

Gladstone and Ireland

Gladstone tried repeatedly to resolve the problem of Ireland. **Matthew Roberts** argues that his efforts were doomed to failure because of his own prejudices and preconceptions.

Gladstone and the Irish Question

Writing to Lord Tennyson during the electrically charged atmosphere of April 1886, Gladstone indignantly commented that ‘for forty-two at least out of the fifty-four years of my public life, Ireland has had a rather dominant influence over it. Which is those of my opponents that has had occasion to study it as resolutely & for the same time?’¹ With comments such as this it is easy to see why some historians have seen Gladstone as ‘a crusader for the cause of the redress of Irish grievances.’² After receiving the Queen’s letter inviting him to form a government in December 1868, Gladstone declared that his mission was to pacify Ireland. But what are we to make of this famous declaration? Was this tantamount to a rejection of his previous stance, in which he had so arrestingly defended the Act of Union between Britain and Ireland? Did this mark a new beginning in Gladstone’s thinking towards Ireland? In short, does Gladstone’s relationship with Ireland after 1868 justify the notion of a special liberating mission? This article seeks to question that assumption, suggesting that there were powerful strands of continuity in Gladstone’s thinking towards Ireland.

Insofar as having a consistent objective throughout his political career, Gladstone worked for the closer integration of Ireland into the United Kingdom. Above all, this article is concerned with the extent to which Gladstone’s initiatives towards Ireland were self-undermining in the years when his second and third governments were forced to respond to the rising power of Parnell, and the Catholic and agrarian nationalist forces that he headed. It will be argued that Gladstone’s interpretation of Irish problems was grounded in his social conservatism and that his constant efforts to export this into Ireland, epitomised by his constant and ill-suited desire for

the Irish landed class to play a leading role in Irish society, undermined his higher objective of strengthening the link between Ireland and Britain.

Gladstone the unionist

Standing before an audience at Southport in 1867, Gladstone said that his ultimate objective towards Ireland was ‘that end of which I never despair – viz. of redeeming the reproach of total incapacity to assimilate to ourselves an island within three hours of our shores.’³ In this respect, Gladstone’s thinking towards Ireland had not changed and was consistent with the Unionist stance of his earlier political years. In his younger years, he certainly appeared as a Unionist *par excellence* in his book – *The State in its Relations with the Church* (1838) – that so ardently defended the established (Anglican) Church of Ireland, which represented only some ten percent of the population. Similarly, in 1853, Gladstone, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, extended income tax to Ireland. By providing a unified scheme of taxation for the three kingdoms Gladstone can be seen as attempting to consolidate the Act of Union. The actions of his first government further confirm his Unionist stance. He was no longer convinced that the Established Church fortified the Union; in fact, he had come to believe that it worked against it. Thus, somewhat paradoxically, his disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869 ultimately sprang from conservative intentions. Equally, his Land Act of 1870 was designed to reduce the enmity between the landlord and the tenant. The events of the year 1868, therefore, did not constitute a *volte face* in Gladstone’s thinking towards Ireland. His desire to strengthen the link between the two countries had not changed, and the only difference after 1868 was



'Waiting for the landlord', by Charles Keene, *Punch*, 1878. 'Sure, Tirince, I hope the ould gintleman hasn't mit wid an accidint!!!'

that he aimed to show that Ireland could be pacified by reform from Westminster, whether that be disestablishment in 1869 or the Home Rule Bill in 1886. The rationale behind such thinking was the assumption that once Irish grievances had been redressed, the animosity that Ireland had once felt would dissipate and the country would be reconciled to the Union.

