



The Ralahine Experiment and the Politics of Land in Late-Nineteenth Century Ireland

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In 1823 Robert Owen arrived in Dublin to give a series of lectures setting out how a ‘New View of Society’ might be made manifest in Ireland. At the heart of Owen’s vision was the establishment of a series of co-operative, self-sustaining communities that would at once take people out of poverty while shaping their moral character. Owen’s visit would have been unremarkable if not for the fact that ten years later, a landlord called John Vandeleur reorganised his estate into a co-operative colony: Ralahine co-operative society, an Owenite commune where tenant farmers effectively became co-partners in the estate’s management. Even though two years later the society collapsed, the legacy and memory of Ralahine exerted a hold over the imaginations of an assortment of land reformers, nationalists, and co-operators in Ireland. This article shows how a failed experiment in co-operative community building created an influential resource of co-operative knowledge that shaped political imaginaries and inspired alternative visions of property ownership in response to crises occurring in the second half of the nineteenth century. In particular, the work of Owenites involved in Ralahine, such as Edward Thomas Craig and William Pare, is examined to locate the enduring historical relevance of the Irish Owenite commune.

In September 1831, Edward Thomas Craig, a 27-year-old Owenite from Manchester, wrote to Robert Owen in London to share his views on the potential that existed for the great work of social reform. Craig was the editor of the *Yorkshire and Lancashire Co-operator*, a leading figure in Manchester’s radical community, and an activist promoting the ideals of a nascent co-operative movement (Harrison, 1969, pp. 170-171). He reflected on the recent Co-operative Congress held in Birmingham and wished that supporters of the movement in the capital would pay more attention to developments outside their own city. The Congress meetings might “make mighty moral streams through which the ‘New Views’ might flow and be disseminated over the whole surface of British society, until the whole map became impregnated with our principles” (Craig, 1831).

Optimistic about the future, Craig also explained in a postscript that he was about to embark upon a bold new co-operative experiment in Ireland. Craig had been contacted by John Vandeleur of Ralahine, County Clare, with an invitation “to assist in his arrangements”. Vandeleur had taken the bold step to reorganise his property in the village as a co-operative commune with the tenants constituted as formal members. As a leading light in the Owen-inspired co-operative movement, Craig was recruited to manage and direct the project. He wrote further that “I shall go there with pleasure, as my whole heart is with the cause. As the success of the experiment will mainly depend upon its management I should feel it a pleasure if you could furnish me with any suggestions” (Craig, 1831).

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The invitation to manage the new commune at Ralahine proved to be one of the most formative incidents in Craig's life. The arrangements referred to revolved around the management of a 618-acre farm, which Vandeleur rented to his tenant farmers as a community, for 900 pounds a year, payable in agricultural produce. Ó Gráda (1974) has shown that this rent, high by Irish standards, was favourable to the landlord and a source of some resentment in the community. Nevertheless, the commune differed radically from other rental arrangements in Ireland at that time with the ultimate objective being for the community to accumulate sufficient capital after the rent payments to eventually buy Vandeleur out of his interest. Until that point Vandeleur retained legal ownership of the property — a point that was central to the collapse of the commune (Garnett, 1972; Geoghegan, 1991).

Vandeleur had taken the radical decision to convert the estate into a co-operative enterprise. In part he was inspired by a lecture tour which he attended and which was conducted by Owen in Ireland in 1823. Owen visited Ireland to promote his plan for social amelioration by “the arrangement of the unemployed working classes into ‘agricultural and manufacturing villages of unity and mutual co-operation’ limited to a population of from 500 to 1,500 persons” (British and Foreign Philanthropic Society, 1823, p. 29). Owen wanted to precipitate a great work of total social reorganisation and he argued that the creation of philanthropically funded agricultural colonies offered a practical approach to improving the condition of the working classes in Ireland. At the time, despite an effort to raise subscriptions to fund such experiments, the plans came to naught (Harrison, 1969, pp. 29-30).

