

The activities of the Tenant League kept the land question alive, and its supporters finally witnessed Gladstone making a genuine attempt to enshrine the Ulster custom in a legal framework. The Land Act of 1881 secured the principle that the tenant had an inalienable interest in his holding irrespective of the terms of his tenancy or the value of his improvements; and it was this that fatally undermined the foundations of landlord supremacy that had endured for centuries.

Brown might have earned himself a place in the hearts of ordinary folk, but he attracted stern disapproval from his own organisation, the Presbyterian General Assembly. Midway through his career the Chair of Moral Philosophy in the Assembly's College became vacant and at the urging of friends, he offered his application for the post. He was not elected. MacMillan is in no doubt as to the causes of this failure:

*'The course which he had pursued in public life...the independent position he had held in every question regardless of frown or favour, were not conducive to constitute him a popular idol.'*

He was a man of independent mind who had the courage of his convictions, no matter whom they offended, and we can now understand that it was probably because he was, in fact, a 'popular idol', that the authorities were loath to offer him advancement.

Brown continued to labour where need was greatest until 1869, when he was forced to retire through ill health, though his mind continued sharp and his interest in local and national affairs undiminished. He looked forward to the day 'when the enlightened nations of Christendom come to comprehend and to apply the sublime truths and counsels of Him who is

wonderful...' and died as any man might wish, surrounded by his family - his wife, the former Margaret Jackson whom he had married on June 12th 1838 at First Ballybay Church, and some of his eleven children. He had the comfort of knowing that he had striven as far as was possible to do what was right; he enjoyed the approbation of his peers; and lived long enough to welcome changes which would ease the burden on those who struggled against the twin vicissitudes of an unfair system and an unfriendly terrain.

Daniel Gunn Brown came home, figuratively and literally, at the end of May 1892, to be laid to rest in Creggan churchyard in South Armagh. The Dundalk Democrat remarked:

*'...at a time when it was neither fashionable nor profitable for men in his position to give expression to the feelings of horror produced by the oppression and legalised robbery to which so many of the tenant class were subjected, he did not hesitate to do so.'*

And John MacMillan, in his graveside oration, quoted a verse chosen by Mrs Brown:

I shine in the light of God;  
His likeness stamps my brow;  
Through the valley of death my feet have trod,  
And I reign in glory now!

It's not a bad way to be remembered.

A full case study compiled by Aileen D'Arcy on Daniel Gunn Brown can be downloaded from our website: [www.sagp.org](http://www.sagp.org)



DANIEL GUNN  
BROWN  
1808-1892



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The Rev Daniel Gunn Brown was a man who believed that the consequence of calling yourself a Christian was that you had to make a stand for social justice and the rights of the oppressed. He used what influence he had to improve the lot of the poorest members of society, and forged a working partnership with Father Michael Lennon, parish priest of Crossmaglen, and other local churchmen, in an early example of ecumenical co-operation.



He was born in The Moy, County Tyrone on January 5th 1808, where he grew up in a culture of religion and learning, and followed his father into the Christian ministry. He received his early education in Armagh before going on to Belfast College, where he distinguished himself by his assiduousness and his personal qualities. He continued to impress academically when he went on to complete his theological studies at Edinburgh University, winning prizes in several disciplines. He was appointed to the joint charge of Creggan and Newtownhamilton, but in 1835 the congregations were disunited, with Brown opting to remain in Newtownhamilton, where he spent another thirty-seven years.

A gifted speaker, he was invited to preach throughout the country, and even in Dundee, where he was so well received that he was invited to stay. Despite his poor remuneration at home he declined, and the explanation he offered reveals a man sincerely driven by vocational zeal. His people at home needed him: 'If I should go away now, who would come and work here?' It was that simple.

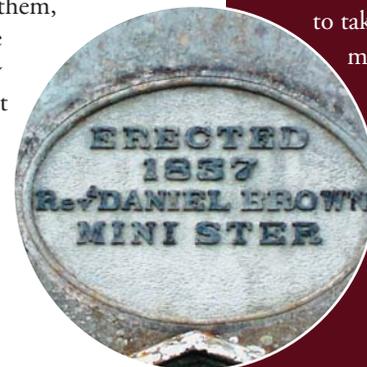
Almost the first thing Brown did when he came to Newtownhamilton in 1833 was to visit all the families under his care, recording observations about each of them. Though primarily concerned with their spiritual welfare, his notes are a mine of information: infant mortality was high; often a house accommodated an extended family or even two families; occasionally a farm was big enough to support a servant. There are occasional flashes of humour, such as 'husband undecided and anxious to please all parties'; and, inevitably, heartbreak:

*'Mary Corner alias Hanaway - widow - 6 children, Mary, Jane, Rose, Nancy, Esther, Eliza - all very poor - high rent... a regular member and communicant - apparently dying.'*

When he spoke to the Devon Commission about the plight of the tenants, we know his evidence was based upon close observation, and unlike many men of the period, who held that suffering and poverty were evils that could be avoided through application and hard work, he understood that sometimes there is simply no opportunity to rise above one's circumstances:

*'There is a universal desire on the part of the people in that locality to work if they can get it.'*

One of the worst vicissitudes his parishioners had to face was the great famine of the 1840s. In an area where the land was poor to begin with, the failure of the potato crop was a death sentence. He quickly got involved in distributing public relief, and often gave away the food from his own table, but the ravages of famine required more than local charity to ameliorate them, and perhaps it was now that he began to realise that the tenant farmer must have more security than the whim of a landlord. When the Tenant Right Movement came to Armagh, Brown became one of its staunchest supporters, for despite some regression to violence after the famine years, most tenants preferred to seek a peaceful solution.



Ulster had been relatively free from agrarian unrest, but murmurings of discontent were rife when the 'Ulster custom' came under threat, for although it had no basis in law, it was generally recognised by landlords province-wide. Essentially it acknowledged that a tenant possessed a saleable interest in his holding, which, if he wished to give up his farm, he could sell to the highest bidder; if a landlord wished to evict a tenant, he must himself purchase that interest at full market value. This meant that the tenant could not be evicted without compensation, nor could a landlord wait for a farmer to make improvements and then raise the rent. In 1847 the Ulster Tenant Right Association was founded by William Sharman Crawford and James McKnight, which soon blended into the Irish Tenant League, their avowed aim the legalising of the Ulster custom and its extension to the whole country.

Brown threw himself whole-heartedly into the movement, though the authorities tried to discredit it, claiming that it advocated attacks on landowners, but Brown spoke out in defence of their pacifist stance, and consistently condemned those who resorted to violent means. His insistence that tenant right was 'no party issue' and that the victory they sought was a bloodless one are points he returned to again and again, and he never wavered in his belief that the government must take action to redress the wrongs whose effects he observed all around him.

But for some people the only solution seemed to be the use of force, and a Select Committee was set up in 1852 to enquire into the outrages, or murders, in Armagh. Giving evidence, Brown fearlessly maintained that the crimes committed were wrong in themselves, yet the perpetrators were driven by an unjust system to take the law into their own hands. His vision is strikingly modern, in advocating that we address the causes of criminal behaviour instead of simply punishing it. He resisted any suggestion that the people were naturally aggressive, and refuted allegations that the violence in the area was inspired by religious or political motives, consistently demonstrating his diplomatic skill, never veering from the truth, yet ready to administer a sharp set-down when being harassed.