

Ginnell, Laurence

by Pauric J. Dempsey and Shaun Boylan

Ginnell, Laurence (1852–1923), land agitator and politician, was born in April 1852 at Crowenstown, Delvin, Co. Westmeath, one of twins among three sons of Laurence Ginnell, agricultural labourer, and his wife Mary (née Monaghan). Little is known about his life before he became private secretary to John Dillon (qv) during the Plan of Campaign (1886–91). Later John Morley (qv), who was working on a biography of W. E. Gladstone, employed Ginnell as a research assistant in the British Museum library. Ginnell later studied for the bar in London, during which time he became a co-founder of the Irish Literary Society (1892). He was called to the English bar by the Middle Temple in 1893. Ill equipped for a career at the bar, he divided his time between politics, journalism, and writing. His publications include *The brehon laws: a legal guide* (1894), *The doubtful grant of Ireland by Pope Adrian IV to King Henry II* (1899), and *Land and liberty* (1908). He became a founder member and secretary of the United Irish League (1898), and in 1899 was unsuccessful in his attempts to secure a position in the new Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction.

On 28 September 1900 he was selected as a United Irish League candidate for the Westmeath North parliamentary seat but failed to win a seat in the 1901 elections. However, as the originator of the cattle-driving campaign in 1903, Ginnell won widespread popular support and, after being called to the Irish bar (1906), was elected MP for Westmeath North (1906–18). In the house of commons he was the most tempestuous of the stormy petrels and was several times ejected from the house for refusing to follow procedure. Popularly known as ‘the member for Ireland’, the highly strung Ginnell was an unpopular and a lonely figure in the house but few doubted his sincerity and courage.

In October 1906 Ginnell, who was on the extreme left of Irish agrarian radicalism, became a leading figure in the ranch war and successfully advocated the extension of the cattle-driving campaign to include the large-scale graziers. Stepping up the campaign in Westmeath during the summer of 1907, he was imprisoned on 20 December for contempt of court by inciting to cattle-driving. Released on health grounds on 24 April 1908 he continued to encourage cattle-driving and was charged with incitement in June 1910. At Westminster he was the only Irish MP to support the women's suffrage movement actively, tabling parliamentary questions on behalf of the suffragists.

Ginnell's radicalism made him unpopular in the IPP, and he was a constant critic of the party, as it was of him. Having queried the use of funds within the IPP, he was expelled in 1909. On 15 September 1910, together with delegates of eleven branches of the United Irish League, he was refused entry to the twenty-seventh meeting of the League, having proposed a resolution questioning why the league

did not support 'land for the people'. He was returned to Westminster unopposed in November 1910. In 1912 he put forward plans for a peat factory.

After the executions of the 1916 leaders he accused the British government of murder and was the only nationalist MP to join Sinn Féin. In July 1916 he was fined £100 for using the false name 'Labhras MacFionngail' (reported in *The Times* as Mag Fingall) to enter Knutsford military detention barracks for the purposes of stirring up trouble among the nationalist prisoners. Having been a thorn in the side of the Westminster establishment since he first took his seat, he was suspended in July 1917 and never returned to parliament. Although he did not become a significant figure in the Sinn Féin leadership, he was elected joint treasurer of the executive alongside W. T. Cosgrave (qv) in October 1917. Throughout this period Ginnell continued his land agitation campaign and in March 1918 was again arrested for incitement to cattle-driving and entering onto lands. He was also active in the anti-conscription campaign. Imprisoned from April to August, he was interned on completion of his sentence and was elected Sinn Féin MP for Co. Westmeath in the general election of 1918.

Finally released in March 1919, he was later appointed director of the dáil department of publicity, where his brief was to win public support for Dáil Éireann. The publicity department published fourteen information pamphlets and produced the film *Sinn Féin review* (1919). In April 1919 he was appointed to a Sinn Féin executive sub-committee to create a plan for cooperative acquisition and working of land. Ginnell was arrested again in May 1919 and imprisoned for four months. On his release he went on paid sick leave for nearly twelve months and then became head of the Chicago-based Labour Bureau for Irish Independence.

On 2 July 1921 he sailed for Argentina in an attempt to persuade the Argentine government to recognise the Irish republic. In Peru he attended the Te Deum to celebrate the independence of Peru (1921). Opposed to the Anglo-Irish treaty, he sent a telegram from South America asking that his vote be registered against the treaty, but this was not allowed. In April 1922 he returned to Ireland and in August 1922, at the bidding of Éamon de Valera (qv), was the only TD opposed to the treaty to enter the dáil, from which he was forcibly removed after repeated questioning of the constitutional status of the assembly. He later became a member of de Valera's council of state, and in 1922 became the anti-treaty representative in Washington. Towards the end of December 1922 he attempted to occupy the diplomatic offices of the Irish Free State as the Free State representative, Lindsay Crawford (qv), was taking up his post. He died 17 April 1923 in a Washington hotel.

He married first (23 May 1882) Margaret Wolfe, of Listowel, Co. Kerry, who died (17 June 1883) following a stillbirth. He married secondly (30 January 1902) Alice (1882–1967), daughter of J. King, JP, of Kilbride, Mullingar, Co. Westmeath. They had no children and lived at 55 Belgrave Square, Rathmines, Dublin.

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*Times*, 31 May 1893; 28 Sept. 1900; 16 July, 3, 17 Sept., 21 Dec. 1907; 25 Apr. 1908; 16 June, 16 Sept. 1910; 29 July 1916; 23 Mar. 1918; 7 Apr., 31 May, 5 Sept. 1919; 5 Aug. 1921; 29 Dec. 1922; *Ir. Times*, 18 Apr. 1923; *Times*, 19 Apr. 1923 (photo); *Westmeath Independent*, 21 Apr. 1923; T. M. Healy, *Letters and leaders of my day* (1928); Pádraig Ó Lionáird, *Fighting Larry Ginnell* (n.d.); Hannah Fitzsimons, *The great Delvin* (1973); Uinseann MacEoin, *Survivors* (1980); Laurence M. Geary, *The Plan of Campaign 1886–91* (1986); Paul Bew, *Conflict and reconciliation in Ireland 1890–1910* (1987); Lawrence W. McBride, *The greening of Dublin Castle* (1991); Denis Carroll, *They have fooled you again* (1993); Arthur Mitchell, *Revolutionary government in Ireland* (1995); Margaret Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington a life* (1997); *Documents on Irish foreign policy*, i (1998); Kenneth Ferguson, *King's Inns barristers 1868–2004* (2005); information from the King's Inns and the Middle Temple