

# Michael Delany and the **UNITED IRISH LEAGUE**

## *An Episode of the Land War around Ballyhaunis*

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**M**ICHAEL DELANY was always a prominent figure in the town, particularly in political circles since the mid 1870s, was instrumental in the setting up of the Ballyhaunis Branch of the United Irish League within ten months of that organisation's foundation. In 1898 he was also Provincial Director of the South Mayo Executive of the U.I.L. He had been a Poor Law Guardian and on the setting up of the local authorities in 1898, became a District Commissioner for Claremorris District. On the 28th. September, 1901, on the motion of one Mr. Doris, and seconded by Conor O'Kelly, M.P., he was co-opted as member of Mayo County Council, where he served for many years after. He came to prominence nationally when, as one of the Coercion Prisoners', he served a prison sentence in 1902 for his part in the campaign against Landlordism and Landgrabbers.

Their terms in prison were not in vain, for within a year their aims and those of the tenant farmers of Ireland were conceded to by the passing into law of "Wyndham's Land Act".

### **Wyndham's Land Act – the end of the Land War**

It is taken for granted nowadays that farmers throughout the country not merely occupy and farm land, they own it as well. It is sobering to think that less than one-hundred years ago the farmers or, more correctly, "tenant farmers" of this area and over most of the West of Ireland, were paying rent to an elite class of landlords, a class

**BY GERRY CRIBBIN  
AND PAUL WALDRON**

totally different in origin and outlook to themselves; a rent, often exorbitant, for land they worked but had no secure claim to; land occupied probably by their families for hundreds of years but from which they could be evicted on a whim.

That this situation changed totally and necessarily, changing the country's tenant farmers into "owners-occupiers" was due specifically to Wyndham's Land Act of 1903 and ultimately to the struggle called: "The Land War", began almost a quarter of a century before in Irishtown with the setting up of the Land League.

Wyndham's Land Act, passed in 1903, went further than any of the previous land acts to enable tenant farmers buy-out their holdings. It encouraged landlords to sell their entire estates to their tenants, the Government providing loans to the purchasers which were to be paid back by annuities.

This Land Act had stemmed from the report of the Land Conference which met in Dublin in September, 1902. This conference, set up to tackle the land question once and for all on the initiative of one John Shaw Smith, involved representatives of both the landlords and tenants of Ireland. That this conference met at all is evidence of the manifest need to confront this issue and come out with a constructive result.

This need was illustrated by the widespread peaceful agitation which was going on around the country at the

turn of the century, activities such as the holding of mass meetings, the boycotting of land grabbers and refusal to pay rent. This activity was a revival of those carried out by the Land League and the Irish National League in the 1870's and 80's. This new agitation was organised by members of another Irish league – The United Irish League, now a largely forgotten organisation and one whose role in the Land War has been overshadowed by its predecessor, The Land League. The United Irish League revived and intensified the aims of the Land League and its activities led directly to the fulfilling of Land League aims.

### **The United Irish League**

The U.I.L. was formed in February, 1898, by William O'Brien, the Cork M.P. and was so named in commemoration of the United Irishmen, it being the centenary of 1798. The U.I.L. soon spread throughout the West and by the middle of 1901 had 100,000 members. The aims of U.I.L. are best summarised in its watchword: Ireland for the Irish, the land for the people and a native parliament in College Green". The second of the above aims was particularly relevant in this part of the country as the newspapers of the time can testify and it was probably the foremost in the minds of the tenant farmers. The existence of a landed class of proprietors, often absentees, keeping large grazing farms or renting them to transient grazers, while alongside their tenants paid high rents for meagre insecure holdings was seen as an outrage. The status of the tenant

farmer had improved somewhat after the various land acts brought in by Gladstone and Balfour since the onset of the Land War, but there was a lot left to be achieved and the U.I.L. vowed to achieve it through nonviolent means.

