I would first like to thank Patrick Cosgrove for writing a thoughtful and interesting review of my book that summarizes effectively some of the key arguments that I developed in *Land and Revolution*. Cosgrove has clearly thought a good deal about some of the issues that my book raises and his technical knowledge of the workings of Irish land legislation certainly adds to our understanding of how land reform was implemented.

Reading between the lines of his review, however, Cosgrove appears to be rehearsing the old ‘high’ politics method of thinking about the Irish land question (in his suggestions that more use should be made of parliamentary papers, parliamentary debates, and estate papers, and in his concern that I should say more about the view from the Big House). One of the aims of my book was to turn the historical gaze away from its obsession with the House of Commons and the Big House, and towards the cabins and forges where the tenant farmers, labourers and artisans lived and thought about their lives, and worked out political and agrarian strategies for improving them. Other historians have examined the Irish landlord’s experience (especially James Donnelly and William Vaughan in their classic and pioneering books) and my own forthcoming book – *The Irish Establishment, 1879–1914* – presents my thinking and research on the way in which various elites groups in Ireland responded to the political and agrarian conflicts that began with the Land War (1879–81). But in *Land and Revolution* I was determined to look at this period from a different vantage point and to try to reconstruct the view from below: telling the landlord’s story was not part of my remit. This is an important point because I do think that studies of Irish history, and of the Irish land question, are in danger of becoming ossified in their preoccupation with a ‘high’ politics approach and the more traditional types of evidence. I think that students of the Irish land question could learn more about life in rural Ireland by reading folklore and provincial newspapers, and using oral history, and by thinking about the ways in which anthropologists and cultural historians reflect on ordinary people’s lives. An encyclopaedic knowledge of Irish land legislation is useful but it can get in the way of understanding what life was really like for people in the past, and how historical processes work.

Cosgrove rightly points out that I emphasise that there was what he describes as ‘a social element’ to the Irish revolution (1916–23). However, my assertion was based on a large amount of earlier work that also described social conflicts during the revolutionary period (by Bew and Fitzpatrick) and, in particular, Tony Varley’s pioneering doctoral dissertation and articles on the land agitation in Ireland that took place between 1917–20. In fact, Varley has not been given the credit that he deserves for writing the first full account of the agrarian conflict that took place during the revolutionary period and, although I was not aware of his work when I started researching that conflict in 1993–4, I was influenced by it and by discussions with him during the following years. Having said that, one of my objectives in *Land and Revolution* was not simply to prove the self-evident truth that there were social conflicts in Ireland during the revolution but that these were expressed in such a manner and with such a ferocity that they had the potential to push the Irish revolution in a more radical direction. In contrast to much recent work on the Irish revolution (by Laffan, Cronin and Regan, and English), I argued that there was radical potential in Ireland between 1917 and 1921, evident in the aim of land agitators in 1920 to implement an immediate and widespread redistribution of land as well as in a number of revolutionary attempts to introduce collective ownership of land. Indeed, I argue that the land agitation of 1920 – which was carried out in a collective fashion and which benefitted whole communities – aimed to create a new kind of society that was fairer and more equitable for the poor tenant farmers, labourers and their families in the west of Ireland. I further argue – in contrast to Bew, English, Fitzpatrick and Laffan – that some sections of the leadership and the rank and file of the republican
movement (Sinn Fein and the IRA) supported the popular agitation to seize and redistribute land that swept across the west of the island during the heady months of early 1920. I also propose that the outcome of the Irish revolution might have been different if the radical sections of the republican movement had been able to influence the policies eventually adopted by the republican leadership. If the anti-Treaty IRA had supported a popular campaign for land redistribution in 1922 then we do not know which side would have won the Irish Civil War (1922–3), and this suggests that the Irish revolution was a period of flux during which a number of different outcomes were possible. When viewed in this light, Ken Loach’s polemic The Wind That Shakes the Barley (2006) is not as far-fetched as some historians have suggested. [5]

My feeling is that these radical agrarian urges (which Bew, English and Fitzpatrick downplay) that aimed to both redistribute land and to change the way in which land was occupied need to be researched in more detail. There are a lot of unread provincial Irish newspapers which have not yet been examined and which are the key to understanding the nature and implications of social conflict in Ireland during the revolutionary period. Unfortunately, there is a tendency in Irish universities for postgraduate students to take on very traditional subjects (focussing on political, military and administrative history rather than on social and cultural history) and so the full-range of human experience in the past in Ireland remains – bewilderingly – an almost completely untilled field from the historian’s point of view.

Cosgrove mentions that I do not make enough of T. W. Russell’s orchestration of the campaign for compulsory land purchase in Ulster c. 1901–3, and he is right. I was mainly concerned with the west of Ireland, and other historians have looked at this topic but I did think that this was an important subject. In particular, a study of rank and file involvement in that conflict is overdue, and this should shed light on Presbyterian farmers’ involvement in agrarian conflict as well as on ordinary Ulster Protestant perceptions of land agitation and Irish nationalism. A history of Presbyterian farmers’ perceptions of these wider issues – and a history of their lives more generally – would be a huge contribution to the literature and I am glad to see that Cosgrove himself appears to have taken this subject on, and to have engaged in the exciting challenge of illuminating some of the dark areas of the Irish past.

Finally, I am struck by the apparent contradiction of Cosgrove’s final verdict on my book – that it is ‘not a revision of existing studies’ – which jars slightly with his earlier discussion of the ways in which Land and Revolution has changed our understanding of some of the key developments of this period. Indeed, my book shows that the Wyndham Land Act – that transformed Irish society – was largely introduced in response to widespread popular agitation rather than being simply the consequence of George Wyndham’s ‘benevolent statesmanship’ as Gailey had previously maintained. [6] The book also demonstrates that the central dynamic of land agitation between 1903 and 1914 remained the conflict between landlord and tenant rather than becoming essentially a conflict between different kinds of tenants (as Bew, Bull and Jones have all suggested). [7] For this reason, the intense outbreak of agrarian conflict known as the Ranch War (1904–8) did not cause the fragmentation of tenant farmer protests and the United Irish League (as Bew and Bull suggest) but actually revived the United Irish League vis-à-vis the emerging threat from Sinn Fein. By connecting the revolutionary period (1916–23) to the earlier periods of agrarian conflict – which most historians had not done – I was also in a position to demonstrate that Sinn Fein in parts of the west of Ireland did not emerge seamlessly from the embers of the old Home Rule movement (as Fitzpatrick argued) but from a distinct radical agrarian and separatist tradition going back to the Land War (1879–81) and beyond. Moreover, I demonstrated that Sinn Feiners and Home Rulers – far from being the same people (as Fitzpatrick believed) – were actually drawn from different classes in rural Ireland. And while other historians had described the radical potential of labour during the revolution (Fitzpatrick, Crean and O’Connor), none of these had acknowledged the radical potential of the small farmer class as Varley and I did. [8]

Unfortunately, even historians – with the notable exception of Norman Davies – are not in a position to change the outcome of the Irish revolution, even if we can suggest different ways in which the revolutionary process worked itself out. [9] Some valuable knowledge within the humanities and social sciences is gained incrementally and gradually rather than dramatically and suddenly (and there is a sliding scale between these two kinds of ‘revision’) but it does seem that some Irish historians protest too much in their rejection of the
notion that the Irish revisionists might themselves one day be revised.

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Notes


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