

**THE
'ALL FOR IRELAND LEAGUE'
AND
'THE IRISH LAND AND LABOUR
ASSOCIATION.'**

**TALK AT THE MOTHER JONES FESTIVAL,
CORK, 27 JULY 2024**

Jack Lane

**Aubane Historical Society
(aubanehistoricalsociety.com)**

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**TALK AT THE MOTHER JONES FESTIVAL,
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THE ‘ALL FOR IRELAND LEAGUE’ AND
‘THE IRISH LAND AND LABOUR ASSOCIATION.’**

It is very appropriate indeed to discuss these movements at this Festival. They originated in Cork and for me they are not abstract historical issues. And they complement this Festival as it celebrates a great example of social justice in Mother Jones and these movements were indeed campaigns for social justice in the broadest sense.

I should declare an interest, as they say, because they are personal for me as I would not be here but for them. Both my grandfathers were involved together in both. One was a farmer who had his land secured by William O’Brien through the Land Act of 1903 and O’Brien was the architect of that as later he was of the AFIL. He was the crucial figure of that era and it is extraordinary how little appreciated he is today.

The other grandfather was a farm labourer and benefited from the ILLA in securing a labourer’s cottage where my father and myself were born and reared. And I began my working life as farm labourer and as I left it without being fired I qualify as a Farm Labourer Emeritus.

They are movements that have effectively been written out of our history but I was delighted to read Gerard O’Rourke’s recent book “*Land War to Civil War-1900-1924*” which presents a very good description of how both operated in the Donoughmore area which was a microcosm of what happened throughout Cork.

Why are they important? I can only summarise and sketch their significance and hopefully discuss them further in Q &A.

The background to the AFIL:

The main issue in Irish life for centuries was centred on the land issue. It is somewhat fortunate that we can see in microcosm today in Palestine what had made land the crucial issue in Ireland for centuries – the confiscation and retention of land by a foreign power across centuries and the attempts to reverse that process by the natives. After massive struggles culminating in the land war of the late 19th century the British government had to find a solution. The result of it all that was essentially the surrender of the planter Ascendancy culminating in the

Land Act of 1903. That arranged for the essential solution of the conflict over land. The man who was most associated with this was William O'Brien. The landowners were well compensated of course as the slave owners in an earlier generation. They were a lumpen, parasitic landlord class.

The Land issue encompassed two classes - the tenant farmers and the farm labourers. Our history is replete with the struggle of the "*Bold Tenant farmer*" and his wife but for every farmer there were farm labourers and many more of them than farmers because in the age before mechanisation they kept the whole show on the road. The situation of the land arrangement in Ireland is often described as an inverted pyramid from tenant farmer, with various middle men to local landlords and absentee landlords at the top.

But there was a missing layer at the bottom - the farm labourer. Their conditions are unimaginable today – no security whatever. Tenant farmers may be insecure but their labourers were even more insecure. Evictions of tenant farmers are well known in the iconography of the period, well described and recorded but for every eviction there were farm labourers and their families evicted. But there are few artistic representations of their plight.

The solution of the land issue was inseparable from a solution of the farmer labourers' issue and that is why they go together as a problem and a solution.

O'Brien did the solving in collaboration with Arthur Balfour known in Ireland as *Bloody Balfour*, and O'Brien first gave him that label because of his policy of coercion during the Land War. (And the current genocide in Gaza can be traced back to his infamous "*Balfour Declaration*" in 1917 so the label "*Bloody Belfour*" could still be appropriate on a broader canvas.)

He had O'Brien jailed and many executed and many more coerced as far as possible. The Mitchelstown massacre occurred under him. Balfour was '*bloody*' indeed when necessary. And these mortal enemies solved the Land issue between them.

And a good starting point for Balfour's attitude to Ireland and the Irish was noted by a close family friend, Wilfrid Blunt, who was a well-known writer, poet Laureate and anti-imperialist radical - he was once arrested here during the Land war. He records one of his many intimate conversations with Belfour and his brother Gerald. Bear in mind that both of them became Chief Secretaries for Ireland.

