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Samuel Clark

Burning them off the land

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Terence Dooley, *Burning the Big House: the story of the Irish country house in a time of war and revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022, xiv + 352 p., index)

In this admirable work Terence Dooley examines, in its greater historical context, the burning of houses of the landowning elite in Ireland during the War of Independence and the Irish Civil War. His major argument is that these burnings had multiple motivations.

The nationalist struggle has been the most recognized motivation. The houses that were burned during the War of Independence (January 1919 to July 1921) were primarily owned by landowners who supported the Union of Britain and Ireland, some of whom allowed British forces to occupy their house at different times. The War of Independence saw cycles of tit-for-tat in which houses were burned as mutual retribution by British forces and the Irish Republican Army. During the Civil War (June 1922 to May 1923) houses that were attacked belonged mostly to those who supported the Free State established under the Treaty of 1921.

An equally determining motivation for the burning of these houses was the overthrow of the Anglo-Irish elite. The Big Houses symbolized the confiscations of the early modern period and persisting aristocratic opulence in a country of relative poverty. Their ruin was a reversal of historical wrongs and ‘a metaphor for the disappearance of a way of life’ (p. 1). More concretely, an important objective of the attacks became that of pushing the Anglo-Irish landowners to leave the country. Houses were usually burned sufficiently to dislodge their occupants; and property on an estate was seized – among other reasons – to prevent their return.

However, the motivation on which Dooley focuses more than do other writers is land redistribution. As a result of agrarian agitation that began in 1879, comprehensive legislation had been enacted in 1903 and 1909 that provided funds to assist the purchase of farms by their occupiers on terms that were good enough to encourage landowners to sell. However, in 1920 considerable land remained in the hands of Anglo-Irish owners. This was the case for several reasons, one of which was that significant acreage was still the property of landowners as demesne, untenanted land, or land let for short periods and thus not covered by the earlier legislation. The destruction of a Big House was almost always followed by demands that the land linked to it be converted into small farms. And legislation was enacted and institutions established by the Free State to facilitate this redistribution.

By bringing to light the objective of land redistribution in the destruction of Big Houses Dooley contributes to the growing literature on the struggles in Ireland of labourers and occupiers whose holdings were so small that they had to engage in paid labour. These struggles pitted these labourers and small holders against large farmers, but they also, as Dooley shows, pitted them against large landowners. The consequence of these processes was, in the short run, the dissolution of the Anglo-Irish landowning elite and, in the long run, their virtual elimination as an elite in the Free State and Republic of Ireland. Dooley estimates that around twenty percent of the Big Houses occupied in Ireland in 1906 were burned. He rightly asks why eighty percent avoided this fate. The answer is that many of these were either located in predominantly Unionist counties in the north of Ireland or conversely were owned by individuals with nationalist credentials. A more general explanation, however, is that the estates of large landowners were important to local economies and provided desperately needed employment.

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Nevertheless, the burning of a fifth of Dooley's Big Houses in less than five years was colossal by any standard. In addition, the conflicts and passions that led to these assaults made life in Ireland unattractive to Anglo-Irish landowners, encouraging them – especially those with land and family in other parts of the British Isles – to sell their properties in Ireland and leave the country. Meanwhile, the transfer of land to occupiers by legislation enacted both before and after Irish independence continued; as a result, by 1973 nearly all the land that was recorded as untenanted at the turn of the century had been eliminated (p. 249).

Dooley is critical of the predominant narrative that treats the transfer of agricultural land from landowners to owner-occupiers as politically and chronologically separate from the achievement of political independence for the twenty-six southern counties. This narrative is wrong for two reasons. First, political opposition to Irish landlordism was a continuous process that began in 1879 and continued into the 1920s and 1930s. Second, no small number of landowners in Ireland had already been selling off portions of their land – owing to their indebtedness, inability to make investments, varying returns from agriculture, and increased taxation – as early as the 1880s, and continuing well after the Irish wars.

Readers of this journal will be particularly interested in similarities and differences between the decline of the Anglo-Irish landed elite and the decline of landed elites in other European countries. A distinguishing characteristic of the Irish case is the size and speed of the land transfer. Related research has shown that, in 1876, proprietors of 1,000 acres or more owned 78 percent of the land in Ireland, and proprietors with 5,000 acres or more 48 percent. By the

early 1920s roughly two-thirds of Ireland's total area had ceased to be the property of landlords. In England and Scotland, the concentration of landownership in the nineteenth century was similar to that in Ireland. There was little transfer of land until the late nineteenth century, when landowners began to divest themselves of their properties for the same financial reasons that encouraged Irish landowners to do so. The process was, however, more gradual than in Ireland; large landowners could survive by giving up outlying portions of their estates. The transfers were more rapid in Wales, the consequence of which was that large landowners disappeared by the 1930s almost as much they had in Ireland. The transfer of land occurred more gradually in most Continental countries than in Ireland. Dramatic exceptions came when communist regimes took over in Russia and Eastern Europe; there land was transferred even more rapidly than in Ireland. Yet in these and indeed the majority of Continental countries a smaller share of the land had previously been owned by a landed elite than in Ireland.