Vandeleur's belated response was also a reaction to growing social unrest in the region. Violence erupted in County Clare during early 1831, perpetrated by secret agrarian societies like the Terry Alts and the Lady Clare Boys. 2,912 agrarian offences were recorded during January to May 1831, including 19 homicides, which included the land steward on the Ralahine estate (Donnelly, 1994; Geoghegan, 1991). Vandeleur fled with his family from his estate to Limerick and left his house under armed guard. As a result of Owenite inspired idealism on the one hand, and the threat of further unrest on his estate on the other, Vandeleur took the drastic decision to reorganise his property in a way that brought the tenant farmers together effectively to become co-operative partners in the management of the estate, although he retained ownership of the land (Geoghegan, 1991).

Those tenants who wished to be involved had to agree to become a member of the co-operative society formed at Ralahine. The society incorporated 618 acres made up of 268 which were cultivated, 63 of bog, and the rest was rough pasture. The community fell far short of Owen's original plans to form societies with at least 500 members. At the end of the first year there were 52 members, and a year later this rose to 81. A committee of nine was formed, chaired by Vandeleur, and this established rules around the practices of farm management, profit sharing, and prohibitions on alcohol, gambling, and tobacco. Craig's role was to serve as the Secretary of the co-operative and assess the membership applications as they came in, while ensuring that principles of social reorganisation could be embedded. Stress was placed on education and this meant that the peasants that made up the co-operative commune would be brought into a state of social enlightenment through the act of community reorganisation in which all members worked towards the success of the co-operative (Evans, 2008).

The story of the commune has been told several times and will not be retold here, except to say that having run for two years with a great degree of success and notice among co-operators and Owenites in Britain and Ireland, the commune collapsed in 1833 following Vandeleur's reckless gambling that saw him place the title deeds of the property on a bet, which he lost (Geoghegan, 1991, p. 407). For those involved in the co-operative, when the end came the effects were devastating as the commune broke up and the creditors moved in. In his recollections of the experiment published half a century later, Craig spoke of his “reason to be gratified at the success of my efforts of social reorganisation and proud of the great improvement that had been realised among the people of Ralahine” only for that pride to be replaced by disappointment on the unravelling of the project. For Craig, the collapse of Ralahine meant that “the past became as a dream, the present a hard and harrowing reality” (Craig, 1882, p. 185).

Experiments like Ralahine were never to be repeated in Ireland. Although Craig wrote to Owen shortly before the collapse in 1833 explaining that the example set in Ralahine had inspired Lord Wallscourt in County Galway to convert 100 acres of his own property into a similar experiment, little was heard about it (Craig, 1833; see also Cunningham, 2005). William Thompson, a socialist and co-operative enthusiast from County Cork, was inspired by Ralahine and when he died in 1833 he left his estate in Glandore to be left to create a similar co-operative commune. The will was challenged by some distant family members and following years of legal wrangles the estate was eventually consumed by legal fees and court cases and therefore never materialised (Pankhurst, 1991).

The commune at Ralahine might be considered a curious footnote of history representing the brief flowering of Owen's influence in Ireland. In the century that followed, Ireland experienced the Great Famine, which devastated the population, the rise of political nationalism, and eventually a revolution that led to the creation of an independent Irish state. Underpinning these political developments, however, was the perennial problem related to the controversial question of land ownership. Irish nationalists channelled the frustrations of tenant farmers experiencing rent increases, evictions, and economic downturns during the second half of the nineteenth century towards the political reform of landlord tenant relations. The emergence of the Land League in 1879 saw the mass mobilisation of tenant farmers and a period of land agitation in rural Ireland. Between 1870 and 1909 a series of land legislation introduced by successive governments set out the basis for tenant land purchase schemes that transferred wealth to Irish tenants (Guinnane & Miller, 1997). The establishment of co-operative land ownership schemes à la Ralahine never materialised as a way to improve the lot of Irish farmers in this period and no landlord looked to secure their own interests in the way Vandeleur had tried in 1831.

Nevertheless, traces of the old Owenite spirit were brought to bear at various points of political crisis. The memory of Ralahine was mobilised at different junctures, including by an older Craig, trying to create alternative conceptions of social organisation and land ownership than those under discussion at Westminster and at Land League meetings. Although now much older, leading Owenites who had been in some way connected to the Ralahine commune reemerged and intervened in the ongoing debates about who should own the land in Ireland. In this context, the publication of Craig's memoir in 1882 about the Owen-inspired commune itself represented an attempt to tilt the present towards a more progressive future. As will be discussed in the rest of the essay, Craig's figure proved to be of longer-lasting significance in shaping the debates about land reform in Ireland, and even helping subsequent thinkers delineate what might be possible in an independent Ireland.