However, one should not elevate this thread of consistency to a level which views the work of Gladstone's second and third governments as representing the logical conclusion to that of his first. Indeed, Gladstone not merely regarded *his* work towards Ireland as complete during the mid to late 1870s, but he was convinced that Ireland's main grievances had been resolved. As he told the Birmingham Liberal Association in June 1877, '... what has been done for Ireland will have its fruits, and the little inconveniences and secondary evils of which we may now, perhaps, complain ... will pass away.'⁴ The work of Professor Matthew has succeeded in throwing more cold water on the notion that Gladstone had a special mission with regard to Ireland. He has argued that Gladstone sincerely sought retirement and had taken steps in 1875 to that end by resigning the leadership of the Liberal Party, declining public occasions and minimising his presence in London. Since he had retired, in the years after 1875 Gladstone's return to political life had to be temporary and justi-

fied by 'exceptional circumstances', and as such, 'made the self-admission of ambition in any usual sense impossible.'⁵ Thus, it cannot be argued that Gladstone somehow perceived his work towards Ireland as incomplete. Whilst it was not long before Gladstone re-entered the political arena, it was the exceptional circumstances created by the evils of Lord Beaconsfield's foreign policy that drew him back into politics. Ireland could not have been further from his mind, even when he resumed office in April 1880.

However, the fact that Gladstone had washed his hands of Ireland during the 1870s by no means constitutes the greatest argument against the notion that he possessed a special liberating mission. For when Gladstone was forced to turn his attention back towards Ireland in the 1880s it could be argued that his attitudes and actions were counter-productive. This was primarily the consequence of his strict adherence to a socially conservative outlook. It is to a discussion of his social conservatism that we must now turn.

Gladstone the social conservative

Gladstone had a highly articulated view of society – especially rural society – and how it was to be ordered. For him, society was and should be deferential, with the upper class taking the lead

through their acceptance of public duty and social responsibility on behalf of the whole community. In turn, this justified their privileges and ensured the deference of the lower orders to their social superiors, thus producing social harmony. With regard to rural society, Gladstone, along with the majority of Liberals, and especially the Whig landlords, was loath to interfere in the landlord-tenant relationship, believing that the symbiosis of the two classes was fundamental to the perpetuation of social harmony. It was therefore most important to preserve the sanctity of contract that governed landed relations between the two parties if that symbiosis was to be maintained. In short, for Gladstone, the aristocracy provided society's natural leaders locally and nationally: if social harmony was to be preserved, he believed that this interdependent relationship between the ruling class and the lower orders had to be maintained at all costs. As far as he was concerned, this was no less true of Ireland than of mainland Britain.⁶

Unfortunately, in reality Ireland was different. What Gladstone refused to accept as final was that the upper classes in Ireland were no longer in a position to play the role that he would have them play. As Allen Warren has argued: 'While historians may take a more tolerant view of the ascendancy⁷ after the Famine than they did formerly, it is nevertheless clear that by the 1880s their authority was being undermined by an increasingly articulate, assertive and Catholic subculture ...'⁸

The work of the late William Feingold on the boards of guardians has confirmed this. These boards were established in Ireland under the Poor Relief Act of 1838 and along with the municipal and town authorities, they were the only part of the Irish administration that contained elected elements. Therefore, a large part of the tenant farming class had the right to vote as ratepayers in elections to the boards, while the more substantial of the class had the right actually to sit as guardians. The important point is that despite the fact that the boards were still weighted in favour of the landlords, as Emmet Larkin concedes, 'the tenants had the means, if they had the will, to oust the

landlords from power.⁹ By the 1870s the tenants were no longer interested in cooperating with the landlords on the boards. With the exception of Ulster, control very quickly passed to the tenants. Ultimately, what the boards represented was a microcosm of the changes that were happening throughout Irish society. In this sense the land war of 1879–81, the result of an acute agrarian crisis, merely acted as a catalyst in the transfer of power to the tenants at the expense of the landlords.