## The U.I.L. in Ballyhaunis

At a meeting on 13th. of November, 1898, a branch was started in Ballyhaunis. This meeting, though convened at short notice, was well attended and the branch was formally established "amidst great applause". Michael Delany commenting, proposed Rev. Fr. Canning, P.P. as President of the branch, on his "sympathy with the people and his sterling and constant advocacy of the poor and downtrodden". Fr. Canning took the chair, explained the object of the meeting and expressed a confidence that the movement would take on in the locality and that "Ballyhaunis which was always to the front in every nationalist movement, would not now be backward". The first officers were: President, Rev. Fr. J.P. Canning, P.P.; Vice-President, Rev. Fr. M. Fallon, C.C.; Treasurer, Michael M. Waldron, Main St; Secretary, Michael Delany, Knox St.; Asst. Sec., Thomas Cribbin, Toger.

The following were chosen from those present to form a working committee: John Sloyan, John Fitzmaurice, Michael Higgins, Martin Hannon, Pat Dillon, William Boland, John Finn, Owen Nolan, Pat Noonan, Pat Fitzmaurice, Pat Lowery, Dominick Dyer, Michael Caulfield, Pat Dyer, Pat Gildea, Pat Carney, Thomas Heneghan and Michael Owens.

## The Coercion Act and Cloonfad

Michael Delany came to prominence nationally in March, 1902, when he and several others served a prison sentence for attending a U.I.L. meeting in Cloonfad. This meeting was held there in February, 1902 and was chaired by Martin Owens, Ballykilleen, Cloonfad. The speakers were Michael Delany, Ballyhaunis; J.P. Hayden, M.P. Roscommon; and William Cunnane, Lisca, Knock. Also present that day

were John O'Donnell, M.P. and Thomas Brett, Claremorris, Secretary of the South Mayo Executive of the U.I.L. The exact purpose of the meeting has not yet come to light, it may have been to deal with the specific case of "land Grabbing" or may have been just a general meeting to rally support for the U.I.L., anyway its purpose was over-shadowed by the events arising out of the arrival of the police there. The police charged Delany, Hayden, Cunnane, O'Donnell, Brett and others under the Coercion Act, used in the early days of the Land War but used less and less since, had been reactivated by George Wyndham, the Chief Secretary to cope with the widespread peaceful agrarian agitation of the U.I.L. It was used so vigorously that by the end of 1902 hundreds, including several M.P.'s had served jail sentences because of the "illegal" activities of the U.I.L.

## Imprisonment

Those charged at Cloonfad were summoned to appear at Ballinlough Petty Sessions and at the court some days later they were all found guilty of having attended an illegal meeting. Mr. Hayden, M.P., was sentenced to twenty-one days for advising tenants not to pay rent to absentee landlords and to boycott those who do, Mr. O'Donnell was sent to Sligo Jail for two months; Delany, Cunnane and Owens each got one month and Brett fourteen days.

On the Monday morning following, District Inspector Carberry arrested Michael Delany at his home in Knox Street and also Martin Owens in Ballykilleen, Cloonfad and Thomas Brett. All three undertook to surrender themselves later in the day to Castlebar Jail, which they did, arriving there by train at 11:30. All along the streets of Castlebar the prisoners were met by cheering supporters to whom, on entering the prison gates, Delany shouted, "Keep the flag flying".

## Release

The prisoners all served their full sentences and on Sunday morning, 6th. of March, at 7:55, Delany and Cunnane were released and were met outside by

a crowd of supporters including James Daly, M.P. After breakfast they headed for Knock via Kiltimagh.

At Knock a public meeting was held in the Fair Green, chaired by Martin McLoughlin, D.C. Addresses were read on behalf of the local U.I.L. branches; Knock, Logboy, Barnacarroll and Bekan as well as from the Claremorris District Council, all of which attempted to put into words the extreme esteem in which the two prisoners were held; the great joy at their having been released from "Wyndham's gloomy bastille".

