

PART 2.

SECRET SOCIETIES

A long history of tenant grievances with landlords, their agents and the clergy had fostered the development of secret societies.

The typical secret society consisted of a group of men from a neighbourhood, bound by oath to defend the tenant farmers of the area in matters relating to their land holdings. **Ribbonmen** and **Whiteboys** were locally based groups, founded in 1761 and 1826 respectively to oppose the payments of high rents, Tithe collection for the upkeep of the Established Church, high dues demanded by the Roman Catholic clergy, and landlord excesses generally. The methods employed by secret societies included intimidation, notice posting, threatening violence, burning crops, maiming cattle and, in extreme cases, murder. Societies existed on most estates throughout the country and were particularly in the more remote areas of Mayo. Such groups had access to firearms, conducted training and carried out actions on a local basis but had no effective national co-ordination or command structures. Joining a society - taking an unlawful oath - was illegal. The churches strongly condemned such organisations.

THE IRISH REPUBLICAN BROTHERHOOD

The general outlook of these groups changed in 1870s by the recruitment of Ribbonmen and Whiteboys into the I.R.B. (which was more commonly called 'The Fenians', 'The Brotherhood' and 'The Organisation'). This secret society was formed in Dublin in 1858. Its' auxiliary and chief source of funding and arms, **The Fenians** (of America), was founded in New York at the same time. The I.R.B.'s main objective was the establishment of a republic in Ireland.

The secrecy of the organisation was secured through its division into Cells under the command of a Centre (known as A). Under him there were nine Captains (known as Bs). Each Captain had nine Sergeants (Cs) and under each sergeant were nine privates (Ds). In each county the Centres elected a County Centre. In each province, and in three regions of Britain, the County Centres elected a Head Centre

who was a member of the organisation's directing body. These seven co-opted four more members to form the Supreme Council. The Supreme Council's executive consisted of its President, Secretary and Treasurer and usually met in London or Paris. The membership nationally was about 11,000 in the late 1870s. As each private knew only the eight other Privates in his Cell and his Sergeant, an informer or spy could do little damage to the overall organisation.

In 1873 the I.R.B. was reorganised and under its new constitution the members were obliged to support any organisation pledged to the cause of Irish independence or any actions which would help bring this about.

PART 3.

THE INSTIGATORS OF REFORM

Among the chief personalities who were instrumental in organising the events which led to the formation of the Land League were:

James Daly (1836 - 1910), a native of Bohadon, Co. Mayo and son of a large tenant farmer. He was the editor and joint-owner of the Castlebar based '*The Connaught Telegraph*' newspaper. In his columns, Daly, from the early 1870s, advocated the introduction in the west of Ireland of the long existing 'Ulster Custom' by which tenant farmers had the rights of Fixity of Tenure, Fair Rent and Free Sale (The Three Fs). He had already organised the Castlebar Tenants Defence Association (also known as. The Mayo Farmers' Club) on 26 Oct 1878 and was its president but so far little had come of his aspirations.

John Devoy (1842 - 1928) was born at Johnstown, Co. Kildare, he joined the I.R.B. shortly after its foundation and helped recruit about 15,000 British soldiers of Irish birth into the organisation. He became chief organiser in 1865, was imprisoned between 1866 and 1871, and afterwards went to U.S. In the late 1870s he visited Ireland on a fact finding mission and on his return to the 'States in 1879 he fund-raised for land agitation purposes.