Feingold argued that this process had begun in the early 1870s and was completed by 1886. Thus, the power of the landlords, which had rested on the deference of the tenants, had by 1886, again excepting Ulster, evaporated.¹⁰ In spite of Samuel Clark's attempts to portray Irish agrarian society with a more complex and nuanced structure, with different classes having different interests, even he is forced to conclude that 'in the post-famine period the stage was occupied almost entirely by collective conflict between independent landholders and the land-owning class.'¹¹ Similarly, whilst Mark Bence-Jones is surely correct to remind us that there were 'plenty of good landlords', even amongst the absentee ones like Viscount Middleton, he is also forced to admit that 'Irish landlords by the 1870s had come to be regarded as hard-hearted evictors and rack-renters', and that 'relations between landlords and tenants were never quite the same' after 1880.¹²

The extent to which this was actually true is irrelevant. The important point is that this was how many landlords were being *perceived*, thanks to nationalist propaganda. The Irish Nationalists worked to exploit and deepen the rift in Irish society between the landlord and tenant by portraying Irish landlords as exploitative foreigners who had come across from England and expropriated the land and enserfed the Irish people. Religious divisions were also capitalised upon by the nationalists as they portrayed the landlords not merely as foreign, but also as Protestant, thus serving to exacerbate the divisions in Irish society since the majority of tenants, outside Ulster, were largely Catholic.

But how are we to account for the persistence of Gladstone's social conservatism, especially when it seemed to be so inappropriate? Did he simply not understand the Irish question? Or did he lack information about real conditions in Ireland? Alternatively, are we to believe that he did have the necessary information, and that he understood conditions in Ireland only too well, but vainly hoped to change them by his various schemes? It will be argued that it is this last interpretation which presents itself most convincingly. When circumstances forced Gladstone to respond to the situation in Ireland in the years 1880 to 1886, he sought to counteract the trends in Irish society by attempting to buttress the waning power of the upper class in Ireland. This will be illustrated with reference to the problem of law and order, his reluctance to interfere with landlord-tenant relations, epitomised by his aversion to extensive schemes of peasant purchase and his attempts to deflect that very issue with the need for Irish local government.

When Gladstone's second government was eventually forced to respond to the lawlessness of the Irish countryside, as a consequence of the acute agrarian crisis, it was Gladstone who offered the most sustained resistance to the demands of his Irish Secretary, W. E. Forster, for the suspension of habeas corpus. At first glance, it certainly

seemed that a progressive Gladstone was restraining a repressive Forster, since his Chief Secretary was willing to sacrifice the liberty of all Irish subjects to achieve his ends. Gladstone indeed spoke out against this. By such actions he placed himself at the head of the radical resistance, who could be expected to be hostile to such an infringement of civil liberties. However, Gladstone's apparent 'radicalism' was a mirage. Ultimately, his objections stemmed from his social conservatism. In his view, it was not the job of the government in London or Dublin to be overly involved in maintaining law and order. He thought Ireland had too many policemen already, and they were proving far too costly.¹³ It was ultimately the responsibility of the communities themselves, with the landed classes leading the way. Thus, Gladstone could write to Forster, on 9 December 1880, that 'it is difficult to feel much admiration for those landlords whose Resolutions you sent me ... surely they ought to have gone beyond the scope of mere complaint.'¹⁴

Unfortunately, this was a forlorn hope given the position of the landed elite in Ireland. Whilst Gladstone eventually acquiesced to Forster's demand at the end of December 1880 – even the radicals had accepted, by 25 November, that coercion was inevitable – as Warren comments, this had more to do with him being isolated 'in his own cabinet,

Armed constabulary at Lisselane, the home of William Bence-Jones in West Cork, during the Land War (*Illustrated London News*). Bence-Jones was supposedly an 'improving landlord'.



but also through him not being prepared to articulate fully an alternative coercion policy ...¹⁵ This is merely further confirmation of Gladstone's refusal to face up to the prevailing conditions in Ireland: he did not need, as far as he was concerned, to articulate an alternative plan since it was not really the government's job to do so. That he still clung to this view is evident by the fact that even a year later he was still hoping for a landlord counter-attack. It is remarkable that he did not realise that even if this was realisable it would merely have added fuel to the flames of discontent – indeed it would have been the worst type of coercion possible. Any argument that Gladstone lacked sufficient information about the position of the landlords cannot be entertained. As we have seen, he had been presented with resolutions from some of the landlords themselves, yet he was still hoping, somewhat foolishly, that the landlords would reassert themselves.