## The Ballyhaunis Welcome

Bonfires and torch-bearers welcomed the party all along the road from Knock to Ballyhaunis, the reception increasing in intention as they neared the town. The Connaught Telegraph captures the atmosphere of the town on that night. "When within half-a-mile of Ballyhaunis the procession was met by a number of Torch-bearers and all approaches to the town were lined by enthusiastic crowds who cheered the ex-prisoners to the echo. The journey through the streets was an exceptionally brilliant spectacle. There was scarcely a house in the whole town that was not splendidly illuminated and the cheering all along the route was deafening. When Mr. Delany's house was reached he was taken from the car by half-a-dozen stalwart friends and carried shoulder-high into his residence."

The public meeting which followed was chaired by James Carney, M.J. Caulfield then read an address on behalf of the Ballyhaunis U.I.L. It praised Delany's spirit of self-sacrifice, his tireless energy and conspicuous ability adding that his imprisonment and that of the other coercion prisoners had the double effect of "fixing that organisation in its determination and procuring for the movement a world-wide sympathy. The address was signed by Fr. J.P. Canning, P.P., President; Patrick Carney, Treasurer; and John Fitzmaurice, Asst. Hon. Secretary.

Next was read an address on behalf of the traders and merchants of Ballyhaunis. This, while mentioning

the struggle for the land, focuses upon the plight of the "long suffering townsman" and suggests that maybe that cause could be more fully included in the aims of the organisation.

Michael Delany in his speech spoke about the futility of Wyndham's coercion policy highlighting the fact that it's hoped effect would never be achieved. He expressed wonder at Wyndham's definition of an illegal assembly saying that the gathering in Ballyhaunis on that night was as "illegal" as the one in Cloonfad, for which he had been imprisoned. He closed his speech by, once again, thanking his supporters and those of the U.I.L., assuring them he would fight on, determined as ever.

Martin Owens, Ballykilleen, Cloonfad and Michael Higgins, other Coercion prisoners, then made speeches and other addresses were delivered by U.I.L., branches from Began, Barnacarroil, Knock, Erritt, Aughamore, Logboy and Cloonfad. Delany was then presented with a brilliantly illuminated and framed address by the Ballyhaunis U.I.L. which included a photograph of himself on top.

### Conclusion

The activities of the United Irish League branches throughout Mayo and elsewhere are well documented in the regional newspapers of the time. Not

least amongst the activities of the Ballyhaunis and local branches were those involving the Island Farm about with which Delany was closely involved and about which several songs were written. Hopefully, there will be an article dedicated to this other interesting episode of the Land War around Ballyhaunis.

With the advent of Wyndham's Land Act and the possibility of tenant farmers becoming owner occupiers, the U.I.L. focused their attention on their more nationalistic aims. Michael Delany continued his association with the movement and with politics in his own town and county.

## Farewell to My Family in '96

I'm going home, but I'm so forlorn  
As I leave my kith and kin  
I'll try to smile as I wave goodbye  
But my heart is black within.

We had great fun but the work got done  
All had their priorities right  
We went to Mass to thank the Lord  
We prayed with all our might

Now it's "farewell all" and thanks a lot  
The jokes were truly grand  
We won't forget the great time we had  
In good old Ireland.

BY DELIA OLDHAM (NEE BURKE)

The prayer that's breathed alone  
In dear old Erin's land  
It's uttered on the threshold stone  
With smile and clasping hand.  
And oft perchance tis murmured low  
With hand clasp and falling tear  
The grandest greeting man may know  
The prayer "God save all here!".

REMEMBERED BY MRS. MARY FLEMING,  
GURTEEN FROM HER SCHOOL DAYS



Helicopter 'Se-Hel' owned by PDG, a Scottish company and on contract to the Forestry. Shown at a re-fuelling stop in Derrylahan Forest. It is used to fertilise forests. Pictured are, from left: G. Brennan, A. Keane, J. Brennan, M. Keane and C. Vahey.



Granlahan Combined Sports and Community Centre Presentation. Back row, left to right: T. Finnegan, J. Neehan, J. Keane, C. Conroy, Fr. Kearney. Middle row: M. McGuire, M. Finnegan, M. Caulfield, M. Birmingham, J. Coffey, T. Hebron. Seated: J. Ruane, J. Walsh, R. McHugh.