Blunt records the following conversation with them while on a sightseeing tour in England which goes as follows:

“Drove with the Balfours where we lunched. [Gerald & Arthur]... On the way we had a grand discussion about patriotism, Gerald maintaining that patriotism was the Imperial instinct in Englishmen, who should support their country's quarrels even when in the wrong. This of course is not my view. ... Gerald has all his brother's scientific inhumanity in politics and it is a school of thought distinctly on the increase for it flatters the selfish instincts of the strong by proving to them that their selfishness is right. ... On our way home we renewed our argument as applied especially to the Irish. "They ought to have been exterminated long ago" said Gerald, "but it is too late now.” (“My Diaries”, Volume 1, p. 85-6.)



“BRAVE MR. BALFOUR.”
BALFOUR.—“Now we have him **IN**, let us torture and degrade him. —When he is **OUT** he exposes and humiliates me beyond endurance.

(O'Brien being tortured in jail with Balfour looking on, *Freeman's Journal*)

The “*scientific inhumanity*” was Darwinism and Blunt went on to make a very acute observation on it: “*Gerald's argument, I recollect, was based on an*

application of inter-racial politics of Darwin's law of the selection of the fittest, or rather what is an exaggerated interpretation of that law. Those who put forward this view forget that Man by the abnormal development of his reasoning power and his invention of lethal weapons, has put himself outside the unconscious working of the natural law." (ibid.)

Blunt also said that Balfour had people imprisoned to kill them – this caused outrage. But the case of John Mandeville of Mitchelstown gave credence to that claim. Blunt's family produced "*the fourth man*" of the Cambridge spy ring, Sir Anthony Blunt, who was a great favourite in Buckingham Place. Balfour himself was a thoroughgoing philosophical sceptic and regarded Darwinism and its conclusions with wry amusement.

When the British ruling class decided that extermination was not on for the Irish then some form of accommodation was the only feasible alternative.

To this end Balfour made a visit to Ireland to find out for himself what and who he was dealing with and make a judgement on them. He was above relying on the media or the Irish politicians. Lo and behold he discovered that they wanted to own their own properties! He could relate to that.

He decided the tenant farmers could be satisfied on his terms and in his way as a property owning democracy. Crucially he and his class were to be, and were seen to be, in control of dealing with issues by recognising realities. They used the carrot and the stick as they felt necessary in this case as in others. A real ruling class. So conceding a solution to the land issue was not from the kindness of Balfour's heart. It simply made sense from the British point of view to do so and settle '*a little local difficulty*' of the Empire. He boasted of his success in this in later life.

This policy is here called "*Killing Home Rule with kindness*" but for the British it was known as '*Constructive Unionism*' created by Joseph Chamberlain and Balfour in opposition to the Liberals' free trade fixation on the iron laws of political economy. The crucial aspect of this policy was to give the state a decisive role in solving social problems and providing the necessary money – this was revolutionary. It broke all the rules of liberal economics to which the Liberal Party was committed and which they implemented with a vengeance during the so-called *Famine*.

This led to the defection of a section of the Liberals led by Chamberlain to join the Tories and create the Unionist Party as it is today. He, as a very successful capitalist, but realised that the social problems that arose from pure capitalism were unsustainable and had to be countered. We will see later that their approach also applied to the ILLA issues as well as the land issue – that is why it is important.

(Of course Balfour is best known today for the *Balfour Declaration* and its consequences are now clear to everyone. Again Balfour showed his hard headed approach towards another issue - the Jewish question. He brought in the Aliens Act in 1905 to limit the number of Jews coming from Eastern Europe and Russia and just over a decade later he encouraged Jewish emigration to Palestine to also limit their numbers in Britain in another way as well as help Britain in its war against Germany and the Ottoman Empire.)

The New Dawn for Ireland.

With the settling of the land issue a new dawn for Ireland beckoned and O'Brien posed the question what was the New Ireland to be? To understand why this was the issue we should understand that the other constitutional political forces in Ireland represented by the IPP under Redmond were not that keen on settling the land issue because if it was settled satisfactorily what was left for them to fight for, to exist for? They felt that their fox was shot, their *raison d'être* had gone. They made a case or rather an excuse against how the land issue was settled. Why pay for our own land, etc.? A populist response in today's lingo.

Also, the IPP represented the '*gombeen*' men who were quite satisfied with the exiting situation on land and lived off it and were not keen on fully developing land ownership by the tenant famers which was the essence of O'Brien's policy. The Redmondite elements were easing themselves into the position of the former Landlords whose legal powers were being 'nibbled away' and their authority constrained by various Acts since Gladstone.