The problem of land

Gladstone's social conservatism was revealed with even more zeal over the question of land. Whether one looks at the debates in the last months of 1880 or the eventual land purchase bill that accompanied his Home Rule Bill in 1886, he was most reluctant to interfere with the landlord-tenant relationship, refusing to countenance any

scheme that threatened the power of the landlord. He proved to be even more difficult over land in 1880–81 than over coercion. Gladstone was adamant that any land reform had to be 'on the lines & basis of the [1870] Land Act' and 'give to the Irish occupier an *increased* security of tenure' as opposed to *fixity* of tenure – one of the dreaded 'three Fs', the other two being fair rent and the right of free sale.¹⁶ This would have removed the landlord's ultimate right to dispose of his property as he saw fit, converting the landlords into mere 'incumbrances', thereby challenging Gladstone's sacred principles of social harmony; consequently he looked upon this with 'considerable apprehension'.¹⁷

Initially therefore, he had supported the Longfield proposal – a complicated compensation mechanism where the landlord or the tenant would pay a financial penalty to the other if either made an unreasonable demand over rent. It is not surprising that Gladstone preferred this and similar plans since they involved no direct interference with landlord-tenant relations and above all, were designed to bring about cooperation between the two parties. Once again, this failed to take account of the realities of the Irish countryside, which was hardly conducive to the success of half-hearted, highly complex intellectual schemes that only provided compen-

sation for tenants *if* evicted rather than protection *from* eviction.

Despite this, Gladstone was reluctant to move away from such schemes, even though the interim reports from the government's own Bessborough Commission (established at the end of 1880 to investigate the Irish land problem) suggested that complicated measures like the Longfield proposal would be ineffective.¹⁸ This is clear evidence of Gladstone's failure to deviate from an inappropriate course of action in spite of contrary evidence. Even when he had accepted that some form of tenurial reform was necessary he would not compromise his principles. In the preparation period of the Land Bill in 1881, he virtually hijacked the process and could therefore present to the cabinet on 5 March his 'limiting conditions ... not to transfer the kernel of the property to the tenant from the landlord', while the bill was 'to leave open the way for an eventual return to free contract.' Above all, the bill should not compel 'people to things on the passing of the Act, but only empowering them.'¹⁹ Thus, he refused to enshrine the three Fs in the bill – despite being presented with overwhelming evidence arguing for their incorporation. He remained implacably opposed to the concept of fixity of tenure and so it was not mentioned in the final bill.

Gladstone also refused to extend the bill to include those in arrears and leaseholders – arguably the most needy – on the grounds that it would have represented an unwarranted interference by the state with specific arrangements and obligations enacted between the landlord and tenant or leaseholder.²⁰ While Gladstone could hide behind the argument that the House of Lords would have been implacably opposed to the Land Bill if it had been more radical, at the same time it cannot be denied that he had allowed his outdated principles to dictate the final form that the bill would take, in spite of overwhelming contrary evidence: Forster's analysis of the Irish situation, based on the numerous reports and correspondence that he had received (many of which were from landlords), convinced him that nothing short of the 'three Fs' would suffice. Gladstone

'The burning of the Duke of Leinster's leases in Kildare' (*Illustrated London News*, 8 January 1881)



himself was forced to concede that 'evidence comes in, rather more than expected, of a desire for a measure such as the brewers call treble X.'²¹

