

Fitzgibbon, John

by John Bligh

Fitzgibbon, John (1849–1919), nationalist politician and land agitator, was born 10 August 1849 in Castlerea, Co. Roscommon, second child and eldest son of five sons and one daughter of Henry Fitzgibbon (d. 1881), draper, and his wife Elizabeth (née O'Connor; d. 1896), daughter of a Tuam saddle maker. Henry Fitzgibbon was active in various repeal and tenant right associations, and was the first president of the Castlerea branch (formed in June 1880) of the Irish National Land League.

John was educated at national school in Castlerea and for one year (1865–6) at St Kieran's College in Kilkenny. Thereafter he served an apprenticeship at McSwineys (latterly Clerys) department store on Sackville (latterly O'Connell) Street, Dublin. He returned to Castlerea to work in the family shop, and in 1873 married Mary Anne O'Carroll, seamstress and daughter of an Askeaton farmer.

Following in his father's political footsteps, Fitzgibbon came to national notice at the convention to consider Gladstone's land bill of 1881, but he achieved much greater prominence as the leader of the Plan of Campaign in the Castlerea area in the late 1880s. He was the subject of repeated imprisonment (three times in 1888–9), as was his brother-in-law who had come from Dublin to run the drapery business in his absence. His case gave rise to allegations in the house of commons of abuse of process, notably by the Liberal politician George John Shaw-Lefevre as well as by Irish MPs, mostly on grounds of repeated prosecution for the same offences, and also for entrapment (refusing to sell ostrich feathers to a policeman's wife).

The Parnell split occurred while Fitzgibbon was directing the Plan of Campaign on the de Freyne estate near Frenchpark, Co. Roscommon, after which John Dillon (qv) made it clear that funds were unavailable to support the tenants and an unhappy Fitzgibbon was left with no choice but to advise the tenants to capitulate. He was to return to this estate in 1893 and again in 1901. Charles Stewart Parnell (qv) made his last public appearance in Creggs, Co. Galway, in September 1891, and it was Fitzgibbon who introduced him. In the July 1892 general election he stood as a Parnellite candidate against Dillon for the East Mayo constituency, receiving 257 votes to Dillon's 2,621. Though among the most personally devout of catholic Parnellite leaders, he believed the involvement of clergy in politics should be limited. With Luke Hayden, and later John Hayden (qv), he continued to organise the Parnellites in Roscommon during the 1890s. Their support for the newly formed United Irish League (UIL) of William O'Brien (qv) in the autumn of 1898 was crucial in spreading the movement outside Mayo and also for including Parnellites; early Roscommon branches were formed in Elphin, Castlerea and Ballinlough.

In contrast to O'Brien, Fitzgibbon supported the policy espoused by John Redmond (qv) of including public-spirited liberal unionists on county councils and rural district councils. He secured the support of the Parnellites for the election of Charles Owen O'Connor (qv) (O'Connor Don) to Roscommon County Council and Castlerea Rural District Council. Fitzgibbon himself became chairman of Castlerea Rural District Council, and in 1902 chairman of Roscommon County Council, positions he held until his death.

A further difference of view with O'Brien occurred regarding the de Freyne and Murphy estates in the autumn of 1901 and into 1902. O'Brien believed that supporting tenants was financially ruinous to the UIL. Fitzgibbon persisted in backing the tenants, notwithstanding the opposition of Bishop John Clancy (qv) of Elphin, local clergy, and the *Roscommon Herald* of Jasper Tully (qv). A serious agitation ensued, complicated by the fact that the de Freynes were resident catholic landlords who had heavily mortgaged the estate to a fund for 'poor and destitute children' managed by the archbishop of Dublin. As a result of the agitation Fitzgibbon and others were imprisoned in spring 1902 for unlawful assembly. However, this 'lawless anarchy' may have contributed to the political atmosphere in which the 1903 Wyndham land act was seen as both necessary and desirable. That legislation, however, did not quickly fulfil the high expectations that George Wyndham (qv) had raised: sales and the sale process were slow, the price-setting mechanism was open to abuse, land prices were high, and recalcitrant landlords (the marquess of Clanricarde (qv), for example) could not be compelled to sell. Fitzgibbon addressed these issues in a number of ways. Where urgency was needed, he purchased grazing farms from his own resources for selling on to tenants or to the Congested Districts Board (CDB). In 1907 he supported the policy of cattle driving (known as the ranch war), which had been advanced by Laurence Ginnell (qv), and was one of its foremost advocates within the UIL, though he moderated his support when its political usefulness became doubtful. He was the official representative of the UIL to the royal commission on congestion in Ireland (the Dudley commission). In his evidence to the commission in March 1907 he envisaged a very substantial redistribution of landholdings. In keeping with his own long-held beliefs, he also proposed that temperance be a key criterion for the allocation of lands. The 1909 land act, which followed the report of the Dudley commission, did adopt a number of key UIL demands: an expanded CDB board to include some local representation, the extension of the area scheduled as congested (which now included all Roscommon), and the principle of compulsory purchase in the congested area.

Fitzgibbon was appointed to the new CDB board in January 1910. On the board he was popular and his known biases were offset by his enthusiasm, energy and his genuine commercial and negotiation skills. Outside the board he was less circumspect and did not initially temper his public and long-held views on the necessity for vigorous action by tenants in forcing landlords to sell their estates. But a public rebuke by Chief Secretary Augustine Birrell (qv) in 1911, and a resolution of

the house of lords in 1912 seeking his dismissal from the board following speeches threatening action on various estates, forced him to modify his public statements. An unseemly controversy over his role in the division of the Sandford Wills demesne in Castlerea and the acquisition of forty acres thereof from the CDB in spring 1912 was probably more damaging to his standing among nationalists.

At the second general election of 1910 he was returned unopposed as MP for South Mayo. He also became one of the three trustees of the Irish parliamentary party. He was not a frequent speaker in the house of commons though he did speak regularly at public meetings in England in support of home rule in 1912. Since the 1870s his business interests had necessitated regular trips to the textile centres of England, and he believed there could be close economic cooperation and friendship between the two countries, but he viewed the depopulation of Ireland and the relative paths of prosperity in the nineteenth century as evidence of the ignorance of English politicians in managing Ireland's affairs.

At the outbreak of the first world war he supported the Redmondite policy concerning Irish involvement but did not actively recruit. The suspension of new land-purchase activities of the CDB due to wartime funding restrictions in May 1915, and the trend against the UIL on both local issues and fear of conscription, reduced his influence. But as chairman of Roscommon County Council he participated fully in the Irish Convention (1917–18), arguing for wider compulsory powers to be granted for the relief of congestion among tenants and sons of tenants.

His son Michael joined the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and was killed at Gallipoli on 15 August 1915. Devastated by the death of his son John (Jack), a Jesuit chaplain, in France on 18 September 1918, he did not stand in the 1918 election. He died in Castlerea on 8 September 1919 and is buried at Kilkeevin graveyard, Castlerea. He was survived by his wife Mary Ann (d. 1923) and his children Mary (Scally), Henrietta (Duggan), Josephine, Helena (Cameron Paton), Gertrude (English), Frances (Robinson) and Harry, the last of whom he had tried to promote in Roscommon politics.

Fitzgibbon's political significance lay in his efforts for the economic improvement of the people of east Connaught, primarily through rent reduction, land purchase and redistribution, and his leadership of local administration and domination of Roscommon politics for almost twenty years.

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