

## Land reform

Stephen Ridgwell examines Lloyd George's attempts to reform the rural land laws in Edwardian England

# The 'Mangold

## Lloyd George, the Game Laws and the campaign

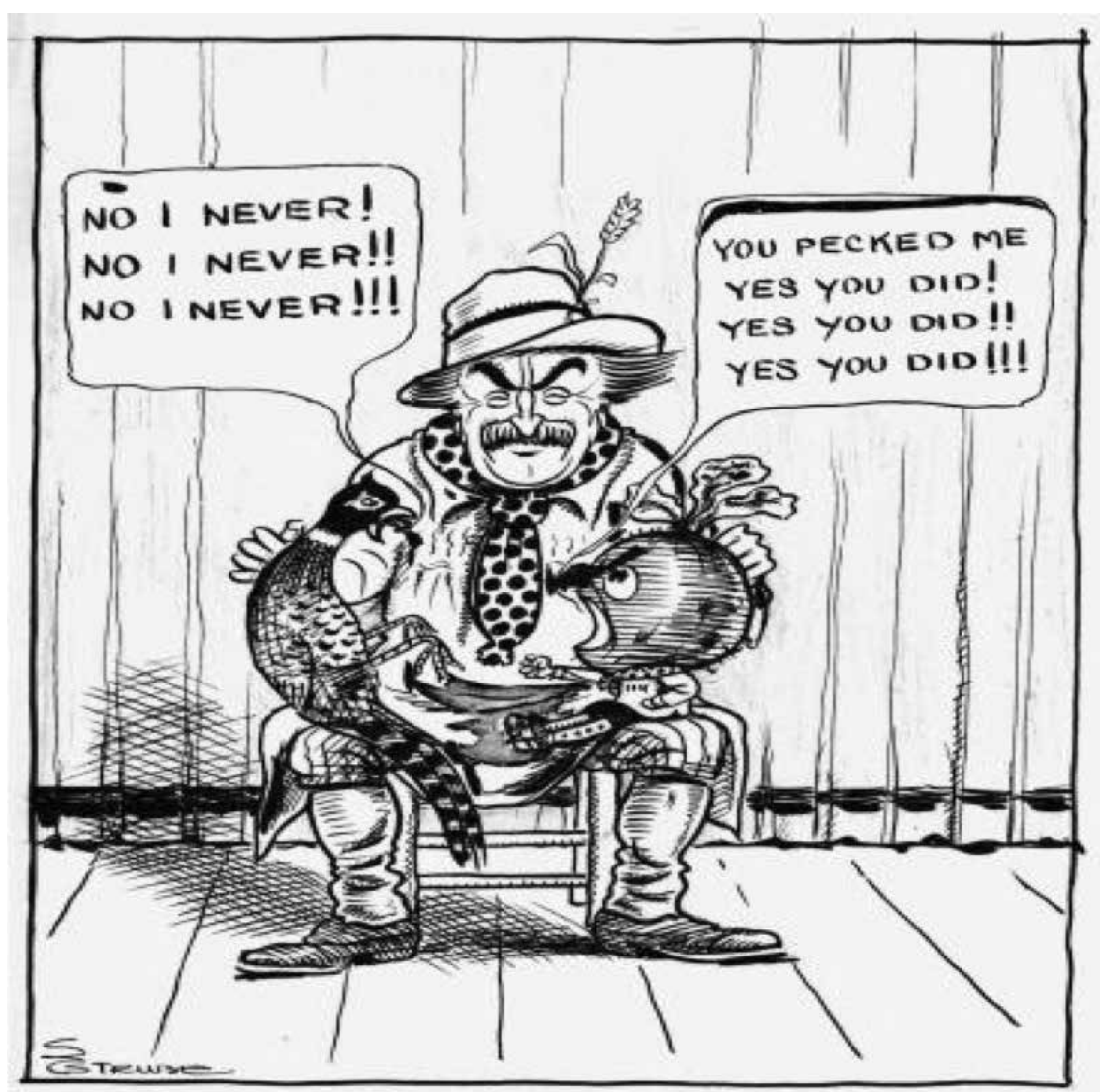


Fig. 1: *Daily Express* cartoon by Strube in the wake of Lloyd George's appearance at the Oxford Union.