To that end, it could be said that the Land Act of 1881 was conservative in the sense that it was designed to prop up the waning power of the landed classes in Ireland. It was this consideration that made Gladstone hostile to large-scale land purchase schemes enabling tenants to buy their land. In his eyes this would not merely have interfered with landlord rights; rather it would have ousted the traditional landlord class once and for all, thereby preventing the upper classes from playing their crucial role in his deferential model of society. When the Bessborough Commission seemed to be going in the direction of purchase, Gladstone thought it 'alarming' and believed the Commissioners to be 'going rather far in the use of their powers.'²² Here again, we see Gladstone's obstinacy in the face of evidence and opinions that were contrary to his own. He believed it was important to keep the conversion of tenants into owners to a minimum: hence his insistence on the tenant advancing a considerable sum himself under the purchase clauses of both the 1870 and 1881 Land Acts. The 1881 Act created only 733 owners in the years 1881–85. This consideration was to underpin all Gladstone's attitudes and actions towards Ireland henceforth. Indeed, the years 1882–86 revealed him to be not merely conservative, but even reactionary; he increasingly deployed Machiavellian tactics to stave off the land purchase schemes which were increasingly coming to the fore not only in his own party, but also amongst the Tories and the Parnellites.

It could be plausibly argued that Gladstone's aversion to purchase seriously retarded a potentially effective solution of Irish problems. While Gladstone was certainly not alone in his attitude towards purchase – some Whigs and radicals were equally unenthusiastic – it could be argued that land purchase was much less problematic than the 'three Fs'. Notwithstanding the general distrust of the Parnellites, and doubts concerning the ability of

the Irish to repay loans that would be advanced for schemes of peasant land purchase, many of the Whigs were in favour of 'an emergency relief bill to enable Irish tenants to fulfil their contractual obligations' in the short term. As for the long term, they advocated a land purchase scheme.²³ In this sense, the supposedly reactionary Whigs were in advance of Gladstone, as their endorsement of a scheme of land purchase was tantamount to an acceptance that the landed class were no longer in a position to play a leading role in Irish society, and also that this state of affairs was largely irreversible – a fact that Gladstone would not accept. This is not to suggest that an extensive purchase scheme would have resolved all of Ireland's grievances. Nevertheless, a generous scheme of peasant purchase, against the background of a relief measure, would almost certainly have been more effective than Gladstone's limited Land Act, since it would have recognised, and indeed assisted, irreversible changes that were under way in Irish society. It would certainly have taken the wind out of the Land League's sails. (The Land League had been established in 1879 to maintain the momentum of the agrarian unrest and direct it towards nationalist ends.) Of course, Gladstone could offer that timeless excuse against such initiatives: it would simply have cost too much. As Lord Derby commented, 'he is more moderate in his proposals than even the moderate section of the cabinet.'²⁴



'The Grand Old Magician's Irish Policy' (*Illustrated London News* 24 April 1886)

That such schemes were attractive to Parnell and his group in the House of Commons is evident by Gladstone's manoeuvres in 1882. When the Land Act's deficiencies became all too evident, the Conservatives aimed to capitalise on the Act's weaknesses by evolving schemes of land purchase, which, as Gladstone realised, had the very real potential of drawing the Parnellites into the Tory camp. Gladstone therefore tried to drive a wedge between the Conservatives and the Parnellites. It was in this context that the so-called 'Kilmainham negotiations' resulted. Masterminded by Joseph Chamberlain and Captain O'Shea (Parnell's go-between), Parnell's desire to leave prison and work for a settlement of the arrears question provided a 'golden moment' for Gladstone: their proposal to amend the Land Act showed that they were willing to work *with* rather than *against* the government. By secretly endorsing the negotiations, this enabled Gladstone to avert the possibility of land purchase,



Fighting the Land League monster

and end the convergence of the Conservatives and the Parnellites.²⁵ More importantly, the episode revealed the extent to which Gladstone was willing to go in order to avoid the introduction of measures for Ireland that contravened his principles: he was quite prepared to settle the arrears question by a gift, rather than a loan, thereby perpetuating sanctity of contract, but he was not prepared to loan large sums of money for peasant purchase.

