

'It was the landlord's right to do as he pleased.'



The heartless evictions on the Gerrard estate March 13 1846: Supported by the law of the land, tenants had no power to oppose or resist.

The succession by the infamous Marcella Netterville to a large estate near Mount Bellew, Co Galway, in the 1820s owed as much to chance as it was to her unlikely mother-in-law, with the wonderful name, Kitty Cut-a-Dash. The Nettervilles were an ancient Norman family, who came to Galway from County Meath after purchasing land from the Bellew family. A judicious marriage with the Trenchs of Garbally, Ballinasloe, increased their holdings. It appears that for a time both the Nettervilles and their tenants lived at peace and in some prosperity, at least until Frederick Netterville began to spread his wild oats somewhat wide of the field.

He became involved with, and actually married, a Dublin prostitute, Kitty Cut-A-Dash, and accumulated debts of several thousand pounds. This was a huge embarrassment for the family, and proved very expensive to untangle. Somehow the marriage was dissolved. Kitty Cut-A-Dash, however, proved to be a formidable negotiator. She achieved an eye-watering settlement of £5,000.

A grateful Frederick meekly accepted his father's demands that he straighten his ways, and marry the sensible Mary Keogh of Portumna. Fred and Mary settled in Woodbrook House on their Galway estate. Marcella was one of six brothers and sisters born to this couple; and inherited the family's lands due to the untimely death of her older siblings.

At 45 years of age she married John Gerrard, a successful grazier in County Meath. They soon began to convert Marcella's 7,000 acre estate into grazing pasture. In order to achieve their project 67 families* had to be put off their land, their cottages destroyed, all to be replaced by cattle bought at the Ballinasloe fair. Their ruthless methods of eviction on March 13 1846, not only shocked the country, but elicited widespread condemnation. Gerrard responded by trying to justify his actions in a long whinging letter in the local newspaper, which The Times of London dismissed stating that it only showed 'the sublime indifference to social considerations of which no one but an Irish landowner is capable.'

A vast population

Historian Tom Crehan, a native of Newbridge, Co Galway, in his study Marcella Gerrard's Galway estate, 1829-70 (published recently by Four Courts Press Ltd on sale at €9.95), suggests that not every landlord condemned the clearances. John and Marcella Gerrard led the way in showing that tenanted land could be made far more profitable if it was converted into grazing pasture. Especially as the Great Famine was beginning to spread its unyielding misery, and render many small farms worthless.

There were widespread clearances in Clare and Mayo during this period. In Ballinrobe, Lord Lucan, who had boasted that he would not breed paupers to pay priests, evicted some 2,000 people between 1846 and 1849. Lucan replaced the people with cattle.

At the beginning of the 19th century the population of Ireland was nearly 5, 500, 000. By 1841 this had rapidly increased to more than 8,000,000. This was an astonishing escalation. Especially as it took place in the absence of industrial development. A vast population almost entirely dependent on what the land could produce. Crehan speculates that if the Great Famine had not happened, the population at the end of the century might have been close to 9,000,000. In 1851, however, following almost five years of famine, the population fell to 6,500,000. Where did everyone go?

During the Great Famine official figures on the movement of people were often difficult to compile. Estimates vary between 3,500 and 24,092 former tenants were driven out on to the roads; the first official figures were in 1849 when in that year alone 16,686 evictions were recorded.

A 'sacred right'

I can see how this callous attitude to tenants displayed by those landlords who were 'indifferent to social considerations', fuelled attacks on them, and their cattle and their agents by various secret societies. The law was totally on the side of the landlords. The tenants were trapped in an unjust society.

Commenting directly on the Gerrard clearances, Lord Brougham reminded the House of Lords, on March 23 1846 ' Undoubtedly it was the landlord's right to do as he pleased, and if he abstained he conferred a favour, and was doing an act of kindness. If on the other hand he chose to stand on his right, the tenants must be taught by the strong arm of the law that they had no power to oppose or resist... property would be valueless and capital would no longer be invested in cultivation of land if it were not acknowledged that it was the landlord's undoubted, indefeasible and most sacred right to deal with his property as he list...'

Thirty-three years later Michael Davitt was prompted to proclaim a daring land revolution. He demanded, to huge public support, that 'the land of Ireland should be owned by the people of Ireland.' He founded the National Land League in Castlebar on August 16 1879. Its president was Charles Stewart Parnell. It went on to achieve reform after reform. Until eventually the great estates were bought out, and the land distributed among former tenants.

John Gerrard never lived to see the tenants' triumph. He had died in 1858. Marcella lived on for a few more years but only rarely visited her east Galway lands. The Gerrard estate was dissipated among several owners; until that too came under the reforming land acts, and distributed among the local community. The action of Marcella and John Gerrard, however, has left a lasting impact on the parishes of Ballynakill and Killian.

NOTES: * The number of victims from the Netterville/Gerrard estate vary. They are given as 447, 300, and 270 persons.

<http://www.advertiser.ie/galway/article/68791/it-was-the-landlords-right-to-do-as-he-pleased>