**I**N NOVEMBER 1913 Lloyd George was the star attraction at the Oxford Union. He was there to defend the government's recently announced programme of rural land reform – the first step in a wider initiative that would also

incorporate urban land reform. The drama began early.

Upon arrival at the union building, the car in which Lloyd George was travelling was pelted with mangold wurzels and a dead pheasant was

# 'Mangold's Champion'

## Argument for rural land reform in Edwardian England

thrown at his head. This unconventional welcome, along with the inclusion of Welsh Rarebit and Pheasants à la Mangel Wurzel on the pre-debate dinner menu, had effectively been determined by Lloyd George himself.

Speaking for well over two hours at Bedford the previous month, the greatest platform orator of the day had controversially claimed that 'there is no country in the world where cultivated, and even highly cultivated land is so overrun and so continuously damaged by game.'<sup>1</sup> Having offered the striking statistic that between 1851 and 1911 the number of gamekeepers had increased from 9,000 to 23,000, while over the same period the 'labourers on the soil' had declined by 600,000, the chancellor told the story of a hardworking tenant farmer whose mangolds had been destroyed by pheasants from a nearby estate.<sup>2</sup>

Dismissed by cabinet colleague John Burns as 'ragtime statesmanship', there was more to Lloyd George's alleged recourse to fake news than headline-grabbing populism.<sup>3</sup> While his sense of showmanship led other critics to compare him to the music hall star George Robey, in taking careful aim at the sporting landlord he was wholly serious in intent.<sup>4</sup> In putting the case against the modern game preserver, and making it an integral part of what was then termed the land question, the only contemporary politician who fully grasped modernity drew on a well-established rhetoric of opposition. An opposition, it should be stressed, that went beyond the confines of Radical politics.

Widely seen as an epitome of class legislation, the laws attaching to the preservation and shooting of game were viewed with a dislike that permeated the culture at large. This in turn fed back into politics. Shortly before his speech at Bedford, Lloyd George told his friend and confidant, George Riddell, how a painting of a poacher on sale in a London gallery had recently caught his eye. Impressed by the look of 'gloomy determination' on the poacher's face, it was only the

price that had kept him from buying it.<sup>5</sup> With the game laws a matter of long-standing interest and concern to Lloyd George, as indeed they were to many others, this article examines the use he made of them in his pre-war assault on the well-defended ramparts of landlordism.

