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Authors	McKenna, Kevin
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Elites, ritual, and the legitimation of power on an Irish landed estate, 1855–90

KEVIN MCKENNA

One of the most prominent, and well-studied, relationships in nineteenth-century Ireland is that of landlord and tenant, and for most of the century it was the traditional authority of the rural landed elite that dominated positions of power at local and national level. This essay, drawing on theory from the social sciences, will examine the role of ritual in legitimizing the elite position of the landed class at local level in the 1850s and how, through the forces of historical change, its efficacy became greatly diminished as the century drew to a close. Howard Newby's aim in his 1975 paper 'The deferential dialectic' was to explain 'the relational and normative means by which [rurally based] elites maintain their traditional authority [and] the strategies they employ that attempt to ensure the stability of their power'.¹ Deference, he argues, is neither 'a type of behaviour' nor 'a set of attitudes', but rather a combination of both as 'a form of social interaction which occurs in situations involving the exercise of traditional authority'.² He uses the dialectic to explain the interaction between the superordinate and subordinate partners in a paternalistic relationship and argues that this dialectic requires attentive management, on the part of the superordinate partner, in order that the relationship's destabilizing 'tensions' can be addressed. The root of these tensions, he explains, is the inegalitarian nature of paternalistic social relations and that the successful management of these tensions necessitates the superordinate group entering into an inherently contradictory relationship with the subordinate one in order to strike a balance between the conflicting elements of *differentiation* and *identification* that constitute deferential interaction.³ Because of the hierarchical nature of the relationship, *differentiation* from subordinates is a prerequisite in order to effectively wield power over them, but so too is it necessary to cultivate a level of *identification* to promote the relationship as mutually cooperative so that the subjection of the subordinate partner is less obvious.⁴

Newby's concept of the deferential dialectic was formulated following sociological research among agricultural workers during the twentieth century, but he was informed by the historical development of traditional relationships such as those of landlord and tenant in the nineteenth century. While his research was focused on rural England, his model of the deferential dialectic is applicable to aspects of the

¹ Howard Newby, 'The deferential dialectic', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17 (1975), 139–64 at 149, 161–2. ² Newby, 'The deferential dialectic', 142. ³ The terms *differentiation* and *identification* and will appear in italics to indicate a specific reference to Newby's concept of the 'deferential dialectic'. ⁴ Newby, 'The deferential dialectic', 161–2.



landlord–tenant relationship in Ireland during the nineteenth century. This essay, using the Clonbrock Estate in east Galway as a case study, will examine the coming-of-age of Irish landed heirs in the second half of the nineteenth century as rituals of power in which the conflicting elements of *differentiation* and *identification* were finely balanced. Using the ‘thick description’ as an analytical tool, it aims to provide a deeper understanding of rural class relations by focusing on the symbolic significance of these elite events and the strategies employed by the tenantry to challenge them.⁵ It will argue that, in the mid-Victorian period, the rituals facilitated the maintenance of an ideological hegemony that defined the rate of exchange between landlord and tenant as free and fair, and explore how the expansion of the public sphere and the land acts undermined this hegemony and the effectiveness of a coming-of-age as a legitimizing force.

W.E. Vaughan has argued that in mid-Victorian Ireland various events associated with landed families provided occasions for spectacle.⁶ The birth of an heir was often marked with bonfires on estates, his coming-of-age with extensive celebrations, his marriage with the presentation of addresses and gifts, and finally the funeral of the landlord was often marked with an exhibition of deference such as the drawing of the hearse and remains by the tenantry. These life-cycle rituals, or what Larry Geary has described as ‘significant family occasions’,⁷ were a prominent feature of estate life at Clonbrock in the second half of the nineteenth century. Mark Girouard has argued that ‘in most [English] country houses of the time, the high point of entertaining was the coming-of-age’ celebrating the twenty-first birthday of heirs.⁸ This also holds true for the Irish country house, but they had significance beyond mere entertainment as rituals that legitimized the power of the landed elite. Their importance was closely associated with the practice of primogeniture that celebrated the forging of another link in the chain of male descent and increased the likelihood that a family’s title and estates would persist in the future. Furthermore, there were implications associated with the complex legal intricacies of ‘strict settlement’ that made these the seminal events of a landed estate.

⁵ The technique of ‘thick description’ was advocated by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in *The interpretation of cultures* (New York, 1973). Geertz, following Max Weber, argued that human beings were suspended in webs of significance that they have spun. These webs, he continued, were cultural and, rather than attempt to ascribe laws to them, he advocated a search for meaning within the signs and symbols of a given culture at particular moments in time. Through close examination of the signs and symbols he argued that it was possible to uncover the layers of significance that would provide a ‘thick description’. See Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures* (New York, 2000 ed.), pp 3–30. See also Aletta Biersack, ‘Local knowledge, local history: Geertz and beyond’ in Aletta Biersack and Lynn Hunt, *The new cultural history* (California, 1989), pp 72–96. ⁶ W.E. Vaughan, *Landlords and tenants in mid-Victorian Ireland* (New York, 1994), p. 4. ⁷ Laurence M. Geary, ‘Anticipating memory: landlordism, agrarianism and deference in late nineteenth-century Ireland’ in Tom Dunne and Laurence M. Geary (eds), *History and the public sphere: essays in honour of John A. Murphy* (Cork, 2005), pp 127–34 at p. 131. ⁸ Mark Girouard, *Life in the English country house* (New Haven, CT, 1978), p. 290.