Another diversionary tactic used by Gladstone to avoid the issue of land purchase was his insistence on the primacy of establishing local government in Ireland. Even though there was a considerable body of opinion advocating large schemes of peasant purchase – in and out of the Liberal Party – Gladstone could not see his way to such large schemes until local government had been established. He certainly had no desire to make the British government the largest landowner in Ireland; this could have soured relations beyond recognition, especially in times of economic hardship when tenants would have found it impossible to repay government loans. Moreover, Gladstone argued that such schemes would not work unless local bodies had been es-

tablished, which in turn could coordinate and manage purchase schemes. Hence Gladstone could say: '[Lord] Cavendish has framed a plan of finance for the purchase clauses ... But he has no body to place between the purchasing tenant & the Treasury.'²⁶ Therefore, Gladstone argued that local bodies would, in effect act as a guarantor for the English money lent for purchase.²⁷ In the absence of such bodies, he did not see how the Irish tenant could 'be safely accepted as a debtor on a large scale to the Imperial Treasury.'²⁸

Once again, Gladstone could hide behind the offer of local government tomorrow to keep the Parnellites loyal, while staving off purchase *before* local government was introduced on the grounds that it was too much of a liability. Thus, the prerequisite for any extensive scheme of peasant purchase was the establishment of responsible bodies in Ireland. Gladstone never deviated from this.

More importantly, Gladstone believed that the introduction of local government would train people in matters of public responsibilities at a local level, which he always believed brought out an intrinsic conservatism in people. Local government taught people to:

understand political rights and understand political duty, and, understanding the relations which prevail between right on the one side and duty on the other, they carry with them a talisman which is a safeguard...against those dangers which have threatened ... other great and distinguished nations.²⁹

Thus, Gladstone thought that the 'many questions connected with Irish Land & Public works' which were 'most dangerous', could 'only be rendered innocuous by our having really responsible & rather weighty bodies to deal with.'³⁰ Publicly therefore,

Gladstone could deflect such schemes on the grounds that they were too expensive, whilst in private he was confident that once taught public responsibility, natural conservatism would prevail and 'local communities would be equally cautious about any schemes to abolish landlordism at public expense.'³¹ As will be seen in Gladstone's Home Rule Bill of 1886, devolution, in his mind, offered a perfect opportunity to restore the landlords to their rightful place as society's natural leaders.

Gladstone's continued opposition to land purchase in the years after 1882 adds further credibility to the notion that he was not prepared to sacrifice his principles of social conservatism under any circumstances. By 1883 it was clear that there was still a widespread desire for land purchase. That the National League advocated such schemes is not surprising given that its objective was the annihilation of landlordism; but there was also pressure for purchase within the Liberal Party, especially amongst the radicals. Furthermore, it was still the central plank of Conservative policy, as demonstrated by Lord Hamilton's parliamentary motion to extend purchase. Gladstone revealed that he had not altered his attitude to the purchase question and that he continued to believe that the maintenance of the landlord-tenant relationship was crucial to the future stability of the Irish countryside.³² Moreover, he characteristically put his faith in the previous inadequate legislation; he believed that the Land Act had addressed the Irish land problem in its entirety.³³

Unfortunately for Gladstone, by 1885 the cries for an extensive scheme of land purchase had become substantially louder and Lord Spencer, Irish Viceroy since the Phoenix Park murders in 1882, had also become convinced. Opinion in Ireland was now virtually unanimous in its desire for a large scheme of land purchase. Whilst this is not the place to discuss the complexities of the year 1885 and the events leading up to the downfall of his second ministry and Gladstone's subsequent move towards Home Rule, suffice it to say that in perfect continuity with his objectives in his second government, his social conservatism was at the route of his thinking

with regard to what he was aiming for in Ireland in 1886.

The flaws in the Home Rule attempt

The final part of this article will argue that the Gladstonian assumptions that shaped the final Home Rule legislation, including the land purchase bill, marked the apogee of Gladstone's foolish attempts to try to counter the changes that had taken place in Irish society concerning the upper class. Consequently, the two interconnected bills of 1886 were seriously flawed, and even if they had become law, it is doubtful that they could have satisfied opinion in Ireland. The fundamental weakness of the schemes, as argued, was Gladstone's unyielding desire to restore the Irish upper class to their rightful position, thereby going against the grain in large parts of Ireland.