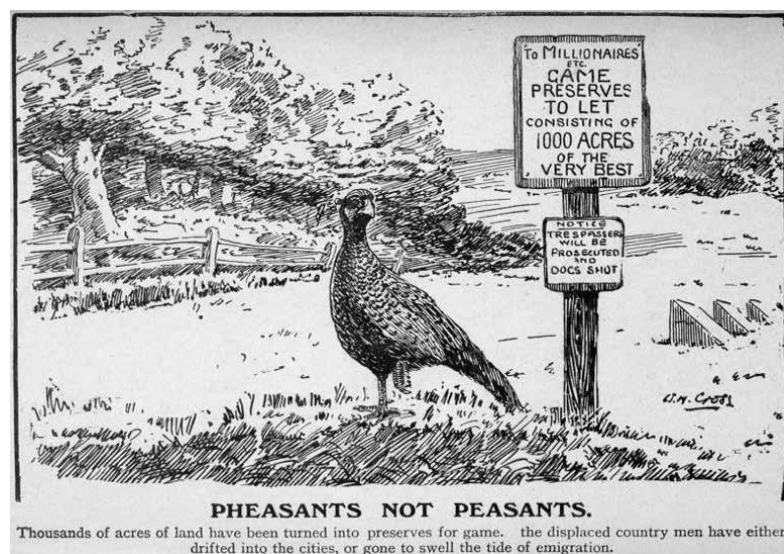
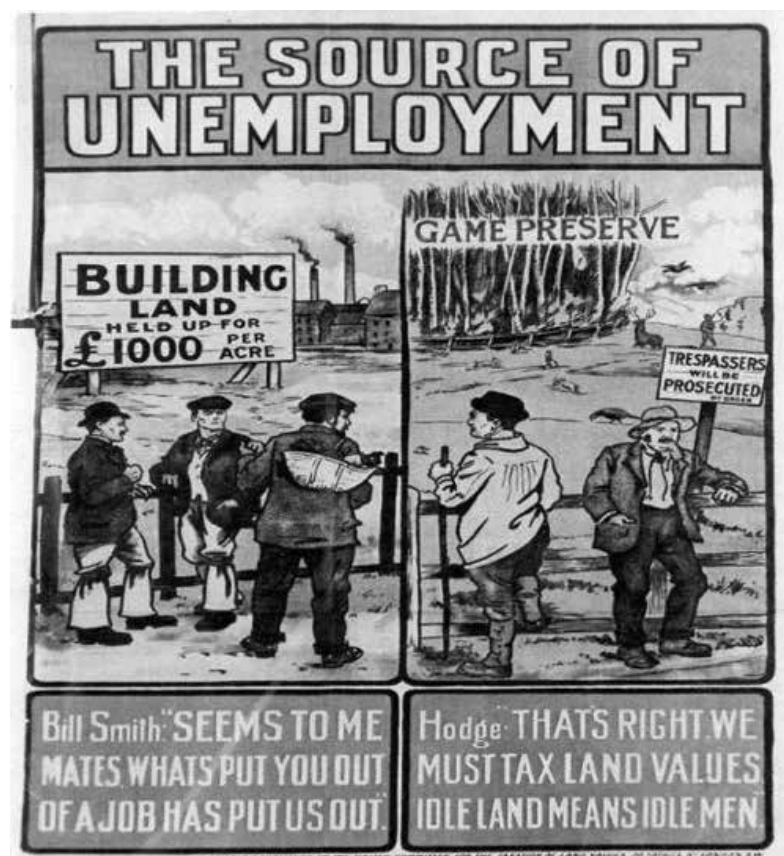
The first section focuses on the general nature of the land question, and the place that game preserving had within it. Some game-related moments in Lloyd George's own political formation are also considered. The article then traces the development of anti-game-law sentiment within the Radical/Liberal tradition from the 1840s to the opening decade of the twentieth century before returning to the Land Campaign of 1912–14. While the absence of an election makes its impact difficult to judge, on a personal level it played well for Lloyd George. By making himself the 'Mangold's Champion' at the moment when the politics of the land was at its height, he not only gave cartoonists a field day, but in the wake of the scandal over Marconi his credentials as the driving force of modern Liberalism were firmly restated.<sup>6</sup>

### **Pheasants not peasants: game and the land question**

The economic and legal resources devoted to the preservation and shooting of game meant that it was never far from the issue of power. When, in the summer of 1880, Lord Beaconsfield (Disraeli) prophesied that the coming political struggle would be focused on the nation's landholding and constitutional arrangements, the subject under discussion was a Liberal reform to the game laws. Giving tenant farmers some limited means of controlling the hares and rabbits found on their land, including the restricted use of firearms, the Ground Game Act became a reliable source of discord between those it was meant to assist and those who took it as an unwarranted

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interference into their contractual and sporting rights. Long before the Conservative MP and estate owner, George Pretyman, was driven by the terms of Lloyd George's 1909 budget to establish the Land Union, anxious preservers of game had formed the National Sports Defence Association as a means of resisting any future incursions by 'organised land robbers'.<sup>7</sup>

Raised at a time when poaching was a common activity in rural Wales (to which an emerging national consciousness gave a patriotic twist), Lloyd George was well aware of the symbolic resonance of game. In a seminal early speech to the quarrymen of Blaenau Festiniog on the pressing need for land reform, an occasion inspired

by Michael Davitt's visit in February 1886, the 23-year-old solicitor from Criccieth outlined the social cost to the poor of landowners primarily concerned with 'fattening their partridges, their rabbits and their dogs'.<sup>8</sup>

Observing how the speech had 'gone like wildfire thro' Ffestiniog', Lloyd George noted the following day that as a fully fledged participant in radical politics he was now wholly committed.<sup>9</sup> Even if the partridge gave way to the more discursively useful pheasant, at a skating rink in Bedford over a quarter of a century later the sentiment was the same.