From the 1650s, strict settlement became the preferred legal mechanism for transmitting estates from one generation to the next. It used the earlier medieval device of 'entail' to restrict the inheritance to specific named persons to try and ensure that the estates were inherited through the line of direct patrilineal descent, which favoured contingent male heirs over heiresses. Before the 1650s, entail named specific persons, usually eldest sons, as heirs, but the entails of strict settlement named sons and sometimes grandsons that may not have been born when the settlement was drawn up. The effect was that the sitting landowner became a mere 'life tenant' rather than the outright owner and this restricted his capacity to dispose of land and other fixed assets. 'His interests were subordinate to those of the family, and the family was of more importance than he was. He was the king in check, his freedom of manoeuvre limited' in order to protect the estates for future generations.⁹ When an heir came of age, he became the 'tenant in tail' and, in many cases, if he and the 'life tenant' – usually his father – came to an agreement, a new settlement could be drawn up to reflect the financial needs of the estate and the family. Therefore, when an heir came of age he was vested with certain powers to change the settlement and this added to the importance of event because from this point forward he was recognized as a significant actor in the affairs of the estate and its future.¹⁰ This system permitted the landed class to maintain a stranglehold on land for centuries as the entails within the settlements could not be broken except by an act of parliament. Even if an estate was bankrupt, it was protected from sale by the entails and this was the case with numerous estates in the aftermath of the Great Famine, so parliament passed the Encumbered Estates Act in order to free them from these constraints and permit sale. This underscores the inflexibility of the system, which, on well managed estates, facilitated a smooth transfer from one generation to the next, but in cases where a profligate or misfortunate generation borrowed heavily then the future heirs, with limited access to capital, often faced an insurmountable task in returning estates to financial stability.¹¹

When Luke Gerald Dillon, the heir of the third Baron Clonbrock,¹² came of age in March 1855, bonfires were observed 'blazing in all directions' to mark the occasion, and a few months after, once he had completed his studies at Oxford, a coming-of-age was staged at Clonbrock in June.¹³ Representatives of the *Galway*

⁹ Laurence Stone and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone, *An open elite: England, 1540–1880* (Oxford, 1995), p. 48. ¹⁰ Barbra English and John Saville, *Strict settlement: a guide for historians* (Hull, 1983), pp 20–2. ¹¹ Among the critics of primogeniture and entail was Adam Smith, who, in *The wealth of nations*, 1 (Hartford, 1811 ed.), argued that they were factors that contributed to the underutilization of land and retarded economic progress, p. 274. ¹² Robert Dillon (1807–93), third baron Clonbrock, inherited the Clonbrock estates as a minor in 1826. With c.26,000 acres in east Galway, he was one of the largest landowners in the county, enlarging his estates to 28,246 acres by 1876. He played an active role at local and national level, acting as a Poor Law guardian as well as lord lieutenant and representative peer for Co. Galway. These positions were also held by his son, Luke Gerald (1834–1917), fourth baron Clonbrock. ¹³ *Galway Mercury*, 17 Mar. 1855.



Mercury, the *Western Star* and the *Tuam Herald* were present as invited guests and their reports of the celebrations were extensive. The main events of the day were the presentation of an address to Luke Gerald by representatives of the tenantry, a 'sports', a tenants' dinner and an exhibition of fireworks. By midday, when proceedings had been scheduled to commence, several thousand people, including tenants' families and others from outside the estate, had assembled near the big house. At 1pm, they greeted Luke Gerald with repeated rounds of applause when he appeared at the front of the house and then dancing commenced on the lawn 'to the music of a number of fiddles and other familiar instruments'.¹⁴ At about half past three, a deputation of tenants, comprising those with the most extensive holdings, approached the house with an address to Luke Gerald and they were 'received in the grand hall by Lord and Lady Clonbrock'.¹⁵

The content of the address was a mix of hyperbole, which eulogized the Dillon family, and what might be described as a paternalistic social contract, which reminded Luke Gerald that, while he had privileges, there were also duties to be fulfilled. It described the attainment of his majority 'as a matter of deep concern' not only to the tenantry but to his country, and expressed expectations that he would become involved in promoting the interests of Ireland as well as those of the tenantry. They (the tenantry) expressed confidence that when he came to manage the estates he would

follow in the footsteps of his noble father, who has at all times with much zeal and justice, discharged his duties as a landlord, and who, intimately acquainted with the requirements of the tenant farmer, has ever been ready with his purse and advice to advance the true interests of those who are placed under him.

