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Parnell in Perspective

Edited by
D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day



Parnell in Perspective

First published in 1991, *Parnell in Perspective* is a collection of essays exploring the ideas and political style of Charles Stewart Parnell.

Divided into two parts, the book explores Parnell's career in detail and investigates the parliamentary and personal qualities that led to his reputation as 'The Uncrowned King of Ireland'. It will appeal to those with an interest in Irish and British political and social history.



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Chronology of key dates in Parnell's life

- 1846 (27 June) Born of John Henry and Delia Stewart Parnell, at Avondale, County Wicklow
- 1853 Went to school in England
- 1859 Death of father – made ward of chancery and received Avondale
- 1865 Matriculated at Magdalene College, Cambridge
- 1869 Sent down from Cambridge
- 1871 Visited the United States
- 1872 Returned home from his American trip
- 1873 High sheriff, Wicklow; ineligible to stand at the general election, early 1874
- 1874 (March) Stood for and lost County Dublin parliamentary by-election
- 1874 Co-opted onto Executive Committee of Home Rule League
- 1875 (April) Contested and won Meath by-election
- 1875 (26 April) Made maiden speech in House of Commons
- 1876 Joined Joseph Biggar in parliamentary obstruction
- 1876 (November) Visited the United States with John O'Connor Power for the celebration of the Independence centenary
- 1877 (August) Elected president of the Home Rule Confederation of Great Britain
- 1878 (October) John Devoy offered conditional support of Fenians to Parnell
- 1879 (April) First meeting of Devoy and Michael Davitt with Parnell in Dublin
- 1879 (5 May) Death of Isaac Butt. William Shaw replaced Butt as chairman of the home rule party
- 1879 (8 June) Spoke at Westport, Mayo, land meeting
- 1879 (July) His candidate successful at Ennis by-election

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- 1879 (October) Irish National Land League founded. Parnell accepted its presidency
- 1880 (January–March) Fundraising tour of the United States and Canada
- 1880 (April) Parnell returned for Meath, Cork City and Mayo at general election. He chose to sit for Cork
- 1880 (May) Parnell elected chairman of the Irish parliamentary party
- 1880 (July) Parnell first made acquaintance with Mrs Katharine O'Shea
- 1880 (August) Compensation for Disturbances Bill defeated in House of Lords
- 1880 (19 September) Spoke at Ennis, advocating 'moral Coventry'
- 1880 (December) Prosecuted by the government. Trial collapsed in January 1881 when jury failed to reach a verdict
- 1881 (February–April) Government introduced a number of coercion measures and the Land Bill. Michael Davitt's ticket of leave was withdrawn
- 1881 (2 February) Irish parliamentary party considered and rejected withdrawal from Westminster
- 1881 (September) National Conference determined, on Parnell's advice, to 'test' the Land Act
- 1881 (9 October) Parnell spoke at Wexford in reply to Gladstone's 'resources and civilization' speech at Leeds
- 1881 (13 October) Parnell arrested and confined in Kilmainham jail. Remained imprisoned until May 1882
- 1881 (18 October) No-Rent Manifesto issued from Kilmainham jail
- 1882 (April) Parnell set out conditions of 'Treaty' with government
- 1882 (2 May) Parnell released from prison as cabinet accepted Kilmainham Treaty
- 1882 (6 May) Lord Frederick Cavendish and Thomas Burke, the Irish chief secretary and under-secretary respectively, murdered in Phoenix Park, Dublin. In aftermath the police watched Parnell. His association with Mrs O'Shea came to the general attention of the cabinet
- 1882 (October) Irish National League founded with Parnell as president
- 1883 (October) Irish National League of Great Britain founded with T. P. O'Connor as president, replacing Parnell who had remained nominal head of the earlier organization since first being elected in 1877

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- 1883 (December) Parnell received cheque for over £37,000 as testimonial at public meeting
- 1884 (27 November) William Henry O'Shea gave Chamberlain note purporting to be Parnell's views on Crimes Act and local government reform
- 1885 (21 January) Parnell spoke at Cork on 'ne plus ultra'
- 1885 (June) Resignation of Gladstone's government; Salisbury became prime minister
- 1885 (25 August; 1 September) In major addresses in Dublin Parnell defined the position for the coming general election
- 1885 (5 October) Parnell spoke at the first nominating convention held at Wicklow
- 1885 (30 October) Katharine O'Shea sent Gladstone draft by Parnell of home rule constitution of Ireland
- 1885 (November–December) General election. Eighty-five Irish constituencies returned nationalists, plus T. P. O'Connor's triumph for the Scotland Division, Liverpool, giving Parnell the 86 of 1886, a number which exactly equalled the difference between the two British parties
- 1885 (17 December) Gladstone's conversion to home rule disclosed by his son
- 1886 (January) Salisbury resigned
- 1886 (1 February) Gladstone prime minister
- 1886 (10 February) Galway by-election: Parnell overcame opposition to W. H. O'Shea's candidature
- 1886 (8 April) Gladstone introduced Home Rule Bill
- 1886 (17 April) John Morley introduced Land Purchase Bill; later withdrawn
- 1886 (8 June) Government of Ireland Bill defeated in the House of Commons
- 1886 (July) Coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Unionists gained a majority at the general election
- 1886 (December) Plan of Campaign begun
- 1887 (April) *The Times* published letters purported to be Parnell's, apparently justifying Phoenix Park murders. Coercion Bill passed through Parliament
- 1888 (20 July) Parnell spoke at the National Liberal Club
- 1888 (13 August) Special Commission established
- 1889 (February) Forgery by Pigott of the Parnell letters exposed
- 1889 (8 May) Parnell spoke at the Eighty Club, London
- 1889 (22 November) Conclusion of Special Commission
- 1889 (18–19 December) Parnell visited Gladstone at Hawarden