There were plenty Catholic middle men who were doing quite well under the existing system and could easily replace the existing system of Ascendancy landlords who had given up the ghost. After all, Daniel O'Connell had been a middleman for some of Trinity College's vast estates that in total were the equivalent to the size of Co. Louth.

Davitt in arguing for land nationalisation put him out of kilter with the tenant farmers and that was an ineffective dogma in the context of the situation.

O'Brien's case was, uniquely, for ownership of the land by the tenant farmers as rapidly and as fully as possible. This successful programme created the basis for the settlement of the land issue. O'Brien argued that this created the basis for a New Ireland and presented an opportunity to eliminate the divisive baggage that the Plantations and the Protestant Ascendancy had created. These divisions were expressed in a religious framework of Catholic versus Protestant but O'Brien argued these divisions should not now define Ireland and need not do so. It is no accident that both Canon Sheehan and he came from Mallow, the home of Thomas Davis who was an inspiration for the Ireland they wanted. There is a very appropriate plaque in the town to Davis, O'Brien and Canon Sheehan in Mallow. So the ideas of the AFIL did not fall from the sky – well maybe from the Cork sky. Essentially, Ireland could be Catholic without being defined by Catholicism.

The AFIL summed up their approach to these issues with a campaign that became known as the three Cs - *Conference Conciliation and Consent* – towards Protestants and Unionists. And they argued that if this was not successfully done then some form of Partition was inevitable. Many have yet to accept this over a century later. He used his alliance of the Ulster tenants with the southern tenants under the leadership of T.W. Russell as a vehicle which negotiated the surrender of the landlords north and south in 1903. An alliance which had the potential to create a future different from the one which came about.

Canon Sheehan, “*the greatest living novelist*” according to Tolstoy, was a theoretician of the AFIL and he wrote its Manifesto in the ‘*Cork Free Press*’ where he summed it up as saying let's not replace one Ascendancy, the Protestant Ascendancy, with another, a Catholic Ascendancy: “*We are a generous people; and yet we are told we keep a sectarian bitterness to the end; and that Protestant Ascendancy has been broken down, only to build Catholic Ascendancy on its ruins. Are we in earnest about country at all or are we seeking to perpetuate our wretchedness and backwardness by refusing the honest aid of Irishmen?*” (11 June 1910). He argued that any nation worthy of the name should fully include people of all religions and none, as well as all social classes and from all backgrounds. That was the secret of the success of all modern nations. If these divisions were allowed to persist in Ireland the AFIL saw a Partition as being inevitable. It should be a case of “*All for Ireland*” – hence the name.

These arguments may not seem very radical these days but the IPP did not agree with this approach and they dominated Irish politics. To them what was wrong with a Catholic Ireland and a more Catholic Ireland? What else was Home

IRISH THE PEOPLE

Published Weekly on
Thursdays

DUBLIN, SATURDAY, MARCH 6TH, 1909.

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THE ONE AND ONLY HOPE.

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necessary to say that a more
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Rule for? The Party had one leader who was quite clear on this, the very capable Joseph Devlin from Ulster who led the radical secret militant Catholic organisation, the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH). This originated and thrived in Ulster for very understandable reasons to counter the plantation and its consequences there. It became the driving force of the IPP. It was the mirror image

of the Orange Order in Ulster and the AFIL argued that this was totally misplaced and disastrous if copied in the rest of Ireland.

