Chapter 2

Historical Antecedents to the Irish Land War

Social processes require a significant period of time to work themselves out; if we investigate such processes only in the present we risk studying incomplete sequences and cases.¹

Arguably the pivotal historical event in the creation of the modern Irish nation, the Land War was itself the culmination of several long and entwined processes of social, cultural, and political struggle and transformation that began with the Act of Union in 1800. During the eight decades prior to the Land War, tenant farmers, nationalist activists, and the Irish Catholic Church (ICC) made claims on the British government, the Protestant ascendancy, and the landlords, all of which, while wide ranging, represented some form of demand for Irish autonomy. These claim-making struggles were often intertwined, based on contentious and short-lived alliances, and producing, at best, limited results. Moreover, the long political struggle for Irish autonomy that preceded the Land War was mediated, conditioned, and sometimes provoked by important contingent and conjunctural events: the Famine stands out above all others, but British elections, economic crises in Europe, and collective action by one Irish group or another impacted consequent social formations and identities, discourses, politics, and trajectories of nationalist movement. The following chapter investigates these “critical antecedents”² to the Land War, focusing on the conditions, factors, and events that prevented strong political alliance prior to the Land War, but produced the diverse social identities and attendant discourses of those that fought it. We begin with the defining political event of the nineteenth century, Ireland’s union with Great Britain.

A. Kane, Constructing Irish National Identity
© Anne Kane 2011
In 1801, the acts of union between Great Britain and Ireland came into effect, uniting the two “kingdoms,” following the violent and failed uprising in 1798 by the United Irishmen movement. Conceived and organized by members of the Irish upper class—landed aristocrats, businessmen, and parliamentarians—the movement eventually included parliamentary reformers, constitutional revolutionaries, and conspiratorial insurrectionists. Greatly influenced by the French Revolution, the Society of United Irishmen developed a political ideology that conceived all the ills of Irish society flowing from the English conquest and the continuation of English domination (Foster 1988, 269–270). Importantly, the United Irishman movement also conceptualized the nation in terms of “the people” defined, at least in theory, irrespective of class or religion (MacDonagh 1968, 3).

The United Irishmen movement found an ally in the Defender movement, which by the mid-1790s had spread through rural Ireland (Garvin 1987b). More than just a sectarian movement or agrarian rebellion secret society, Defenderism was “a complex web of archaic and modern forces…remarkably adept at fusing local grievances with an anti-Protestant, anti-English, anti-state ideology” (Bartlett 1985, 374–375, cited in Jordan 1994, 78). As summed up by Donald Jordan: “Defender ideology involved deeply-rooted bitterness within the Catholic community over the land confiscations of the seventeenth century and the Penal Laws of the eighteenth. It appealed to the vague but fervently held belief of many Irish farmers in their historic right to the land…It opposed the payment of tithes to an alien church and taxes to an alien government, demanded the reduction of rents and, in general, responded to the hopes and fears of the Catholic poor” (1994, 78–79).

In 1798, the United Irishmen and the Defenders staged an uprising against British domination, fortified by the misguided belief that the grievances of the Irish people would motivate the latter to join the uprising en masse. In addition, the insurrectionary leaders counted on the French assisting them with troops and armaments. Neither the mass insurgency nor the French assistance materialized. In the wake of the uprising’s violent failure, Irish Parliament established the Act of Union with England in 1800, abolishing itself and transferring governance of Ireland to the English Parliament.

Despite its failure and its fateful outcome, the union with Great Britain, the United Irishman movement of 1791–1803 provided a foundation of modern Irish nationalism—the vision of Ireland as a fully autonomous nation. The uprising, its martyred heroes such as Wolf Tone, and the hated Union would become central symbolic elements and moments in nineteenth-century Irish political discourse (Whelan 1996). Moreover, the