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- 1889 (24 December) Captain O'Shea filed a divorce petition against his wife naming Parnell as co-respondent
- 1890 (13 February) Report of Special Commission
- 1890 (17 November) O'Shea received a decree nisi in his successful divorce petition
- 1890 (20–1 November) National Liberal Federation expressed strong feelings privately against Parnell
- 1890 (25 November) Parnell re-elected chairman of Irish party
- 1890 (28 November) Parnell issued manifesto 'To the people of Ireland' (published in morning press on 29 November)
- 1890 (1–6 December) Second party meeting in Committee Room 15 began 'split' when a majority of MPs left to convene a further meeting under the chairmanship of Justin McCarthy
- 1890 (3 December) Catholic Episcopal Standing Committee denounced Parnell
- 1890 (10 December) Parnell arrived in Dublin for a hero's welcome
- 1890 (22 December) Anti-Parnellite candidate won Kilkenny by-election
- 1891 (February) Boulogne negotiations between Parnell, John Dillon and William O'Brien broken off
- 1891 (April) Anti-Parnellite won North Sligo by-election
- 1891 (25 June) Marriage of Parnell and Mrs O'Shea
- 1891 (July) Anti-Parnellite won Carlow by-election
- 1891 (27 September) Parnell's last speech at Creggs, Roscommon
- 1891 (6 October) Death of The Chief at Brighton
- 1891 (11 October) Funeral, burial in Glasnevin

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Introduction

D. George Boyce
and
Alan O'Day

Charles Stewart Parnell (1846–91) stands between Daniel O'Connell and Eamon de Valera in the triumvirate whose careers coincided with, and helped shape, the formation of modern Irish nationalism; but he towers above them in popular perception; and, unlike his great predecessor and successor, he became a focus for those whose concerns were as much literary as political. He was enveloped in a kind of mystique usually reserved in Ireland for the martyred dead – an accolade not normally accorded to politicians in the constitutional tradition. Parnell mounted no scaffold and spent merely a brief time in prison, a confinement passed in relative comfort. He differed from other heroes in the nationalist Pantheon in being the universally recognized leader of the Irish 'race'. O'Connell and de Valera cast no similar net which covered those outside Ireland as well as the people at home.

Parnell's lofty standing is at first sight surprising. He had few of the popular gifts of O'Connell, nor de Valera's baptism of fire in the cauldron of armed insurrection. O'Connell made his way to the political leadership of Catholic Ireland in adverse circumstances. He was a Catholic in an age when his co-religionists were trying to advance from a century of powerlessness and degradation. Although he achieved much, his reputation remains the object of criticism and he is regarded with ambivalence: was he not the Catholic who promised that, if Ireland was governed well, then her people of all religious persuasions would be content to become 'West Britons'? De Valera steered his country to the brink of total sovereign independence and yet – father of his people though he might claim to be – he never achieved that romantic and enduring fame that made Parnell an influential figure posthumously as he was in life. Neither O'Connell or de Valera has been the subject of a Hollywood film or BBC mini-series: Parnell has featured in both media.

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On the face of it Parnell seems an unlikely candidate for political canonization. He was fundamentally a West Briton. Parnell was reserved and spoke with a polite, unmistakable English voice. Moreover he was a Protestant landlord who sought to take Ireland not towards a bucolic Gaelic future, like some of the later Sinn Feiners, but a leader more concerned to industrialize and modernize Irish society. O'Connell, the Catholic landlord, trained as a lawyer, had to fight his way to the top; de Valera, a teacher, was typical of his 'revolutionary generation', but owed his rise to a dry, but passionate, style and an ability to learn from his mistakes and then to claim that he had never made any. He and O'Connell were able political organizers who never neglected the structures of power. Parnell, in contrast, entered politics from the top. As a landlord, a political career was always open to him – it was what people of his class did. But they rarely entered politics on the nationalist side; it was even more rare to find them heading popular causes. And his rise was remarkably quick: in 1874 he was an unknown and unsuccessful parliamentary aspirant; in 1875 he was returned to the House of Commons for Meath; within two years he was a promising newcomer; by 1880 he had become the master of a small and as yet insecure home rule party. Yet also by 1880 he had won the recognition of rural Ireland because he did what no other leading home ruler would: he placed himself at the head of a widespread, and frequently illegal, agrarian radical movement, the Land League. Parnell, however, was never driven by the hatred of landlordism which motivated many of his supporters and his championship of home rule contained a cerebral quality usually absent in those who followed him. He was 'uncrowned king' of a country, the object of a popular veneration of a people who shared few of his opinions on the proper order of society.