Ralahine and Late-Nineteenth Century Land Politics

A flurry of accounts detailing the aims, organisation, and fate of the Ralahine commune appeared decades after it collapsed. However, they shared in common a desire to influence contemporary debate around land ownership in Ireland. The first such book length account that appeared was written by William Pare in 1870, an Owenite from Birmingham and a champion of the co-operative movement (Murphy, 2009). Pare made his intention clear by entitling the book *Co-operative agriculture: A solution of the land question as exemplified in the history of the Ralahine co-operative agricultural association* (Pare, 1870). The account drew on Pare's memories of his visit to the co-operative in 1833 when he travelled to witness the effects of the organisation, but also drew on a series of interviews he conducted with Craig.

Pare's book was conceived as an intervention to the contemporary debate around land ownership as much as it provided a historical account of the Owenite experiment. Under the premiership of William Gladstone, the Liberal Government elected in 1868 promised to reform land ownership to provide a benefit to the tenant farmer. The 1870 Land Act extended the Ulster Custom throughout Ireland whereby the security of tenants was increased through the mechanism of providing compensation to tenant farmers for any improvements made to the land

when a lease was terminated (Guinnane & Miller, 1997, p. 594). The debates over the terms of the land legislation provided the backdrop to the book's publication. Mindful of this context, Pare presented the book as being for the "owners and occupiers of land generally, but to those of Ireland especially, and to intending emigrants, these 'short and simple annals' of Ralahine are hopefully dedicated" (Pare, 1870, p. iii).

In telling the story of a moment in Ireland's agrarian history where collective management of the land delivered improvements both in character (according to the author) and productivity, Pare was providing an alternative paradigm to the continuation of private management of parcels of land by individual farmers. He argued that the unsettled social and political conditions that Craig encountered in 1831 evaporated in the area as a result of the commune: "In the midst of this bloodshed and anarchy, the 'New System' acted like a talisman" (1870, p. 121). Peasants, landlords, and social reformers looked to Ralahine as "a solution of the difficulties with which unhappy Ireland then, as now, was beset" (p. 121). In Ralahine, workers formed part of a corporate entity via their membership of the co-operative society. Having been brought into a new system, the farm labourers "instead of being constantly liable to suspension from one cause or other incident to the individualised competitive system ... were also entitled, in their new character as capitalists, to the surplus ... of their labour" (Pare, 1870, p. 52).

Pare engaged with a current generation of liberal political economists interested in the reorganisation of private land ownership. He drew approvingly on the work of the Liberal MP and economist, Henry Fawcett, who argued that "Irish landlords should strive, by judicious liberality, to make some amends for the wrongs which were committed in those days when it seemed to be thought that there were rights but no duties connected with the ownership of the land" (Fawcett, 1865, p. 172). However, unlike the example of Vandeleur 40 years previously, Pare asked whether any Irish landlords were "ambitious for their country's weal? ... any who, moved by philanthropy, desire to extricate the sons of toil from their present truly wretched condition?" (Pare, 1870, p. 172).

Pare ended the book by making it clear he felt the proposed legislation of 1870 fell far short of what was required to enhance the commonwealth of Ireland. Directly addressing Gladstone's Government, Pare hoped his narrative would turn the minds of legislators to the lessons to be learned from co-operative land ownership. The 1870 Bill failed to address core problems related to social unrest and improving production on the land. For example, the proposed Bill focused only on tenant farmers. Ralahine had showed that successful resolution of a social defect in the countryside could be addressed if "the direct and immediate improvement of the *mere labourer* is ensured, which the Act now debating in Parliament *does not contemplate*" (Pare, 1870, p. 176). The policy encouraged small cottier holdings, to which Pare argued one might see advantages and disadvantages when it is compared to the large farm system. However, Pare's book argued that "happily there is a *tertium quid* in co-operative agriculture ... by this method all the advantages of the two systems of small and large farms are combined and many super-added which could not otherwise be obtained" (Pare, 1870, p. 175).