The Liberal attempt to achieve a comprehensive package of rural land reform has, until relatively recently, not received the attention it merits.<sup>10</sup> The fact that the outbreak of major hostilities in August 1914 killed off the land campaign before it could yield any legislative results has made its inconsequentiality easy to assume. This, however, is to read history backwards. Though farming now contributed less than 10 per cent of gross national income, and under a quarter of the population still lived on the land, the agricultural sector remained an important source of employment and was central to the debates over national efficiency and tariff reform. Moreover, with constituency boundaries unaltered since 1885, the English countryside was over-represented and capturing the rural vote was a high priority. In the view of a leading expert on Edwardian Conservatism, 'the land was neither separate nor peripheral' and across the ideological spectrum it was 'seen to intersect "modern" issues at every point'.<sup>11</sup> For example, the belief that the continued 'rural exodus' would depress the urban labour market, as well as creating physically damaging levels of overcrowding, was a major national concern.

An obvious way to counter this trend was to improve the material conditions of life on the land. Proposing, amongst other things, the establishment of minimum wages for agricultural labourers, along with a system of land courts to ensure greater security for tenant farmers, the content of the rural land campaign, to say nothing of its paired equivalent for towns, was intended as much for the urban voter as the rural. In promoting the interests of the more 'productive' elements of society, the campaign was deliberately trans-class in its appeal. Helping to bind this bundle of interests together was the endlessly repeated image of the game-preserving landlord. Speaking in Middlesbrough in November 1913 on the Urban Land Problem, Lloyd George moved seamlessly from the country landlords whose souls were 'centred on sport' to the insistence that 'the rural policy is vital to the towns, and the urban policy is equally vital to the country'.<sup>12</sup> In a similar way, the shared hardships of urban and rural workmen at the idle hands of landlords were routinely highlighted by advocates of land value taxation – a cause supported by prominent

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Liberals like Josiah Wedgwood and Charles Trevelyan (Fig. 2).

But the land was more than just a valuable economic resource. Any account of the Edwardian land question, and the role of game preserving within it, must also recognise the cultural dimension. As a recent study of A. E. Housman suggests, 'statistical facts do not ... accurately reflect how people feel', and for much of the population 'the countryside remained the true locus of "Englishness."' <sup>13</sup> Here of course was a highly emotive conflict of interest. If the 'essential England was rural', the ongoing struggles of open-air recreationalists and nature lovers for greater access further sustained the idea of a selfish elite taking their pleasure at the expense of the many. <sup>14</sup> Instances like the loss of Trevelyan's 1908 Mountains and Moorlands Bill added greatly to this view. *How the Tory Landlords Oppose the People's Right to the Land* ran the title of a Liberal pamphlet highlighting the role of northern game preservers in blocking the proposal. <sup>15</sup>

Inextricably linked to the issue of access were the laws that surrounded game. Since 1831 its pursuit had technically been open to anyone who purchased a licence, but in practice the so-called sporting rights were invariably reserved to the landowner. While the Ground Game Act eventually gave farmers limited rights in the matter, the game laws were synonymous with the protection of landlord interest. There was also the issue of enforcement. Although country magistrates often acted impartially, the idea of the poacher as a perennial victim of 'Justices justice' remained prevalent. It was certainly one that Lloyd George made use of. In a typical case at the police court in Pwllheli in 1896, the MP for Carnarvon Boroughs successfully defended a farmer's son accused of shooting pheasants. In a well-rehearsed move, Lloyd George started by questioning the motives of the gamekeeper who had brought the charge before informing the chairman of the court that 'you are known for your injustice, especially in poaching cases.' According to a report preserved in his personal papers, the dismissal of the case 'created much satisfaction amongst the public present'. <sup>16</sup> In terms of framing the future statesman as a tireless champion of the people against the forces of entrenched monopoly, episodes like this had a significant afterlife.