Historians have been aware of the need to study Parnell and also of the problems of assessing him. F. S. L. Lyons caught both the fascination and dilemma of portraying 'one of the most elusive and shadowy figures in the modern history of Ireland'.¹ Despite massive documentation for the era, Parnell himself has remained a problem for study because he left no significant body of personal papers, kept no diary, was naturally reserved, even mysterious, in his relationships – and notably in his contacts with his newer, less gentlemanly colleagues in the Irish party. Much of what is known about Parnell is second-hand information – chiefly the later memories of people who knew him – or his own words delivered in numerous parliamentary and public speeches. Yet, there is little of

a private or intimate nature which sheds light on Parnell's inner thoughts or motivations.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, his ambiguity Parnell is one Irish figure whose place has remained unchallenged. Opinions concerning his affair with Mrs O'Shea, or the attempt to retain the leadership in 1890–1, differ but no aspersion has been cast on the genuineness of Parnell's commitment to the aim of Irish self-government. O'Connell's credentials as a popular nationalist and democrat are suspect, de Valera's record of government soiled his repute among posterity, but Parnell's standing as the man who, but for the treachery of colleagues and bigotry of the clergy, would have secured home rule remains unsullied. O'Connell and de Valera were defeated by the efforts of Britain and their own limitations – Parnell's failure was due to the treason of his own people. His success in the 1880s has seemed the lesson of national unity, the disaster of the fall, a parable on the defects of the Irish. In reality, as modern writers have recognized, Parnell's views were more complex, his actions less than totally self-sacrificing. It was the land question which catapulted him into being the 'uncrowned king', but from the shelter of Kilmainham jail he confessed to Mrs O'Shea that 'Politically it is a fortunate thing for me that I have been arrested, as the movement is breaking fast, and all will be quiet in a few months, when I shall be released'. In February 1882 he reported to her,

At least I am very glad that the days of platform speeches have gone by and are not likely to return. I cannot describe to you the disgust I always felt with these meetings, knowing as I did how hollow and wanting in solidarity everything connected with the movement was.²

If academics have come to explore Parnell's ideas and intentions with critical scrutiny, little of this has seeped through to the wider public. Hugh Leonard's 'Parnell and the Englishwoman' simply repeats and confirms the old uncritically admiring version of the Parnell myth.

While Parnell's most concrete achievement was to win legislation and change attitudes on Irish land ultimately culminating in making the country's farmers owners of the soil they worked, his lasting recognition arose from Gladstone's adoption of home rule for Ireland. Parnell's role and his vision have been the subjects of intense analysis but little has happened to blur the near triumph. The unity he forged among the nationalist majority in Ireland, his apparent

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influence on British leaders, the sense of strength which Parnell imparted, were lasting legacies which time has not blotted out. Parnell's era remains the only time when Irishmen seemed capable of dictating to Britain's leaders. O'Connell turned tail and ran at the sight of British resistance; the Free State, or at least its form and extent, was forced upon the Irish people by a prime minister of Britain. De Valera might talk tough about the Treaty but it was he who declined to face the lion in his den – Parnell not only did so but bearded him in it as well.

Throughout the 1880s The Chief moved from strength to strength. After the tribulations of the years 1880 to 1885 he formed a working alliance with a great English political movement. The attempt by *The Times* to link him with agrarian crime collapsed in humiliating defeat with the revelation that Richard Pigott had forged the letters which purported to reveal Parnell's sympathy for the Phoenix Park murders. By 1890 he seemed to be an omnipotent figure, but the revelations of the divorce court, where he did not contest the allegations of Captain O'Shea, suddenly cast Parnell from his pedestal. The manner of his fall, the last campaign with its appeal to the 'hillside men', the marginal people at the bottom of the heap in Ireland, his tragic death, and the subsequent weakness of the national movement, reinforced the Parnell legend and, in fact, added new dimensions to it. Neither O'Connell or de Valera found fresh sources of support in their respective demises. O'Connell's death was an anticlimax; de Valera, though a much beloved elder statesman, had become a political embarrassment to a country anxious to move in different economic and political directions from his. Parnell's vision has never come to seem so dated. His movement and the ideals which animated it have remained germane to successive generations. This is because it has been possible to see him from so many angles. Even Parnell's Protestantism, something he wore very lightly himself, has proved a bonus. To have a Protestant head of a popular movement has made it possible to equate nationalism with something more and nobler than simply being coterminous with Catholicism, and also has reflected a tolerance which the Irish people have aspired to rather than the sectarianism which too often has been characteristic of the island. Parnell's significance has been neatly expressed by two people, one a great leader in his own right, de Valera, the other a popular American novelist, Thomas Flanagan. The former, speaking at Creggs, Roscommon, the scene of Parnell's final speech, in 1946, linked him to the onward march of the nation but also paid tribute to his

contribution to land reform and 'on the very ground on which we stand, came to an end a long period of devoted service – a period of leadership which brought our people from the slough of despair to the firm hope of a final victory'.³ Parnell had, de Valera declaimed, taught the Irish to 'set aside the futility of expecting a voluntary change of heart in imperial masters and to rely confidently on themselves'. Equally pertinently, a character in Flanagan's novel, *The Tenants of Time*, observes that Parnell was 'in life what he is now is memory – an outline, a shape into which we had poured our hopes'.⁴

This volume marks the centenary of Parnell's death and serves as a salute to his continued impress upon the active memory not merely of Ireland and the Irish 'race' but of the wider world. His significance seems as compelling now, even after critical academic reassessment, as it was a hundred years ago. Yet, the contributions show that there is still no consensus on precisely what made up Parnell's mystique, influence and policy. Passage of time has added new dimensions to understanding The Chief without rendering a final verdict. Two broad themes weave the chapters together – analyses of the contexts of power and the ideas and images he evoked. In the first section essays examine Parnell's relations with the Catholic church, with colleagues such as Michael Davitt and William O'Brien, where he fits in the spectrum of nationalisms, his impact on British politics and the political content of the last campaign. In the second section chapters consider Parnell's political and economic ideology, the factors which made him a charismatic figure, and how he came to be treated in literature and biography. In short, the volume deals with the man and the myth.