224 A second noteworthy feature of the transfer of land ownership in Ireland was the role of the state. In most of Continental Europe states played a significant role in the abolition of seigneurial rights. They also played a role by increasing land taxes and death duties. In England the taxation of landed properties increased during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially at the hands of David Lloyd George. States might also intervene by regulating agricultural production. The British state did so during the Great War to the benefit of farmers and to the chagrin of landowners. Otherwise, the British state played a relatively limited role. Even in European countries where the transfer of land was promoted by radical state decrees, the redistribution of land was not always under direct state control. In 1917 local communities in Russia were initially in charge of land distribution. Land reform was introduced in a number of countries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but as often as not such efforts failed to bring about significant land redistribution. In contrast, not only did a series of state interventions in Ireland that began in the late nineteenth century significantly increase the control of the state over landed property, but the greatest number of transfers took place under the legislation of 1903 and 1909, which, as already mentioned, provided state financing of sales.

A third characteristic of the Anglo-Irish experience was the social cleavage between landowners and their tenants. It is not true, as frequently thought, that most Irish landlords did not live in Ireland. Nor is it true that religious sectarianism was a determining factor in the selection of houses for destruction (pp. 129-30). It is true, however, that the majority of large landowners were historically and culturally distinct from their tenantry and were closely connected with an external landed elite. Their expulsion was the expulsion of what was seen as an alien segment of Irish society. European history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was one of increasing ethnic identification and conflict. This could lead to the kind of ethnic expulsion experienced by the Anglo-Irish; it was the experience of Hungarian magnates in Slovakia and of aristocratic German-Austrian landowners in Bohemia and Moravia after the Great War. Yet, in general it was not the typical experience of aristocracies in Modern Europe.

Finally, we can consider what was different between the violence that the Anglo-Irish landed elite endured and the violence experienced by other landed elites in Europe. In order to understand what was different about the Irish case (and what was not) we need to

look more broadly at the history of rural violence in Ireland. First, we can note its continuity. At least from the middle of the eighteenth century until the 1920s there not many years in which significant rural violence did not occur. It is essential not to be deceived by notions among English elites that the rural Irish were less civilized than their English counterparts. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that that the level of violence in rural Ireland was relatively high, particularly during the first half of the nineteenth century. Then recreational violence was widespread; organized faction fights, usually resulting in deaths, were common. More instrumental violence – mostly attacks on landlords, land agents, agricultural employers, large farmers, or those engaged in law enforcement – was routinely carried out by individuals or small gangs, operating or claiming to operate as agents of communities or organized associations. The government repeatedly struggled against secret societies that sought to function as alternative states. In so far as these organizations mobilized labourers, they have been regarded by some historians as precursors to labour unions. Whatever the degree of organization, these gang attacks were not desultory; as a rule, they were planned, nocturnal, and preceded or followed by threats, oftentimes by means of threatening notices.

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This is not to say that Irish rural violence was rarely perpetrated by crowds. It frequently was, sometimes by crowds numbering in the hundreds. Although far from all violent crowds were agrarian, many certainly were. Crowds regularly gathered to compel reductions in rent or in the tithe, prevent the serving of tithe notices, thwart evictions, resist the sale of a tenant's property, or impede the occupation of land from which a tenant had been evicted. And Irish protestors also held massive demonstrations, most spectacularly during the Repeal campaign, but also before and repeatedly afterwards.

Of course, crowd violence had a long history on the Continent, including the destruction of aristocratic houses. In France, chateaux were burned during the Revolution of 1789. Peasant crowds increased in number during the Great Fear. Over the course of 1789 they shifted from defending against rumoured threats to more social, economic, and political objectives, which included challenging landowners, who were often confronted by large crowds seizing seigneurial documents, demanding they renounce their feudal claims, and in some cases destroying much of their property. A similar pattern emerged in Russia before and during the 1917 Revolution. Although it was in urban settings that crowds played the most important role in this revolution, aristocratic houses were plundered, and in some cases, destroyed by crowds of peasants or returning soldiers.

In contrast, the burning of Big Houses in Ireland during the Irish War of Independence and Civil War was usually the work of gangs that were much smaller than crowds and with very specific objectives. Thus, they were more in the tradition of agents acting on behalf of secret societies or communities – in this case burning houses as agents of the IRA or later the Anti-Treatyites, but also on behalf of those communities seeking to drive the landed elite out.

These observations do not do justice to what is a large and complex subject. In my view, Ireland has not been given sufficient attention in comparative-historical work on the European aristocracy. Those interested in including Ireland in this comparative project would be well advised to begin by reading *Burning the Big House*.

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