In his admiring 1914 biography of the chancellor, J. Hugh Edwards described how, in Lloyd George's early days as a solicitor, the local 'poaching fraternity' often turned to him for his services and that 'scenes were constantly taking place' in which he 'boldly and unflinchingly stood up to the Bench'. As well as Hubert Du Parc's multi-volume *Life of David Lloyd George (1912-14)*, potted biographies like the one published by the *Daily News* (1913) also recounted his battles with game preservers. This included the celebrated occasion when in a case involving the defence of four poachers the justices withdrew from court

'rather than withstand his onset'. <sup>17</sup> Coming at a time when Conservative MPs could blame electoral defeat on their involvement as magistrates in high-profile poaching cases, as happened to George Verall in the marginal constituency of Newmarket in December 1910, such stories were loaded with popular potential. <sup>18</sup>

But Lloyd George had not just been a poacher's lawyer. The self-styled 'cottage bred man' liked to reference his own poaching past – a point not lost on *Punch*. <sup>19</sup> Upholding his claim about pheasants in the second of his major speeches on land reform at Swindon, Lloyd George explained that 'I have not lived for 25 years in a rural area without knowing more about game than the gamekeeper would like'. <sup>20</sup> Four years earlier, he had responded to the Lords' rejection of his land-taxing budget by announcing them to be 'of no more use than broken bottles stuck on a park wall to keep off poachers. That is what they are there for – to keep off radical poachers from the Lordly preserves'. <sup>21</sup> Not only was this good political knockabout, it also emphasised his deep understanding of the land. That the violently anti-Lloyd George publication the *National Review* should damningly assign him 'no higher place in the hierarchy of sport than that of an ex-poacher' rather missed the point. <sup>22</sup>

The preservation and shooting of game had by this time reached its historic peak. More guns shot at more game than ever before or since. With around 50 per cent of agricultural land now subordinate to the needs of the shoot, and guide-books such as *The Pheasant: From the Cradle to Grave* proliferating, even the *Field* could warn that 'excessive preservation' was a mistake and liable to encourage the 'anti-game movement'. <sup>23</sup> Speaking privately in January 1913, Lloyd George noted that while modest shooting in the 'old style' at least had some merit, modern practices were simply a 'monstrosity'. <sup>24</sup> In the meantime, the historical accounts of the game laws contained within widely read works like J. L. and Barbara Hammonds' *The Village Labourer* (1911) not only reinforced the belief in their 'feudal' and 'tyrannical' nature, but made them indissoluble from the process of parliamentary enclosure. With the living memory of enclosure informing much of the debate on the present and future use of the land, the double enclosure represented by the game preserve became central to the narrative of loss and needful restitution that formed part of the rationale for state-led change.

Fleshing out the details of the government's reform programme at Swindon on 22 October, the 'architect of the new England' announced that, whatever gamekeepers and landlords might say, the 'full resources of the soil' would be developed through the creation of Land Commissioners. <sup>25</sup> Answering his own question 'Why Commissioners?', Lloyd George delighted in telling a cheering audience that 'It is an idea we get from the landlords. When they enclosed the

Fig. 2: Poster produced by the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, March 1910 (reproduced with the kind permission of the Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading)