Readers will find themes, incidents and facts which are familiar along with those which are less well known. Also, they quickly will be aware that the individual contributors interpret facets of Parnell's life differently and even at times in quite contradictory ways, thus emphasizing the variety of possibilities opened up by his life. The chapters do not make a biography in the usual sense but confirm and advance existing studies of Parnell and his times, providing meat for future interpretations. Although the volume does not purport to be a collective biography, it will be evident that the pictures of R. Barry O'Brien and F. S. L. Lyons are shaded now in distinctively fresh colours. In an age of revisionist history, it is notable that the chapters do not make Parnell seem smaller than he appeared to his contemporaries; but, rather, by exploring the complexity of the political world in which he lived, they explain

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more clearly his significance. And not just his political significance narrowly construed. For those who stray into this volume from the BBC series 'Parnell and the Englishwoman',⁵ a quite different sort of person unfolds before their eyes. Still, the series, for all its manifold factual misrepresentations and interpretative simplicities, reveals both the special power and the fascination of The Chief. That quality inspired James Joyce to write one of the most moving passages in modern Irish literature:⁶

Mr Casey, freeing his arms from his holders, suddenly bowed his head on his hands with a sob of pain.

- Poor Parnell! he cried loudly. My dead king!

He sobbed loudly and bitterly.

Stephen, raising his terror-stricken face, saw that his father's eyes were full of tears.

NOTES

- 1 F. S. L. Lyons, review of Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Parnell and his Party, 1880-90*, *Irish Historical Studies*, 11, 1958-9, pp. 64-9.
- 2 Katharine O'Shea, *Charles Stewart Parnell: his Love Story and Political Life*, London, 1914, vol. I, pp. 207, 235-6.
- 3 Quoted in Maurice Moynihan (ed.), *Speeches and Statements by Eamon de Valera, 1917-73*, Dublin 1980, p. 492.
- 4 Thomas Flanagan, *The Tenants of Time*, London, 1988, p. 313.
- 5 'Parnell and the Englishwoman', BBC television series. Published as: Hugh Leonard, *Parnell and the Englishwoman*, London, 1991.
- 6 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, London, 1964 edn, p. 40.

Part I

Contexts of power



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1 Parnell and the Catholic church

C. J. Woods

Parnell's Protestantism was purely social. As a boy he questioned religion and as squire of Avondale he never read the lesson in church. Tolerant of the religious beliefs of others, he was himself an unbeliever.¹ His lack of concern for Protestant interests does at least help to explain how Parnell found it possible to co-operate with Catholic ecclesiastics and to promote their objectives; it helps also to explain the willingness of the ecclesiastics to co-operate with Parnell. Why Parnell and the Catholic church should have found it desirable to work together remains to be seen.

I

When the young Charles Stewart Parnell sought to enter Parliament in 1875 as one of the representatives for County Meath he was careful to secure the support of the parish priest of Rathdrum in County Wicklow, where he was the landlord, as well as of local Meath priests and of the Bishop of Meath, Thomas Nulty.² The choice of constituency was a good one, considering the course Parnell's political career was to take, for Nulty was one of the very few bishops at that time not beholden to Cardinal Cullen (who detested the Fenians) and he was the only one to be already an active promoter of agrarian reform.³

Once elected, Parnell showed little interest in ecclesiastical issues. His concerns were ones that were likely to endear him to the Fenians rather than to the priests. Quickly he rose to prominence in Butt's home rule party as a leading member, and then as head, of a small group of 'obstructionists', who defied custom and decorum as a means of focusing attention on the home rule question. Three other members of the group were Fenians: Joseph Biggar (its founder), John O'Connor Power and Frank Hugh O'Donnell.⁴

Parnell caused a sensation in the House of Commons in 1876 by a spirited defence of the 'Manchester martyrs'. Inside and outside Parliament he campaigned for an amnesty for the remaining Fenian prisoners.⁵ He became a member of a political prisoners visiting committee formed in April 1877 at the instigation of Michael Davitt, then still imprisoned in Dartmoor; he was one of the first to meet Davitt after his release in December 1877; and he was one of the few non-Fenians on the reception committee that organized a rapturous welcome home a month later to the last of the liberated Fenian prisoners – probably the largest Fenian-organized demonstration in Dublin since the McManus funeral in 1861. Parnell's association with Fenians went deeper in March 1878 when he and two other 'active' members of Butt's party attended a secret meeting of Fenians in London to discuss mutual co-operation.⁶ In August 1879 Parnell had been elected President of the Home Rule Confederation of Great Britain, a body much more under Fenian influence than the Irish parent-body, the Home Rule League, which the Parnellites had already penetrated.⁷