That the ritual promoted the landlord–tenant relationship as contractual is further evidenced by the tenants' assertion that, although Luke Gerald's position in life conferred certain privileges, he would 'never overlook its duties'.¹⁶ It reminded him that he had obligations and allowed the representatives of the tenantry to express a degree, albeit limited, of agency.

From the centre of the hall, Luke Gerald replied to the tenants, thanking them for the kind words expressed in the address. He referred to how he was 'most closely connected' with them and that their 'happiness and welfare ... must ever be the object of [his] life to promote'. Acknowledging that they were in a contractual relationship, he expressed hopes that throughout his life his 'conduct [would] meet with [their] approval' and if he ever strayed then he would follow the shining example that had been set by his father.¹⁷ With the conclusion of the address and reply, Lord Clonbrock then introduced Luke Gerald to the deputation, who 'expressed their

¹⁴ *Tuam Herald*, 16 June 1855. ¹⁵ *Western Star*, 16 June 1855. ¹⁶ Tenants address to Luke Gerald Dillon, published in *Galway Mercury*, 16 June 1855. ¹⁷ Luke Gerald Dillon's reply to the tenantry, *Galway Mercury*, 16 June 1855.



sincere and hearty congratulations'.¹⁸ Lord Clonbrock introduced his son to them as his heir, a man in full enjoyment of his rights, prepared and entitled to take control of the running of the estates when the time came, and the members of the deputation were recognizing him as such. Clonbrock was paving the path of succession for his son by introducing him to representatives of the tenantry; in effect, he was stating 'here is my son, someday he will inherit these estates and he will replace me as your lord'.

After the formalities of the address and reply were dispensed with, a celebratory tenants' dinner was given in a large pavilion erected in the demesne. It was bedecked with flags, some of which were inscribed with 'Irish harps', while others were emblazoned with slogans such as 'Welcome' and 'Erin go bragh'. The newspapers listed the invited guests of Clonbrock beginning with the aristocracy then moving on to the gentry, clergy and others among whom the principal tenants, Michael and John Carr, were mentioned, indicating that they were the elite of the tenantry. The rest of the 'general company, which numbered upwards of 600' tenants from all sections of the estates dined on 'everything substantial and delicate with wines of the purest vintage'. At the after dinner speeches, Clonbrock proposed a toast to his son and pointed out the many qualities he possessed, he expressed hope for the transmission of the family name and title to Luke Gerald, who, he expected would 'perform the duties of the station in which God has placed him'.¹⁹ The various speeches that ensued were of a similar nature, referring to the benevolence of Clonbrock and the hopes that Luke Gerald would follow in his footsteps. Charles Filgate, the land agent, spoke of how it had been his pleasure to have served Clonbrock for thirteen years, as he had been permitted to 'distribute the favours at all times so liberally bestowed by their noble landlord'. He referred to the reductions of rent that had been made during the Famine, but that the calamity had now passed and he expected the rents to be paid in full. He pointed out the difference between the 'improving and the slothful tenant' and that a landlord was as entitled to his rent as a merchant was entitled to payment for goods.²⁰

Concluding the speeches, Clonbrock proposed a toast to the press and remarked that the celebrations at Clonbrock that day were a private affair that was hardly worth reporting, but there were 'many absent friends that would like to know their doings on the occasion' and he hoped the press would oblige them. Jasper Kelly, of the *Tuam Herald*, spoke of Lord Clonbrock's reputation as a benevolent landlord and expressed hopes that his son would 'sustain his ancestral name as nobly and as well as his respected and honoured father had done before him'. The banquet was then brought to a close and dancing resumed on the lawn and later that evening a fireworks display, the event's grand finale, took place in the village of Ahascragh.²¹ It was reported that

a large number of the respectable inhabitants of Ballinasloe had arrived to witness the fireworks . . . In that part of the country the scene was a novel

¹⁸ *Tuam Herald*, 16 June 1855. ¹⁹ *Ibid.* ²⁰ *Ibid.* ²¹ *Ibid.*



one, and excited some deep interest in some thousands who had never before witnessed such a display.²²

Such was the extent of the pyrotechnic illuminations that ‘in Ballinasloe [eight miles away] they were quite observable’. The celebrations continued until 1 am and the press was of the opinion that the event was enjoyed so much that it would ‘long be remembered by all who were present on the occasion’.²³ That the illuminations and fireworks would ‘long be remembered’ was, of course, the reason for such a display, and the impact of the spectacle on a nineteenth-century Irish smallholder must have been great. Stories of the display could then be told to children years after the event had taken place and the next coming-of-age would have been looked forward to in expectation of such spectacle.