He was still hostile to large schemes of peasant purchase. As he told Spencer on 23 December 1885:

There is, however, something most grave in the idea of bringing about a wholesale emigration of the resident proprietors and depriving society of those who should be its natural heads and leaders.³⁴

The drafting of a land purchase bill did not constitute a *volte face* on Gladstone's behalf. Essentially, it had been forced upon him by Spencer and Morley, whose support was paramount if Gladstone was to form a viable third ministry and a reconstituted Liberal Party that was not just concerned with the sectional interest of Home Rule. Their condition for support of a Home Rule Bill was the settlement of the land question. On this issue Spencer was clearly in advance of Gladstone and seemed more willing to accept the changes that were prevalent in Irish society, as a letter written on 2 February 1886 illustrates:

I therefore have come to the conclusion that we must try to come to terms with the National Party in Ireland ... It is the only chance of settling Ireland ... It is odious to have to deal with men who have tolerated methods of agitation ... but they are the chosen representatives of Ireland ... *The Landlords must be bought out.* [My italics]³⁵

Gladstone, however, refused to accept this; he 'subscribed to every word' in Spencer's letter except the phrase "bought out"³⁶ That Gladstone was still hoping for the landlord to play an active role in Irish society is further exemplified by his opposition to compelling the tenant to purchase if the landlord chose to sell (the latter had the option). Thus on 13 March 1886 Gladstone prepared the following cabinet memorandum:

Are we bound in honour or policy to do more than give to the landlords of Ireland fair optional terms of withdrawal from their position? Why should we not do this, and having done this, leave the land question to Ireland herself?³⁷

In perfect continuity with his previous arguments over purchase, Gladstone still believed that if it was left to the Irish, once they had been given Home Rule, their intrinsic conservatism would come to the fore and they would want to preserve the position of the landlord.

With relative ease, on 20 March 1886 he reduced the sum of money that was to be made available to buy out the landlords from £120 million to £60 million. Whilst any explanation of his motives for reducing the sum must take account of the widespread unease in many circles concerning the potential and substantial risk to the Treasury if the Irish defaulted on their repayments – especially since such large amounts of money were involved – it is surely no coincidence that Gladstone had been forced to agree to compulsory purchase on behalf of the tenant five days before.³⁸ Gladstone's decision to halve the amount of money available can therefore be seen as a desperate attempt to counteract the compulsory element of the bill, severely curtailing the Irish landlords' ability to sell, preventing them from leaving Ireland and thus compelling them to take an active role in the newly reconstructed Irish society. Against this background, in Gladstone's eyes, land purchase threatened to un-

dermine his objective of social reconstruction, and for that reason one must conclude that he was no more reconciled to extensive purchase than he had ever been.

Conclusion

In his 'Notes and Queries on the Irish Demands', published in 1887, Gladstone remained firmly convinced that:

The natural condition of a healthy society is, that governing functions should be discharged by the leisured class ... when the leisured class is disposed as it is to a very large extent in Ireland, that indicates that a rot has found its way into the structure of society³⁹

In Gladstone's opinion the rift that separated the gentry from the people had been produced by the Union. This had led to landlord absenteeism and had transferred 'the centre of Ireland's special interests and placed it out of Ireland.'⁴⁰ Accordingly, when a legislative body was re-established in Dublin,

'the position held by the leisured and landed classes of Ireland as towards the people, will be entirely changed.' Home Rule would therefore restore the Irish upper

class to their rightful position as society's leaders since they would no longer be associated with an alien country. Gladstone believed that the Irish were at heart very conservative: 'The religion, the character, and the old traditions of the Irish are all in favour of them leaning upon the leisured classes, and desiring to be represented by them.'⁴¹ It was this desire that underpinned Gladstone's design for an Irish assembly. His ultimate purpose was to bring together the most important classes, ranging from the upper class to the small farmer and instil a spirit of cooperation.⁴² Whilst Gladstone's adoption of Home Rule had indeed arisen out of his changed attitude towards the Act of Union – he had become convinced of its historic unjustness and that it was ill-conceived – he had not ceased to work for the