Parnell's espousal, in the closing weeks of 1879, of the cause of agrarian reform in the west of Ireland likewise had little to do with the Catholic church. It was the beginning of the 'new departure' in Irish politics – a combination of 'active' parliamentarians and Fenians or ex-Fenians with local leaders to form the Land League. The initiatives were taken locally in County Mayo by James Daly of Castlebar (editor of the *Connaught Telegraph*), John James Loudon of Westport (a barrister and farmer) and Matthew Harris of Ballinasloe (a builder and member of the supreme council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), the Fenian organization in Ireland). In the spring of 1879, Daly called the famous Irishtown meeting. He was assisted by some local farmers and by some Connaught Fenians including Davitt.⁸ Parnell was consulted by Davitt and, though he was not present, he did attend and address (speaking after Davitt and two other well-known Fenians) a similar but better publicized meeting at Westport on 8 June. It is the Westport meeting that best illustrates Parnell's involvement in the land agitation at this time and his relations with the Catholic church. It was held in the face of episcopal opposition, a letter having appeared in the Nationalist daily, the *Freeman's Journal*, above the name of the popular Archbishop of Tuam, John MacHale, denouncing the agitation as 'directly tending to impiety and disorder in church and society'. Davitt considered Parnell's refusal to be deterred by the archbishop's letter as 'the most courageously wise act of his whole

career'.⁹ The only flicker of support from the Catholic clergy was a public letter from two priests of MacHale's diocese.¹⁰

At the meetings at Irishtown, Westport and elsewhere in the summer of 1879 the absence of priests was as evident as the presence of Fenians. One meeting, that held at Claremorris on 13 July, was different in this respect and a closer examination reveals something of the delicate nature of relations between the emerging agrarian movement and the local clergy. On the platform together were Fenians and priests as well as other local organizers (merchants from the town and tenant-farmers from the countryside). The parish priest of Claremorris, Ulick Joseph Bourke, presided.¹¹ Bourke must at least have had a sneaking sympathy for Fenianism, for as president in the 1860s of St Jarlath's, the diocesan college at Tuam, he had been the mentor of a number of young men belonging to the IRB; he was moreover a firm believer in peasant proprietorship.¹² 'For the past six months', he stated from the chair, 'the Catholic clergy have not, owing to some misunderstanding, been on the same platform with the people. Today, however, the priests and people of Mayo are as one.'¹³ This unity was more apparent than real. John Devoy, emissary of the American Fenians who was behind the scenes (attending a meeting of Mayo Fenians in a Claremorris public house), recalled how Bourke arrived early to find awaiting him letters and telegrams from the archbishop's secretary (and nephew), Thomas MacHale,

insisting that the resolutions must include one for Catholic education and another in favour of the temporal power of the pope. He was told that this was to be a land meeting . . . and . . . there must be nothing sectarian in the resolutions.¹⁴

The clergy stayed away from the meeting on 16 August at Daly's Hotel, Castlebar, to form the Land League of Mayo; so did Parnell.¹⁵ Why Parnell did not take any prominent part in the agitation between the Westport meeting on 8 June and a farmers' meeting at Limerick on 21 August has not been satisfactorily explained. Davitt was to recall how Parnell, questioning him afterwards about the Irishtown meeting, 'was intensely interested, especially about the clerical opposition, and this hostility may perhaps have been one reason why he showed some disinclination for a time to become identified with the movement'.¹⁶ Parnell was involved in the summer months in what must then have seemed a mere sideshow to the great land meetings even if with hindsight it can be seen as a highly significant event in the history of his relations with the Catholic

church: the Ennis by-election. In opposition to the candidate of the Home Rule League, the *Freeman's Journal* and the local clergy, Parnell nominated one of his own disciples, James Lysaght Finigan, an anticlerical who had served in the French Foreign Legion. Finigan won by six votes. Later Parnell confided: 'I would have retired from public life if Ennis had been lost, for it would have satisfied me that the priests were supreme in Irish politics.'¹⁷ When the proprietor of the *Freeman*, Edmund Dwyer Gray, accused Parnell of using the expression 'papist rats' to describe opponents of a university bill, the archbishop of Cashel, Thomas William Croke, intervened to reconcile the two antagonists.

The role of Croke in relations between Parnell and the Catholic church was to prove pivotal. From that time on Croke took every opportunity to intervene in politics, almost always in support of Parnell, on whom he bestowed the most lavish praise – he referred to him publicly in June 1881 as 'the immortal Parnell'.¹⁸ Parnell for his part made use of Croke at about this time by approaching him and obtaining his support for the agrarian agitation. In a speech made at Holycross on 1 June 1881, Croke stated:

Mr Parnell, in Dublin, more than two years ago, when this movement first commenced, waited upon me in the hotel in which we stop in Dublin and, to use a common expression, he literally went upon his knees to me . . . to use all my influence to have the priests join the movement, because, said he, without the priests it cannot succeed and with them it cannot be a failure.¹⁹

The existence of this encounter is mentioned by MacHale's biographer, Bernard O'Reilly, who recalled hearing both Croke and Parnell refer to it at a meeting at Kildare in mid October 1885.²⁰ The date Croke gave at Holycross for his meeting with Parnell in 1879 is earlier than the date of the Westport meeting. A later date is more plausible. It was on 21 September 1879 that he wrote the first of his many public letters in Parnell's support.²¹ But it is difficult to reconcile Croke's Holycross speech or this public letter with a private letter he wrote on 21 November 1879 to an Irish ecclesiastic in Rome in reply to a charge that he had given his 'public support and approbation to a politician known to be a violent man' (presumed to be Parnell):