The coming-of-age of an heir was the central ritual of the landed class that celebrated the forging of another link in the chain of descent and, while the main focus of the celebrations was on the heir, there was also a symbolic celebration of the virility of the landlord who had produced an heir and reared him to maturity. Lord Clonbrock mentioned that the celebration of his son’s majority was a private affair, but, with several thousand people crowded into the demesne and reporters from three newspapers present, nothing could be further from the truth. It was a statement of power to tenants that were present but also to the public at large, as the event was extensively reported in the newspapers. Throughout the speeches, the paternalistic message of hierarchy was conveyed, outlining the duties and responsibilities that each class had to each other. It was acknowledged by all that Lord Clonbrock was as good a landlord as any tenant could hope to have and the continuity of the family was repeatedly asserted through the hope that Luke Gerald would follow in his father’s footsteps.

Examining the coming-of-age festivities of landed heirs in the nineteenth century provides an opportunity to feel the pulse of landlord–tenant relations at those particular moments. On the surface, these rituals seem somewhat generic as there appears to be little difference between one and the next. If carefully examined, however, they reveal much about the landed family and the tensions that may or may not have existed between them and their tenants. The coming-of-age celebrations at Clonbrock were very much a success, but the same cannot be said for the festivities to celebrate the majority of Lord Dunlo, the earl of Clancarty’s son, two months earlier. Resentment against Lord Clancarty existed because of his proselytizing efforts among his tenantry as well as his refusal to allow the Sisters of Mercy to administer to the poor of the Ballinasloe Workhouse in the 1850s. As part of the festivities to celebrate the majority of Lord Dunlo, his heir, it was planned that the householders of the town would place lighted candles in their windows at darkness to honour his majority. One section of the town did not ‘illuminate’, however, and although Lord Clancarty stated that he respected their wishes to refuse and would not deny them access to his park, it must have rankled with him.²⁴

²² *Western Star*, 16 June 1855. ²³ *Ibid.* ²⁴ *Tuam Herald*, 14 Apr. 1855.



At the Clonbrock festivities, the music and iconography had a mix of Gaelic and imperial flavours, suggesting that the two traditions could co-exist. 'Rule Britannia' was played alongside 'Rory O'Moore' and banners displaying 'God save the queen' were draped alongside others displaying Irish motifs like 'Erin go bragh'. This, however, was not the case at the festivities to celebrate the majority of Lord Bernard, the earl of Bandon's heir, in 1871. The festivities at Bandon, 'that most Protestant town',²⁵ featured marches of freemasons and Orangemen and there was no mention of the playing of Irish airs, but 'the strains of martial music (were not) wanting, for two bands were in attendance, the fine band of the 14th Hussars ... and that of the South Cork Light Infantry [also known as the Bandon Militia]'.²⁶ At Clonbrock, a festive atmosphere prevailed and, along with dancing and leaping, the choicest wines were supplied for the dinner. At Bandon, there was no mention of any dancing or the provision of alcohol at the tenants' dinner. During the after-dinner speeches, a clergyman referred to the 'sober men, like those he saw before him, met together in cordial friendship to pay compliment to their future landlord'.²⁷ Altogether, there was an austere and militaristic tone to the celebrations at Bandon, which reflects the siege mentality that pervaded in the town, not least with its principal resident, the earl of Bandon, who had held office in the Orange order.²⁸ Some weeks later, there was a further exhibition of this militarism when a banquet was given to the tenants on one of Lord Bandon's outlying estates at Durras Court. The day concluded with a display of fireworks 'accompanied by salvoes of artillery, which provoked many an echo in the surrounding mountains on the top of which bonfires were lit'.²⁹

Coming-of-age rituals were celebrated in different ways by different families and provide insights into how landed families communicated with their tenantry. The success of the celebrations at Clonbrock indicates that the event was a well-managed affair that could permit a degree of high spirits while maintaining control. The *Galway Vindicator* reported that

hilarity, order and regularity everywhere prevailed ... attended by nearly 3,000 spectators of all ranks and ages, no accident occurred. After a minute and painstaking inquiry, the only casualties we can record are the breaking of a couple of wine glasses, and the partial conflagration of a lady's dress.³⁰

The *Irish Times*, a publication generally favourable to the landed class, reported such events regularly from 1859, communicating a message that property, hierarchy and tradition brought order. In Britain, as the new industrial and merchant class became wealthier and increasingly influential, they held similar celebrations when their eldest sons came of age, but these were seldom reported by the *Irish Times*. One exception

²⁵ Ian d'Alton, *Protestant society and politics in Cork, 1812–1844* (Cork, 1980), p. 29. ²⁶ *Cork Constitution*, 13 Sept. 1871. ²⁷ *West Cork Eagle*, 16 Sept. 1871. ²⁸ For a contemporary profile and history of the town, see George Bennett, *A history of Bandon and the principal towns in the west riding of County Cork* (Cork, 1869). ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 30 Sept. 1871. ³⁰ *Galway Vindicator*, 16 June 1855.



