggest that far from being an Irish agrarian radical Ulick Bourke was most definitely an Irish agrarian moderate.