I have never spoken a word to Mr Parnell but once and that casually; nor have I ever mentioned his name in any public document . . . but once and then I referred to him because of a

mischievous contention that had arisen between himself and Mr Gray . . . and solely in the interest of peace and charity. At *that* time he had held no meeting and made no pronouncement on the land question; nor did I know anything whatever about his views on the subject.²²

The archbishop did sometimes speak with tongue in cheek. It is safe to state that Parnell solicited Croke's support in 1879. The two men had much in common. Both came from well-to-do families, had powerful personalities, were firm disciplinarians, held extreme political opinions and had a penchant for dramatic gestures.

In September 1879, on agreeing to join Davitt in putting the Land League on a national basis, Parnell invited some ninety public men to a meeting in Dublin on 21 October. Most agreed to join the proposed committee. Among them were fourteen priests. Two of these, both curates, Eugene Sheehy of Kilmallock (in the Limerick diocese) and John Behan (Dublin), were present; eight sent letters of support, among them Ulick Bourke of Westport (Tuam diocese), William Quirke (who was Dean of Cashel and an intimate of Croke) and Thomas Lynch and Michael Tormey (both of Paines-town in Nulty's Meath diocese).²³ Parnell's invitation to members of the Catholic clergy to participate in the Land League was another new departure. What motivated Parnell and how he drew up his list of invitations are matters for speculation. It would seem reasonable to suppose that, despite his association with the Fenians and his defiance of the local clergy at Westport and Ennis, Parnell never lost sight of the usefulness to politicians of the traditional role of priests in the countryside; he was therefore trying to draw priests into the movement by inviting those he had reason to believe were both willing and able to join, something he was better able to do after getting Archbishop Croke on his side. What is most significant about this episode in Parnell's relations with the Catholic church is that the clergy did not join the new movement until it was already firmly in existence and then by Parnell's invitation and on his terms. The priests on the national committee became only sleeping partners, power being vested in the executive and day-to-day business being conducted by a triumvirate of Davitt, Thomas Brennan and Patrick Egan – all Fenians.²⁴

Parnell was not to get the universal support of the Catholic church until four more years had passed. In the general election of 1880, Parnellites stood in only a handful of constituencies; some received clerical support, others clerical opposition. Parnell himself

again had the backing of the Catholic church in Meath: a prominent Navan priest acted as his agent and Bishop Nulty ordered a collection to be taken at chapel doors to defray his expenses.²⁵ But in Cork city, where he was also a candidate (a successful one, as it proved), only two priests, John O'Mahony and Denis McCarthy, braved the hostility of the bishop, William Delany (who called Parnell 'a self-elected dictator'), by electioneering on his behalf.²⁶ In the Cork county constituency, after encountering much clerical opposition and causing several ugly scenes, Parnell narrowly failed to secure the election of a prominent member of the Land League, Andrew Kettle.²⁷ The significance of the election of 1880 was that in consequence Parnell was elected chairman of the Irish party in the House of Commons and so was in future able to exercise to the full his great capacity for leadership, which he did by imposing a tighter discipline on the party and allying it firmly with the more militant elements of Irish society represented in the Land League, thus making the party both more effective and more popular – and so irresistible to those ecclesiastics who had misgivings about him.

In the course of 1880 and 1881 the diocesan clergy became, if their bishops would allow it, more and more involved in the agitation of the Land League, with its associated boycotting and violence, partly because they sympathized with the tenant-farmers (with whom they had family as well as social and economic ties) and partly because they considered it their duty to exert a moderating, if not a controlling, influence to offset the influences of Fenians and others whom they mistrusted. Only a handful stood aloof or were hostile. With Parnell on the platform at Ennis from which he made his 'moral Coventry' speech advocating boycotting were as many as eight priests.²⁸ One priest, Eugene Sheehy (one of those on the national committee), was imprisoned for some months in 1881 for his activities. Several others were also convicted of offences connected with the agitation.²⁹

The agitation was therefore a subject of utmost concern to the Irish Catholic bishops, more especially as the Vatican began to take note of the increasing clerical involvement in political affairs in Ireland and to attempt to exert an influence of its own.³⁰ But if the diocesan clergy were throwing themselves into the agrarian agitation, the episcopate was seriously divided. The death of Cullen in October 1878 had removed the discipline and unanimity that had characterized the episcopate during the long office of that stern martinet as papal legate. Some bishops, most notably Croke of Cashel and Nulty of Meath, now favoured Parnell; others, especially

Edward McCabe of Dublin and Delany of Cork, were vehemently opposed; the largest number kept to the middle ground. In 1880 McCabe issued two pastorals hostile to the Land League, the second of them on the eve of the trial of Parnell and thirteen other Land Leaguers on charges connected with the agitation; from Rome, where they were on an official visit, Croke of Cashel, Butler of Limerick, Fitzgerald of Ross and McCormack of Cloyne (all proven Parnellites) reacted by sending contributions to the Parnell defence fund. McCabe wrote privately to an agent in Rome lamenting that their action could 'be distorted into a sort of papal sanction' and 'an endorsement of Mr Parnell's policy which brought the country face to face with revolutionary and communistic doctrines'.³¹