in 1868 was the majority of the heir of a Staffordshire coal and iron magnate. This event surpassed any Irish coming-of-age in terms of magnitude. Entertainment was extended to between 4,000 and 5,000 people:

900 bottles of wine and 2,340 gallons of ale were consumed. The drunken orgies which marked the affair were most disgraceful. One reverend gentleman . . . wandering he knew not whither, hatless and fighting with his friend and neighbour, was tumbled out of the pavilion. A gentleman of the press was discovered among the helpless at five in the morning in a field. Fights took place without number, and many, men, women, boys and girls were helpless through drink; others reeling home, and numbers lying in the fields and lanes, dead drunk. Sixteen men, felled by drink, helpless and prostrate, were counted within a radius of twenty yards, and scores scattered about, many bleeding, hatless, shoeless and coatless, incapable of movement or speech.³¹

The message here is clear, a man may accumulate wealth but that does not necessarily convey upon him the qualities of a ruler or one who could command order. The landed class considered this their birthright through generations of good breeding and superior education. Furthermore, this is given as an example of how society would disintegrate if the merchant and industry types ever replaced the landed class as the 'natural' rulers. The extent of the effervescence at coming-of-age festivities depended very much on the landed family hosting them and how comfortable they were with their tenants. As we have seen, there was a militaristic and austere atmosphere at Castle Bernard and the celebrations concluded there after a reception at 10pm. At Clonbrock, they continued until 1am, while at the coming-of-age of Lord Dunraven's heir at Adare in 1862, 'copious supplies of hot punch' were served at a supper to over one thousand people and dancing resumed afterward. 'At half past five o'clock [in the morning], his lordship was in the midst of his people throwing open his cellars to give his parting drink to his tenants and their families'.³²

Newby argues that traditionally legitimized hierarchical organizations are capable of extreme stability because deference is granted to both the tradition itself and to the person holding the position of authority. Those deferring to the superordinate partner, however, cannot be taken for granted and to understand the social basis for deference it is necessary to understand the strategies by which rural elites legitimate their position. Deferential interaction consists of two opposing elements: *differentiation* and *identification*. It is by *differentiation* that the positions of domination and subordination are delineated, but acceptance of social hierarchies cannot be achieved unless the subordinate group identifies sufficiently with the superordinate partner in the relationship: 'It is the tension between these opposing elements of *differentiation* and *identification* from which contradictions arise that threaten the destruction of the

31 *Irish Times*, 21 Sept. 1868. 32 *Munster News*, 1 Feb. 1862.



relationship'. If the superordinate partner carries the process of *identification* with the subordinated group too far, then *differentiation* is not possible and 'deference to elite authority breaks down; thus, while elites attempt to retain the *identification* of those below them in the hierarchy, they must also operate certain mechanisms of social distancing which endorse their *differentiation*'.³³ At Clonbrock, the coming-of-age ritual provided an opportunity for this *identification* to be strengthened and if it is considered that the *Galway Mercury* reported that 'hilarity, order and regularity everywhere prevailed', then it appears that the balance between *differentiation* and *identification* had been struck perfectly, as the 'hilarity' of the occasion would have fostered *identification* while at the same time, unlike the debauchery witnessed in Staffordshire, there was sufficient *differentiation* to preserve 'order and regularity'.

While the opposing elements of *differentiation* and *identification* were well balanced at the Clonbrock coming-of-age, there was one narrative that challenged the legitimacy of Clonbrock's power. Popular tradition held that the Clonbrock estates were once owned by the O'Kelly clan and following their participation in a rebellion against the English crown they were confiscated and granted to an ancestor of Lord Clonbrock. The O'Kelly chieftain remained in the district, however, and paid clandestine visits to the site of his former power at Clonbrock, where a tannery had been established.

On one of these occasions, having gone into the new tannery, he strongly excited the compassion of the workmen, who, through his rags, recognized their quondam chief, and one of them, perceiving the dilapidated condition of his shoes, gave him some of the leather to repair them. As he was going out with it, he chanced to encounter the new proprietor, who roughly handled him, overbearingly reproached him, and charged him with baseness and theft!!! At length, stung beyond endurance, the grey-haired chieftain knelt down and poured forth, in his native tongue, one of those aoirey maledictions [and] bound him under a spell that no father of his race should, for many generations, live to see his son come of age.³⁴

In 1855, when Lord Clonbrock lived to see his heir come of age, the curse had, apparently, been broken, so reports like the one above appeared in numerous provincial publications. Similar reports, however, made it into the press many years before this. Daniel O'Connell made reference to the curse in 1843 and even those in far-flung Tasmania learned about it in 1851 through the *Hobart Town Courier*.³⁵ It is difficult to say, definitively, how long the curse or versions of it were in circulation, but if it is understood that the family's genealogy verifies that no father of the Dillon family had lived to witness a son's majority for over 150 years, then there was ample time and material for such narratives to develop.³⁶ What is important, however, is that the curse