In the end Pare argued that policy should look to place:

the people in Ireland, and elsewhere, in suitable numbers on the land to cultivate it co-operatively under lease, and at first, if required, on loaned capital, for their own benefit, and, in so doing, withdraw as far as practicable, all the incentives to evil, and replace them, by all that should incite to good (Pare, 1870, p. 174).

Despite Pare's effort to tilt the discussion around the legislation towards the promotion of a co-operative model of farm ownership, his book failed to change the discussion.

Craig on the Land War

Over a decade later, Craig followed Pare's book with his own account of the events in the early 1830s. Like Pare, Craig viewed his book as a contribution to the wider politics of land ownership

in Ireland, appearing as it did during the height of the Land War and he entitled it *The Irish land and labour question: Illustrated in the history of Ralahine and co-operative farming*. In particular, the return of agrarian violence to the forefront of Irish politics struck a chord with Craig, who recalled that when he arrived in Ireland in 1831 there were people who “had become brutal in their revenge for social injustice, and driven to wild and demoniacal deeds of desperate violence through lack of food, work, and useful employment” (Craig, 1882, p. 8).

This paralleled the situation in the early 1880s, with Craig commenting “[I]n 1881 we find the old evidence repeated. The relations of the labourer to the land and the landlord make peace difficult, if not impossible” (Craig, 1882, p. 190). The return of agrarian outrages was linked to the emergence of a mass movement called the Irish National Land League in 1879. The Land League looked to protect tenant farmers from the economic downturn precipitated by a global agrarian crisis by ensuring that rent levels remained fair and affordable. The backdrop against which Craig wrote the book was “one of revolutionary change”, in which Irish landlords’ legitimacy to the ownership of large estates was called into question (Dooley, 2022, p. 9). Craig’s narrative proved to be more disjointed than Pare’s more concise book. Alfred Russel Wallace described the book as an “interesting but very excursive and rather confusing little volume”, which reflected the somewhat haphazard structuring of the book (Wallace, 1900, p. 468). However, a clear theme of Craig’s book is to offer a commentary and critique of the land legislation being considered by the Gladstone administration.

By 1881, the Liberal Government under Gladstone’s leadership returned once again to the question of introducing legislation to quell the Land League’s campaign of direct action, rent strikes, boycotting, and increased agrarian violence. The resultant Land Act passed in 1881 went further than the 1870 Act in that it created an adjudication role for the state. The Land Act established a Land Commission to decide what constituted a fair (reduced) rent. By 1882 the rents reduced by 21 per cent on average across the country (Comerford, 2010; Curtis, 1980). The new Land Commission was adjusted to 4 per cent interest at forty-nine years in 1885, but land questions remained a feature of Irish politics from this point until well after independence in 1922 (Dooley, 2004; Jordan, 1998).

Craig echoed the approach of Pare and used the dedication to recommend the history of Ralahine to “members of the British Government, the owners and occupiers of land, the friends of practical industrial training, and to those earnest co-operators who believe in the justice and wisdom of social organisation” (Craig, 1882, p. iii). The use of historical precedent to argue for an alternative paradigm of land ownership to that being considered by the government suggested that the proclivity for Owenite propagandising had not abandoned the two gentlemen.

Craig explicitly addressed the land question in the book. Just as Pare decried the 1870 Land Act as ignoring the plights of the labourer, so too did Craig view the 1881 Bill as similarly “deficient in breadth, grasp, economy, and simplicity. At present it utterly ignores the labourer in all its clauses”. As his time in Ralahine had revealed, “[I]t was the unemployed labourer whom I found to be the main cause of the agrarian disturbances and outrages fifty years ago” (Craig, 1882, p. 68). The argument advanced by Craig focused on the fact that tenant farmers would be awarded a degree of social justice from the 1881 legislation. The fixing of a fair rent for tenant farmers addressed a central objective of the Land League, but Craig argued that labourers also deserved equal consideration. In fact, labourers were often exploited by tenant farmers who rented them small portions of ground at “far higher and more exorbitant rents ... than those demanded by rack-renting landlords” (Craig, 1882, p. 69).