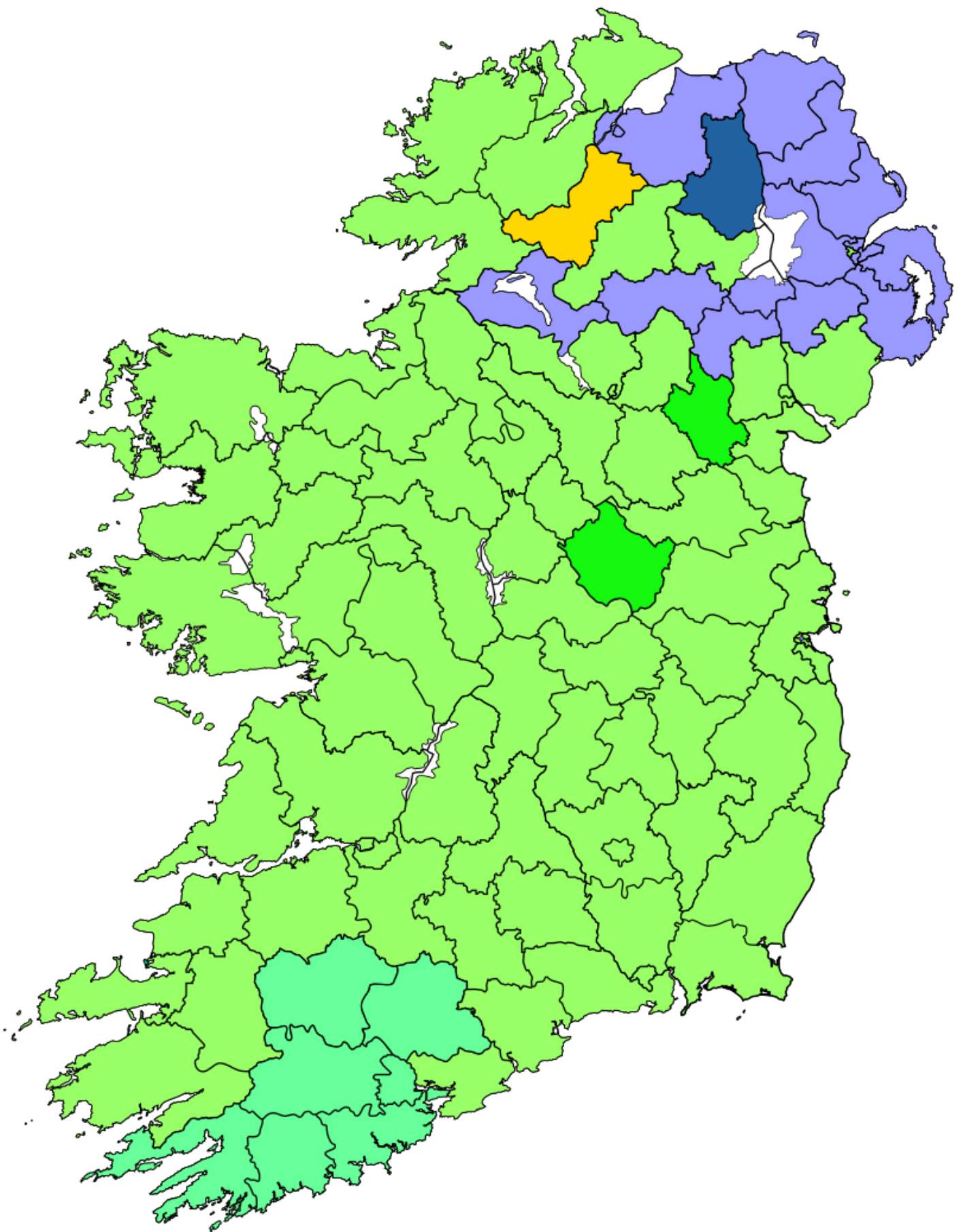
The conflict represented two radically different views about what an independent Ireland should be. And the conflict was all consuming in Cork city and County for over a decade. At an Irish Party convention in 1909 O'Brien objected to the Party's continuing support for the Government which was backtracking on the Land Act and he and anybody with a Cork accent was not allowed speak at the rostrum and were batoned from the hall by the AOH. O'Brien promptly set up a newspaper called *The Cork Accent* so if the accent could not be heard by the Parliamentary Party they would read about it.

The AFIL dominated Cork city and County politics for over a decade prior to WWI which is shown by the fact that in 1910 they won every seat in the city and county bar one that they did not contest because they were in accord with the candidate in East Cork, a Protestant Home ruler. In other words, Cork was liberated from Redmondism and the IPP 8 Years before it happened in the rest of the country. That is a unique Cork achievement.

But the crucial thing is that despite dominating Cork city and County the AFIL did not succeed as they hoped nationally and the nation they envisaged did not win out despite their best and gallant efforts. But its impact on Irish politics did not disappear and it was challenged in other ways behind the scenes. It supported Sinn Fein in the 1918 election. It is not accidental or a coincidence that Cork became a very effective hub in the War of Independence and the personnel involved alone shows the influence of the AFIL. After all, neither Sinn Fein nor the IRB had a mass following and it was the AFIL's transference of their support to Sinn Fein that made the War of Independence what it was across Cork.

The AFIL and the ILLA had succeeded on the Land issue and on the Labour issue and were just as determined to succeed in getting political independence when the need and opportunity arose following the 1918 Election. Success breeds success.