³³ Newby, 'The deferential dialectic', p. 152. ³⁴ *Galway Mercury*, 17 Mar. 1855. ³⁵ *Tuam Herald*, 15 Sept. 1843; *Hobart Town Courier*, 13 Aug. 1851. ³⁶ Lady Mahon, 'The Dillons of

can be viewed as a ‘counter-public’ at variance with the dominant paternalistic discourse expressed in the provincial press that, for the main part, constituted the ideological hegemony and legitimized the power of landlords such as Clonbrock.³⁷

The foundation text for discussion of the public sphere is Jürgen Habermas’ *Structural transformation of the public sphere*, which argued that, during the eighteenth century, the advent of salons in France and coffee shops in England, together with an increase in pamphlets and printed material, created a space that facilitated the reflexive circulation of discourse leading to the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere that challenged the power of church and state.³⁸ Habermas argued that this public sphere was open and inclusive, but Nancy Frazer, in her critique of his thesis, counter-argued that certain groups including women and the lower strata of society were excluded from this universal public sphere and formed their own ‘subaltern counter-publics’, which were ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs’.³⁹ The rhetoric that framed landlord–tenant discourse in the 1850s remained overwhelmingly paternalistic and even when landlords received criticism it was through this framework that they were accused of not fulfilling their duty. Therefore, the curse, with its narratives of dispossession and retribution, acted as a counter-discourse to the paternalistic *zeitgeist* that pervaded the provincial press through the 1850s.

The week of the coming-of-age was very significant in terms of the development of the public sphere in Britain and Ireland as Gladstone’s bill to repeal the final stamp tax on newspapers was debated in parliament.⁴⁰ The conservative *Western Star* made its position clear on the issue and it provides insights into how small farmers were being excluded from the discourse of print culture. It argued that the bill ‘would tend to produce a set of publications addressed only to the lower classes, and appealing in many cases to their worst passions and prejudices . . . the character of the newspaper press would be so lowered as essentially to bring it into collision with the public’.⁴¹

Clonbrock’ (unpublished family memoir), genealogy and family tree appended to this volume; Bernard Burke, *A genealogical and heraldic dictionary of the peerage and baronetage of the British Empire*, 1 (London, 1853), pp 214–15; this volume provides dates of birth and death of the heads of the family from 1754, which confirm that neither the first or second barons had lived to witness the heir come of age. **37** Curses by widows against landed families have been widely recorded in Irish folklore and many survive through oral tradition. Notable examples are those incurred by Lord Waterford and the Shirleys of Lough Fea in Co. Monaghan. For discussion of the curse in folkloric tradition, see Séamas MacPhilib, ‘Legends of Irish landlords in their international context’, *Béaloides*, 62:3 (1994–5), 79–89; for gossip as a tool of resistance, see J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak* (New Haven, CT, 1985), p. 282. **38** Jürgen Habermas, Thomas Burger (trans.), *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into the category of bourgeois society* (Cambridge, 1989). **39** Nancy Frazer, ‘Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy’, *Social Text*, 25 (1990), 56–80 at 67. **40** Marie-Louise Legg, *Newspapers and nationalism: the Irish provincial press, 1850–1892* (Dublin, 1999), p. 13. **41** *Western Star*, 24 Mar. 1855.

Lord Clonbrock did not vote on the issue in the House of Lords and does not appear to have been hostile to it as he toasted the press during the coming-of-age dinner. The press, he argued, 'exercised so potent an influence upon all communities. He believed it to be the one which, more than any other, guaranteed the freedom of a free people'.⁴² The bill passed parliament that month and it is generally agreed that 'it was crucial for the growth of the newspaper industry on both sides of the Irish sea. But in Ireland the growth of a cheaper press coincided with the growth of nationalism'.⁴³ In the post-Famine period, increasing literacy and the growth of the provincial press facilitated the emergence of what might be called an 'agrarian public sphere' and the counter-public that articulated the narrative of dispossession and retribution embedded in the curse became part of this public which, by the time of the Land War, had no problems articulating those narratives. As Anne Kane has argued,

the Land War provided the 'political field' on which a unified national identity emerged from public discourse over landlordism and British domination, and collective action based on new symbolic understandings. At the core of both Land War ideology and the emergent national identity was a discourse of retribution, configured through the collective sharing of narratives, embodying central themes of the injustice of British and landlord domination, and the rights of the Irish to the land and the country.⁴⁴

When the next generation of the Dillon family came of age in 1890, the paternalistic rhetoric that, in the 1850s, had discussed the landlord-tenant relationship in terms of duties and responsibilities had become anachronistic. The rights of tenants had been enshrined in the land act of 1881 and it was the language of rights rather than the paternalist rhetoric of duty that had become the *lingua franca*. Furthermore, the settled land act of 1882 permitted the breaking of entailed estates, thus weakening the grip that the landed class had held on land for centuries. Entail had protected the interests of heirs and its abolition meant that it was less likely that the heir would inherit the estates. As such, the coming-of-age of an heir as a ritual of power had been divested of much of its significance. Despite this, in 1890, festivities to celebrate the coming-of-age of Robert Edward Dillon, the heir apparent, were staged in much the same fashion as they had been thirty-five years previously when Luke Gerald, his father, had come of age. A group of tenants formed a committee and commissioned an illuminated address and a portrait of Luke Gerald as gifts for Robert Edward. The content of this address differed in many ways from the one presented to Luke Gerald in 1855, however. It spoke of 'loyal hearts' but there was not a single mention of Robert Edward ever becoming their landlord or following in his father's or grand-