The next clash was more open, more unseemly, more damaging. In March 1881 two bishops, Bartholomew Woodlock of Armagh and McCabe of Dublin, publicly denounced the Ladies' Land League and by implication the whole agrarian agitation. McCabe used language that was, in the opinion of one episcopal colleague, 'severe and unmeasured'.³² The meeting of all the Irish bishops on 15 March (called to consider Gladstone's new land bill) was stormy.³³ The bishops' disagreement deepened when Croke wrote a letter to a layman (immediately published) denouncing McCabe in contemptuous terms. It needed discreet intervention by Cardinal Simeoni for Croke to apologize.³⁴

McCabe's star rose in the months that followed. Parnell's credit with those bishops normally sympathetic towards him appeared to fall when he stomped the country employing his rhetoric against Gladstone's land measure (which the bishops generally approved) and, after being held in preventive detention under emergency legislation with a grand total of nine hundred and fifty-five other Land Leaguers, issued a manifesto urging tenant-farmers to pay no more rent until they were released (a manifesto which even Croke denounced). Archbishop McCabe's elevation to the cardinalate, news of which broke on 9 March when Parnell and the others were still in detention, was rightly interpreted as a success for George Errington, a dissident member of the Irish party who had been opposing Parnell's leadership by bringing to bear in the right quarters in Rome (where he regularly wintered) the influence he possessed as a well-connected Catholic gentleman and as a person trusted by Gladstone's foreign secretary, Lord Granville.³⁵ Probably under McCabe's influence, the Irish bishops at their annual meeting on 10 June 1882 agreed to prohibit clergy from attending public meetings without the consent of the local parish priest.³⁶ This

restricted clerical participation in politics at national level, as McCabe kept a tight discipline over the parish priests in Dublin.

II

But Parnell's political decline was more apparent than real. His outspokenness on the subject of Gladstone's land measure was intended only to propitiate his Fenian and Irish-American supporters, who could not accept that anything good could come from a British government; privately, like most tenant-farmers and the priests, he saw the measure as a success for the Land League and as a means of improving landlord-tenant relations. The problem was to resolve the conflict of interest that existed, throughout 1881, between the different groups constituting the Land League: the Fenians, who were the 'organization men', both at national level and in the small towns of Connaught; the Irish-Americans, who were the financiers; the farmers at the grass roots; and the priests who were the reliable agents in the countryside. Parnell's stay in Kilmainham jail (13 October 1881 till 2 May 1882), where he had great leisure to confer with his lieutenants, gave him respite from his difficulty and the opportunity to plan ahead. In the autumn of 1882 he formed a new organization, the Irish National League, on the ruins of the banned Land League. The new body was very much under the control of Parnell and his parliamentary colleagues, some of whom were firm moderates; the Fenian triumvirate was no more.³⁷ The Irish National League both strengthened Parnell's hand and made him more acceptable to the Catholic church. Thus Parnell was breaking with his Fenian past and espousing Catholic politics.

An episode that occurred in the spring of 1883 reveals much about Parnell's relations with the Catholic church at this time. A subscription was opened in County Wicklow, on the initiative of the Avoca branch of the Irish National League (some members of which would have depended on Parnell for a livelihood), 'to help pay off the inherited mortgage on his estate'.³⁸ The parish priest of the town of Kildare, James Kavanagh, proposed that it should become a Parnell testimonial fund; on St Patrick's Day Archbishop Croke sent a cheque for £50, declaring that the amount each person subscribed would be regarded as a measure of his patriotism.³⁹ Soon, many members of the clergy and about one-third of the episcopate had become associated with the testimonial. Other bishops (notably McCabe, Moran of Ossory and Walshe of Kildare and Leighlin) refused.⁴⁰ The new Archbishop of Tuam, John McEvelly,

told his diocesan clergy of his determination not to subscribe but did not forbid them to do so. He afterwards explained his attitude to his agent in Rome:

I myself can never pardon Parnell his putting in a worthless Presbyterian minister to represent Catholic Mayo and many other slights offered to the clergy, not to speak of his alleged association with French reds and atheists.⁴¹

The explanation sent by a County Kilkenny curate, Michael Corcoran, with the sum collected by his parishioners is one that most country priests would have endorsed in the aftermath of Gladstone's second Irish Land Act: 'we feel that we owe a deep debt of gratitude to Mr Parnell. He found the Irish farmer the slave and serf of a tyrant; thank God, he has uplifted him and given him high hopes of a bright future'.⁴² It was in the diocese of Cashel that ecclesiastics did most to relieve Parnell: Archbishop Croke, a member of the national committee for promoting the testimonial, ordered collections to be made in every parish and the proceeds to be forwarded to him within three weeks; his priests responded with great enthusiasm.⁴³ Of the £7,688 collected nationally by 11 May, £2,500 came from the Cashel diocese.⁴⁴