The failure to address the labour question in the proposed legislation concerned Craig. He saw in it a logic that promoted Irish peasants to view themselves through a lens of self-interest and individualism. This built on an underlying feature of changing land use across Ireland. In 1855, 10,872,968 statute acres had been used as grass land with 4,436,035 used as tillage. By 1880, 12,168,933 acres served as grass lands, with only 3,186,665 used as tillage. Tillage land required more labour and offered more opportunities for employment and an increased output of cattle and farm produce. Such a long-term pattern in land use contributed to the emigration

of farm labourers. As Craig saw it, the reduction of tillage revealed “an absence of capital, a diminished labour market, with an increase of destitution, poverty, and agrarian crime”. The proposed land legislation failed to address these fundamental problems as a focus on securing small holdings did not “increase the area of permanent profitable employment” (Craig, 1882, p. 70).

The contemporary social and political conditions in which he was writing reminded Craig about those he encountered in the 1830s. Then, the Ralahine commune revealed the positive benefits that could accrue from the application of Owenite principles. Ralahine had embodied the features of Owen’s attempt to bring about a new view of society grounded in communitarian idealism and which, according to Beatrice Potter, represented “the one successful experiment in co-operative communities” (Potter, 1891, p. 30). As well as playing a part in temporarily quieting social unrest in the area, the commune also pioneered educational and public health innovations. The school system provided infants with an educational grounding unavailable to the vast majority of the population. Also, Ralahine was spared the ravages of a cholera outbreak in 1832, a circumstance ascribed to Craig’s installation of an ash closet system of sewage disposal (Evans, 2008).

The collapse of the commune due to Vandeleur’s gambling put a stop to such progress. However, Craig, like Pare, wished to demonstrate the potency behind the organisational principles at Ralahine and their applicability to contemporary problems around employment on the land, as well as occupancy and ownership. High levels of unemployment and agrarian outrages revealed that “[A]s it was then, so it continues. Want, poverty, and turbulence are the accompaniment and twin brothers of want of employment. Ralahine points to the remedy” (Craig, 1882, p. 71).

Craig aimed to disabuse readers that the history of Ralahine represented “a romance of facts and figures” and instead spoke to pressing contemporary concerns. Ralahine revealed that:

To most Englishmen as well as Irishmen the history of the collective occupancy of the soil, and the social organisation of the workers for sharing the profits of labour on the land, must appear like a map of a new earthly paradise in the heart of the country they have long occupied — half-tilled, starved, and often unremunerative to the capitalist and the labourer. (Craig, 1882, p. v).

The solution to Irish problems did not wholly reside in new political treatment, but instead required a new social organisation of industry and agriculture. Therefore, Craig made recommendations to be included in any new land legislation. This constituted a different political economy which called for the “collective occupancy of the land for the purpose of tillage ... that rents on collective holdings be paid in quantities [of goods] instead of fixed sums of varying currency prices”, and that absentee landlords be taxed to provide funding for the industrial training of the Irish people (Craig, 1882, pp. v-vi). The suggestions went unheeded.

Both Craig and Pare retained their lifelong commitment to a social gospel of Owenite progress and their faith in the importance of social reorganisation remained intact. In 1831, the Ralahine Co-operative Society represented a novel paradigm in landlord and tenant-farmer relations in Ireland. Emphasis was placed on a rules-based system that emphasised a mutual interest among all members of the commune in cultivating a productive farm. Such a model of land ownership and management promoted a common interest between labourers, tenants, and landlord and provided some social progressives with a tried and tested blueprint for tackling the Irish Question.

The contribution of Craig to Irish history — both through his involvement in Ralahine, but also through his contribution to social thought in later years — meant that traces of Owenite ideology haunted Irish politics, albeit it was an Owenism with Craig’s inflection. Tracing the history of Ralahine’s afterlife in the late-nineteenth century debates on land complicates an understanding of the emergence of co-operation as an organising principle for the Irish dairy industry that emerged in the 1890s under the leadership of Horace Plunkett and George Russell (Doyle,

2019). Rather than see Irish co-operation as a phenomenon that responded to Irish farmers' need to compete with international rivals such as Denmark's co-operative farmers, the memory of Ralahine points to an influential resource of co-operative knowledge that shaped political imaginaries and inspired alternative visions of land ownership.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Michael Doyle for feedback on earlier drafts and Jane Donaldson for her valuable assistance at the National Co-operative Archive.

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