⁴² *Tuam Herald*, 16 June 1855. ⁴³ Legg, *Newspapers and nationalism*, p. 13. ⁴⁴ Anne Kane, 'Narratives of nationalism: constructing Irish national identity during the Land War, 1879-82', *National Identities*, 2 (2000), 245-64 at 245.

father's footsteps, as there had been in the 1855 address. A further difference between the address of 1855 and that of 1890 was the absence in the latter of references to the paternalist values of duties and responsibilities. There was little need for the tenants to make reference to them, as Gladstone's land legislation had seen to it that landlords could not behave in an arbitrary fashion, as some had in former years, and tenants had legal avenues by which they could assert their rights.

By now, the 83-year-old Lord Clonbrock, grandfather to Robert Edward, was blind and confined to a wheelchair, yet he was still possessed of enough energy to participate in the proceedings. He was brought out to the front steps of the house and the *Western Star* reported that 'he literally electrified the whole audience and the tenantry by delivering a speech which was throughout enthusiastically applauded'. While the tenants' address neglected to mention the transmission of the estates from one generation to the next, Lord Clonbrock did not; he spoke of how his place would 'be filled by one far more capable of holding it than ever I have been myself' and he urged the tenantry to 'stand to [his grandson], and when time and opportunity occur, my hand to you, he will stand to you'. Following tradition, a celebratory dinner was held. One of those who eulogized Lord Clonbrock's treatment of the tenantry during the Famine was Father Fahy, the local parish priest, who praised him for giving up his hounds at this time. As in former years, the highlight of the event was the fireworks display, after which a dance commenced in the servant's hall and continued until the early hours of the following morning.⁴⁵

The decline in importance of coming-of-age celebrations as rituals of power was reflected in the relative disinterest that the provincial media displayed in reporting the event. In 1855, Luke Gerald's attainment of majority was extensively covered by three Galway newspapers as well as in minor reports in several others. In 1890, however, the *Western Star* was the only Galway newspaper to devote any significant coverage to his son's coming-of-age, and allocated only half a page, compared to almost a full page when Luke Gerald had come of age in 1855. As a clear indication of its decline, the address to and reply from Robert Edward were placed in the advertising sections of both the *Western Star* and the *Athlone Times*, revealing that these once newsworthy events now had to be paid for. A letter to Luke Gerald from a friend in the diplomatic service expressed the degree to which times had changed and lamented their passing. This friend, on reading a newspaper account of the day's festivities, related how he had felt both pleasure and pain:

Pleasure . . . at the grand sight suggested by the old man [Lord Clonbrock] on the steps of the house, speaking those beautiful simple words, transcendently eloquent and thrilling one even at this distance . . . The pain was the thought that this was an almost miraculous survival from a beautiful past never destined to return. Of a past that had not died a natural death but has been inhumanly murdered by the basest combinations of the very violent and

45 *Western Star*, 12 Sept. 1890.

vulgar political egotisms on both sides of the channel . . . Accursed army of murderers with the GOM [Gladstone] and Parnell at their head.⁴⁶

In an increasingly democratic age, the rituals of paternalism and deference on the landed estate were losing their significance and Joseph Lee has argued that the Land League provided the stimulus 'to the struggle to emancipate tenants from the shackles of mental serfdom. It taught the tenants the simple but symbolic technique of not doffing their caps to landlords'.⁴⁷ Larry Geary has provided an example of this in action through a resolution passed by the Rossmore branch of the Land League, who did 'solemnly bind [themselves] not to take off [their] hats to any man in future except the priest'.⁴⁸ This illustrates that deference to landed authority was in decline and that, in certain cases, the power of the Catholic clergy at local level was in the ascendant. Although deference to the landed elite was on the wane, it had not yet disappeared as there was sufficient will to stage the coming-of-age at Clonbrock. The ritual did come under attack, however, and, had the author of letter quoted above been aware of how the event was criticized in the nationalist press or of a resolution passed by the local branch of the National League, his anguish, no doubt, would have been multiplied. Earlier, it has been explained how the folk-curse, with its narrative of dispossession and retribution, operated as a subaltern counter-discourse and an effective form of passive resistance to landed power. In 1890, however, and for many years beforehand, due to the growth of the nationalist press, these counter-discourses were being firmly expressed in print culture by those opposed to the landed interest. The *Tuam News* reported how the coming-of-age

was taken as an occasion by some of the wealthiest of Clonbrock's tenants to show their flunkeyism. A committee was formed and a ticket sent to each of the tenants admitting one to lunch at Clonbrock, for which the modest sum of 3s. had to be paid. A couple of fat heifers and a fat sheep were killed for the feast, but the tenants paid smartly for it.⁴⁹