'The natural condition of a healthy society is, that governing functions should be discharged by the leisured class ...'

closer integration of Ireland into the United Kingdom. On the contrary, his adoption of Home Rule was an acknowledgment that if this integration was truly to be achieved then the relationship between the two islands needed to be revised. Gladstone was no less a unionist in 1886 than he had been in 1838, 1853 or in 1868. The only difference in 1886 was that he had become a unionist with a small 'u' rather than with a capital 'U'.

Unfortunately, the design envisaged by Gladstone was at odds with the stark reality of Irish society. As argued above, the tenants not merely had little desire to cooperate with the landlords outside of Ulster; they had become hostile to them. How then, are we to account for Gladstone's continuing and unyielding attachment to such outdated principles? Was he simply ignorant of developments in Irish society? Given that Irish problems had occupied much of his time in the previous six years, such an explanation is hardly convincing. Admittedly, Gladstone's sources of information in 1885–86 were somewhat limited and partial. Apart from Parnell, who subscribed to a social conservatism very similar to Gladstone's, he made no effort to gauge other nationalist opinion. However, any argument which suggests that Gladstone was unaware of the Irish upper classes' position cannot be sustained. He had been receiving reports ever since Forster was Irish Secretary, and letters from landlords themselves, which should have left him in no doubt about their diminished power. As we have seen, Spencer continued to echo these views in 1886.

Given his resolve to re-engineer Ireland to his social specifications, it is doubtful that Gladstone could have been swayed from his objectives even if had been better informed about developments in Irish society. Indeed, it may well have been the case that it would have made him *more* determined, having learnt the real extent of the landlords' diminished power. As Professor Vincent comments, Gladstone 'could not see much beyond a reformed landlordism because he had no wish to...'⁴³ In reality it was simple obstinacy that prevented Gladstone from jettisoning his social conservatism in relation to Ireland. Deep

down, even he realised that the landowner was 'the salient point of friction.'⁴⁴ But such an admission merely serves to confirm his obstinacy.

Above all, it can be argued that his refusal to countenance any extensive scheme of land purchase served to perpetuate the discord prevalent in Irish society. As Professor Matthew comments, 'the continuance of the overwhelming Protestant land-owning class meant that there would be more land agitation, which in turn would mean more coercion ... it was the landowners that were the cause of the disorder.'⁴⁵ Whilst it can be argued that Gladstone's initiatives towards Ireland stemmed from the unhappy realisation that the Irish upper classed were not in a position to act as he would have them do, the important point is that he refused to accept that this was final. As a consequence, his initiatives were not merely aimed to allow the upper classes to resume their leading position if circumstances permitted; rather, they were designed to encourage the upper class to play a leading role by reversing, or at the very least halting, their deteriorating position. As a result, many of his initiatives were half-hearted and ineffective. His strict adherence to a socially conservative outlook prevented him from implementing a series of more extensive reforms which might have gone a long way to defusing some of the tensions in Ireland.

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- 1 H. C. G. Matthew (ed.), *The Gladstone Diaries*, XI (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990), Add MS 44548, f. 79., p. 540.
- 2 D. George Boyce, 'Gladstone and Ireland', in P. J. Jagger (ed.), *Gladstone* (London, The Hambledon Press, 1998), p. 105.
- 3 Quoted in J. Vincent, 'Gladstone and Ireland', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, LXIII (1977), p. 202.
- 4 *The Times*, 2 June 1877.
- 5 Matthew, *Diaries*, IX (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986), p. xxiv.
- 6 A. J. Warren, 'Gladstone, Land and Social Reconstruction', *Parliamentary History* 2 (1983), pp. 155–6.
- 7 The old land-owning families of Ireland were collectively known as the Ascendancy.
- 8 Warren, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

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