Manus O'Riordan described the Republican movement of the War of Independence in Cork as the 'Continuity AFIL.' (*Irish Political Review*, December 2013). In his book Gerard O'Rourke recounts that it was at a meeting of the AFIL in Donoughmore as early as 29 March 1914 that it was proposed to set up "A corps of Volunteers" in the area (page 59).



1910 ELECTION RESULTS SHOWING THE AFIL SUCCESS IN CORK

THE IRISH LAND AND LABOUR ASSOCIATION

As mentioned earlier farm labourers were at the bottom of the pile in social and economic terms. Their conditions were truly desperate. There were many attempts at improving their lot but this proved almost impossible. The land and national issue always took primacy. Also by their very situation it was difficult for consistent organised attempts at improving their lot. Normal attempts via trade unionism were not suitable. They were something like the peasantry that Charlie Marx described as being like a sack of potatoes - difficult to keep and act together. So there had to be an Irish solution to this Irish problem. The key issue as it was for all classes was the need for security. And the key to security was a version of the security that the tenancy farmers achieved in the form of land and housing.

But how was that to be achieved? This needed resources and power. These do not drop from the sky and the farm labourers had neither.

The man who personified how this was to be changed was D D Sheehan and it was done through organisation of the labourers and the exercise of their political power at government and local government level – the latter has just been established 1898. The suffrage had been extended to most males in 1884 so they had muscle to be used. The ILLA was formed in Kanturk in 1894 and had 98 branches by 1900 and 150 by 1908. D D was elected to Parliament in 1901 the first Irish Labour Member of Parliament. The highlight of his efforts was the 1906 enabling Labourers Act for the construction of labourers' cottages.

This was a unique project. Government support for house building was a novelty and this was the first of its kind. Another example of '*Constructive Unionism*.' For example, such a scheme was not applied to dealing with slums which continued for decades afterwards. The farm labourers had become organised to get what they wanted and got it. There was several aspects to this:

- It was the Western world's first large-scale public housing scheme. It inspired Fianna Fail's house building of the 1930s.
- The basic financial setup under the Act was that 36% of the cost would be met by UK taxpayers. This was economic heresy at the time.
- The money that local authorities had to borrow was over a longer period (nearly 70 years rather than 50) and at a much lower interest rate (3.25% rather than 4.5%).
- The new terms were generous enough that many rural districts could make a profit on the scheme.

- As a consequence, the building of labourers' cottages increased significantly. Everyone was a winner! The rent was one shilling a week and they cost approximately £200 to build.

It's amazing how housing remains an endemic problem in our type of society. Over 50 years ago I was associated with Ted Tynan, a founder and sponsor of this Festival, in efforts to alleviate the need for public housing here in the city. And housing remains an issue if not THE social issue today which Ted has long pursued along with other social issues. It is an interesting and amazing thing that it was solved in rural Ireland well over a century ago. And it's not rocket science on how it was and can be done. Serious government involvement is the key.

The Labourer's cottage was more than a cottage. The cottage and the acre was in effect a welfare state for the labourer. He need never go hungry, which was not then unknown, and so his bargaining power for his labour was strong; the family could run a small business from such a cottage and an acre and I have personal experience of that. What would now be taken for granted was then unusual and innovative. A lot of planning was involved. Design were taken very seriously and health was a prime concern.

- They were slated, concrete built, two storey, facing south on a hill if possible, concrete floors, fireplace in the centre of the house, not the gable end, and in every room.
- There was a spring well and a garden and sometimes a small wood for shelter.
- They were better than the usual farmers' houses which was thatch and mud built.
- They were built on the roadside for easy travel and convenience - very important.
- And with a half door. Anybody know the significance of the ubiquitous half door? For ventilation against dampness - a most unhealthy aspect of existing houses.

How many were built? By 1921 there were over 50, 000 built across the country. The biggest proportion in Cork and Munster. How many people did that represent? Do the maths. As in my case there could be three generations and even up to 10 people per cottage. Families were not then nuclear averaging 1.34 children as today. You could have half a million people catered for – a whole class of people. And for some mad reason these one off houses schemes are now condemned as anti- social. By the 1980s 80% of them were owner occupied.