A special meeting of the Ahascragh branch of the Irish National League was convened to discuss the event. The chairman, Andrew Manning, a poor law guardian for the Ballinasloe union, was a tenant on the neighbouring Mahon Estate and a veteran of the Land War. He had no objection to the celebrations at Clonbrock and stated that it was only natural that Robert Edward's parents 'should avail themselves of this opportunity to pay him this tribute of their affection'.⁵⁰ What he did find objectionable was that

⁴⁶ Letter to L.G. Dillon, n.d. Clonbrock Papers, NLI MS 35,761/5. ⁴⁷ Joseph Lee, *The modernisation of Irish society* (Dublin, 1973), p. 89. ⁴⁸ Resolution passed by Rossmore branch of the Land League, in Laurence M. Geary 'Anticipating memory', p. 127. ⁴⁹ *Tuam News*, 12 Sept. 1890. ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 8 Oct. 1890.



a Catholic priest should so far forget himself as to enter the camp of the political enemies of the people, and signalise his advent by an address that I feel bound to describe as nothing short of a tissue of the meanest and most crawling literary rubbish that ever came from the lips of the most servile hanger on or underscraper of an extensive landlord.

The branch unanimously adopted a resolution denouncing

the language used by Father Fahy, of Fohenagh, at the Clonbrock festivities on the 9th inst., as being unworthy of an Irishman and a priest, and strongly calculated to resuscitate the dying institution of landlordism, and a most pernicious example to the members of his flock.⁵¹

While there may have been some transference of deference from the landed elite to the Catholic clergy, it was very much dependent on the clergy behaving in an appropriate fashion, especially when the issues of landlordism and politics were a factor. As J.H. Whyte has argued, 'it seems to be on the whole true that the Irish clergy could lead their people only in the direction in which they wanted to go'.⁵²

At some level, Manning and the other members of the National League understood the role of ritual in the legitimization of elite power and openly challenged it. Newby identifies 'ideological hegemony' as one of the principle strategies by which the landed elite maintained their positions of power, arguing that 'a crucial element in the management of the tensions inherent in the deferential dialectic is the provision of a consistent and coherent set of ideas which interpret the power of the ruling elite in a manner that reinforces their legitimacy'.⁵³ Until 1855, the landed elite's influence over the press meant that paternalist rhetoric dominated the discourse of landlord–tenant relations and ensured that the coming-of-age of heirs received sufficient coverage to buttress this ideological hegemony. The emergence and development of the 'agrarian public sphere' from this point forward, however, undermined this hegemony and made the management of the deferential dialectic increasingly difficult for landlords such as Clonbrock. With pressure from below, these rituals became increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of popular opposition. As the agrarian and mercantile classes began to establish their own hegemony, they too began to assert themselves through different forms of ritual, from Land League meetings to public statuary, as well as agrarian protests in the form of hunt sabotage and 'cattle driving'.⁵⁴ With this increased pressure, coming-of-age rituals as expres-

51 Ibid. **52** J.H. Whyte, 'The influence of the Catholic clergy on elections in the nineteenth century', *English Historical Review*, 75 (1960), 239–59 at 248. **53** Newby, 'The deferential dialectic', 142. **54** See Fergus Campbell, *Land and revolution: nationalist politics in the west of Ireland, 1891–1921* (Oxford, 2005); Patrick J. Cosgrove, 'The Wyndham Land Act, 1903: the final solution to the Irish land question?' (PhD, NUIM, 2010); Anne Kane, 'Theorising meaning construction in social movements: symbolic structures and interpretation during the Irish Land War, 1879–82', *Sociological Theory*, 15:3 (Nov. 1997), 249–





sions of power went into terminal decline and there were no further heirs to the Clonbrock title as Robert Edward Dillon, fifth Baron Clonbrock, died without issue in 1926. Denuded of much of their significance, reports of coming-of-age celebrations became less frequent and less spectacular. Some families continued to stage them, however, and they were reported by the *Irish Times* and the provincial press until at least the late 1930s. By this time, they were no longer used as opportunities to project power or affirm the position of the landed class at the apex of the social order. Their sole purpose was to try and maintain a bond of *identification* with their former tenants, as demesnes and their Big Houses increasingly became islands of isolation with the emergence of a new social and political order.

76; Heather Laird (ed.), *Subversive law in Ireland: from unwritten law to Dail courts* (Dublin, 2005); Gary Owens, 'Nationalist monuments in Ireland, c.1870–1914: symbolism and ritual' in Raymond Gillespie and Brian P. Kennedy, *Ireland: art into history*, pp 103–17.