All of a sudden Croke was summoned to Rome where on 11 May he was humiliatingly reprimanded by Pope Leo XIII for his role in Irish politics;⁴⁵ on the same day the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide (which regulated the Irish church) issued a rescript holding that 'the collection called the "Parnell testimonial fund" cannot be approved . . . and consequently it cannot be tolerated that any ecclesiastic, much less a bishop, should take any part whatever in recommending it'.⁴⁶ The reaction of Parnell's friends in Ireland, lay and clerical alike, was to assert that the rescript was based on misrepresentation by Errington at the behest of the government.⁴⁷ When the Irish bishops met as a body on 5 July they issued a statement that made no mention of the papal rescript but blamed the government for the economic distress of the Irish farmer.⁴⁸ Parnell, far from suffering as a consequence of the Vatican's condemnation, gained even greater popularity: the fund increased rapidly to a total of £37,000. Though ecclesiastics generally ceased to be associated with it, they did so only for appearances' sake, resentful, even jealous, of Errington's success at the Vatican and foreseeing the benefit Parnell would obtain from the episode. At the presentation banquet in Dublin on 11 December 1883, nearly forty priests were present (chiefly from the dioceses

of Cashel and Meath); Fr Kavanagh of Kildare said grace but the plan for Eugene Sheehy and Croke's administrator at Cashel, James Cantwell, to speak was dropped.⁴⁹

In 1883, Charles Stewart Parnell made two gestures to endear himself further to his Catholic supporters and to disarm or even win over his Catholic opponents. One was to take a stance against Charles Bradlaugh, the well-known atheist who had been elected to serve as Member of Parliament for Northampton but was not permitted to take his seat in the House of Commons. In June 1880, Parnell had spoken strongly in Bradlaugh's favour when he was threatened with arrest for refusing to leave the chamber; he and five other Irish members were among the seven who voted against arrest; and Parnell and four colleagues visited Bradlaugh in the office of the serjeant-at-arms to tender sympathy. Such behaviour conformed with Parnell's association with Fenian and democratic causes in the 1870s, for Bradlaugh too had had Fenian associations, like Parnell he had spoken up for the 'Manchester martyrs' and both men were vice-presidents of the Democratic League of Great Britain and Ireland. But some Irish members hotly disagreed with Parnell over the Bradlaugh affair, while in Ireland Catholic opinion, lay and clerical alike, was generally very hostile to Bradlaugh.⁵⁰ Parnell kept silent on the affair until the spring of 1883 when he veered publicly into the anti-Bradlaugh camp by opposing a government Bill to allow any member to affirm instead of swearing.⁵¹ One explanation of Parnell's volte-face is that he now sought at least to respect the wishes of the Catholic bishops, every one of whom had signed a petition against the affirmation Bill.⁵² It is likely that he recognized the political expediency of deferring to Catholic opinion with regard to an issue on which it was so sensitive and so unanimous and which affected the Irish issues of home rule and land reform so little.

Parnell's second gesture was to speak in the House of Commons against the annual vote for the Queen's Colleges when other members failed to do so.⁵³ These colleges, at Belfast, Cork and Galway, secular in inspiration and religiously mixed, had been, ever since their inception in 1845, a source of grievance to the Catholic bishops, who had founded their own rival university in Dublin in 1854. Despite an episcopal resolution and the dispatch of letters to individual Catholic members urging them to attend the debate on the Queen's Colleges in August 1883, only one did so.⁵⁴ 'So far as I know', wrote one senior ecclesiastic with special responsibility for higher education in February 1884,

Parnell was not spoken to or communicated with at all. I carefully avoided meeting him. . . . Yet, with his usual skill, he seized the opportunity and in the absence of everyone else (except Colonel Colthurst) made a Parnellite stand against the queen's colleges. This is the sort of thing that is throwing the whole country into the hands of him and his followers.⁵⁵

Parnell had previously, in 1878 and 1879, promoted the bishops' views in Parliament by calling for equality of funding for the Catholic university.⁵⁶ Yet privately, as late as 1885, he questioned the need for a Catholic university.⁵⁷ Why then did he take up an issue that was controversial among his supporters (the American Fenians were dismissive of it) and had nothing to do with home rule or land reform? As F. S. L. Lyons put it, Parnell realized that, as a Protestant, he 'would have to identify himself positively with those causes which were most relevant to the needs and desires of Irish Catholicism'.⁵⁸

The other side of the rapprochement between Parnell and the Catholic bishops was the movement of the episcopal bench towards Parnell's position, the result partly of change in its leadership, partly of a change in its attitude. Early in 1883, Cardinal McCabe became ill and was at death's door; he made a recovery but seems never again to have been in robust health before his death on 11 February 1885.⁵⁹ Therefore it was not McCabe but Daniel McGettigan, the Archbishop of Armagh, who presided at the episcopal meetings that followed the papal rescript condemning the Parnell testimonial; at those held in July and October 1883 it was not even mentioned. Belonging neither to the McCabe nor the Croke camp, McGettigan was no doubt in a good position to assess the general mood of his colleagues. The rescript, to judge from the bishops' correspondence, weighed on their minds and seems to have brought despair at what they considered to be undue interference by Rome based on misrepresentation.⁶⁰ A long letter, really a memorandum, dated 26 March 1884, from Bishop Higgins of Kerry to Cardinal McCabe (to whose camp he belonged) is indicative of a consequent change of episcopal attitudes: the reception of the rescript in the country, said Higgins, showed the depth of popular sympathy for Parnell and his movement; Parnell's political power was so strong that the clergy could not be counted on to challenge it; with the extension of the franchise to small farmers and artisans it would soon be even greater; the bishops had therefore to reach an understanding with