Any classical scholar among might be interested in the view of the Roman philosopher and poet, Horace, about the perfect place required to live the ideal life: "*A piece of land, not so very large, which would contain a garden, and near the house a spring of ever-flowing water, and beyond these a bit of wood.*" This is almost a perfect specification (2,000 years old) for the labourers' cottages that I know personally and, having come from one such, I think I can confirm that Horace was on the right lines.

To appreciate the feeling of pride and regard – and affection - for these cottages that was created I came across the result of a competition organised by the local authority for the best kept cottage and the winner was my next door neighbour in Aubane, maybe we came second, but the description of the winner give us a flavour of what such a cottage was and meant to the occupants: "*The first two cottages were excellent and reflect great credit on their occupiers. Kelleher's front garden is entered by a gravel walk, with a square on the left hand, fitted with flowers and some fruit bushes, the general effect being very bright. On the right is a broad gravelled sweep, leading up to a galvanised iron porch, 9ft. x 6ft. put up by the occupier and which was partly used as a storeroom. The kitchen was bright and clean; the parlour, used as a bedroom, had been ceiled with wood by the occupier, and was a very bright, fresh room, which remark applies to the other two bedrooms. The bed quilts were made by the daughter, and the sheets spun by her mother. There was also a large wardrobe, made by the son; the backyard was clean, and contained a donkey stable put up by the occupier.*" (The Cork Examiner, 18/9/1906). And I can tell you that the work described here continued across the generations and a luxury kitchen making business was set up in the yard by the current generation.

How was the land acquired? There was a moral case of course in that if farmers deserved to have security in their land then farm labourers were entitled to some security as well. But morality butters no parsnips. Farmers then like all property owners are not noted for giving away bits of their land. There was compulsory purchase under the 1906 Act. If a case could be made to the local authority that a cottage or cottages were required the authority was obliged to acquire the land and build them. This is where the organised ILLA came into play with their organised political muscle. There is a play somewhere about this but I did not note the reference but one can imagine the tensions involved. I know that farmers can be still well aware that cottages were built on their land and for example some imagine they should have first refusal if a cottage came on the market.

A few final thoughts.

- The AFIL created a cleavage in Irish politics that has persisted but unacknowledged and helped divide the hitherto monolithic Party approach and create our party system well before the so-called ‘*civil war*’ divide. AFIL merged with Sinn Fein during the war of independence and that influence was inherited by Fianna Fail. Frank Gallagher personified this: editor of the *Cork Free Press*, a major contributor to the Dail’s *Irish Bulletin* and first editor of *The Irish Press*. Fianna Fail wanted O’Brien to stand for it in the 1927 election. On the other side there was Redmondism, Free Statism, Blueshirts and Fine Gael.
- The ILLA gave rise to a rural Labour Party, very unusual. That Party has not flourished as well in urban settings.
- James Connolly does not come into the picture. I don’t think he could relate to it insofar as he aware of it. No disrespect to him and his greatness but he was not of the conflicts and context that these movements dealt with.
- My friends on the Left are not very enthusiastic about the achievements of either movement. It does not fit into their ideology and is another reason why they are written out of history. It all seems so conservative and property orientated and not ‘*revolutionary*.’ They are dismissive and explain them away rather than explain them, seeing them exclusively through a class prism.
- I like to remind these people of how the greatest revolutionary of them all, Lenin, came to power. He boiled down his policy to “*Peace, Land and bread*.” Very conservative demands in themselves but why did these demands turn the world upside down?
- In their own modest way these people of our grandfather’s generation played the hand that was given them and they played it well – they succeeded in delivering peace on the land issue, land for the people and gave themselves more security about where their bread came from. There were no more famines – a hitherto regular feature of Irish life.
- What they did was truly transformative even revolutionary but it is not fashionable to say so about them by the Left today.
- For what they achieved they should be recognised and honoured and the Festival is to be congratulated for giving them their due.

There is a lot more to be said about those movements as what I have described here is only a sketch of what they achieved. Thanks to the Festival organisers for recognising their importance.

Jack Lane












From this.....

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| <h1>Labourer's Cottages</h1> | |  |  |  |
| <p>Simon Bates</p> | |  |  |  |
| <p>Launch: 6pm, 25th June 2019 Running: 26th June - 31st July</p> | |  |  |  |
| <p>Irish Architectural Archive 45 Merrion Square, Dublin 2</p> | |  |  |  |
| <p>2019. photoireland.org iarc.ie</p> | | | | |

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