Fig. 3: From the illustrated version of Lloyd George's Swindon speech published by the *Daily News*. The main notice board references the renting out of sporting estates to wealthy businessmen. (reproduced with the kind permission of Bristol University, Special Collections)

commons they did it through Commissioners ... the Commissioners having deprived the people of their interest in the land, Commissioners are just the people to restore the land to the people'.<sup>26</sup> With the army's summer manoeuvres an annual source of friction between estate owners anxious to protect their birds and the military authorities, criticism of the game preserver could be neatly folded into the patriotic crusade to open up the land (Fig. 3). But in making the case against the preservers of game and their pheasants, Lloyd George was not simply adding 'more tasty matter' to his prescription for reform but drawing on a rich tradition of populist anti-landlordism.<sup>27</sup>

### One of the oldest Radical bugbears: attacking the game laws c.1845–1909

John Burns might not have liked Lloyd George's style, but his views on the political uses of game preserving were essentially the same. Electioneering in Battersea in 1906, an area not known for its sporting estates, he declared how England should henceforth 'care more about the peasant than the pheasant'.<sup>28</sup> Not only was Burns echoing Campbell Bannerman's recent call for the countryside to become 'less a pleasure ground of the rich and more of a treasure house for the nation', he was also airing what has been rightly labelled one of the 'oldest Radical bugbears'.<sup>29</sup> Across the second half of the nineteenth century, and into the next, attacking the preservers of game formed a significant part of a Radical / Liberal *Kulturkampf* against the owners of landed property.<sup>30</sup> Often compared to Joseph Chamberlain in his more radical days, when his outspoken attacks on landlords were full of the 'philosophy of Robin Hood, or even Jack Sheppard', Lloyd George also stood in line to the dominating presence of mid-Victorian Radicalism, and a redoubtable critic of the game laws, John Bright.<sup>31</sup>

Bright's first intervention came in February 1845 when, in moving for a select committee on the game laws, he described to a packed House of Commons the 'Hundreds and thousands of persons ... fined and imprisoned for poaching' while excessively preserved game was significantly hindering agricultural output.<sup>32</sup> Not only was this a blight on the working part of the rural community, but a growing problem for urban dwellers forced to pay a higher price for their food. In attacking the preservers of game Bright was seeking to drive a wedge between farmers and landlords in the hope of persuading the former to turn against the Corn Laws and to bring the affronted interests of town and country together. Representing 'one of the strongest marks of landlord domination', and relatable to the Norman Conquest, the manifold injustices of the game laws were a constant theme in the literature of the Anti-Corn Law League.<sup>33</sup>

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**Successful in his bid to end the Corn Laws, Bright was unable to achieve the same for the game laws. Undaunted, however, he returned to the issue in 1865 when, in the process of calling for franchise reform, he stated that the 'evil' of game preserving had become 'not less, but greater' and that in future elections Liberals in towns would give their fullest support to anti-game law candidates.**

game laws. Undaunted, however, he returned to the issue in 1865 when, in the process of calling for franchise reform, he stated that the 'evil' of game preserving had become 'not less, but greater' and that in future elections Liberals in towns would give their fullest support to anti-game law candidates.<sup>34</sup> Not only did this greater evil consist of ever-larger concentrations of game, it was also contained in the recent Poaching Prevention Act. Initiated in the Lords in 1862, this controversial measure gave rural constabularies the power to stop and search anyone suspected of the crime. Almost as bad for the Act's many critics, the cost of turning policemen into 'auxiliary gamekeepers' would be met by the general county rate. Further evidence, it seemed, of landlords having their legislative cake and eating it – to say nothing of their well-protected pheasants.

With Bright continuing to speak on the need to repeal the whole of the game law system, other leading Radicals like W. E. Forster and the indefatigable MP for Leicester, Peter Taylor, were also taking up the cause. Devoted to female suffrage, Garibaldi and churchwarden pipes, Taylor was especially driven by hatred of the game laws and in 1872 established the Anti-Game Law League. Like many with similar views, Taylor was convinced that the laws surrounding game were 'in the nature of an outpost or rampart of the Land Laws' and continually restated the connection between landlord monopoly and sporting excess.

Anticipating a claim later made during the Land Campaign, the first of the league's reasons for abolition was that 'the Game Laws diminish the area of land under cultivation'.<sup>35</sup> In a way that Lloyd George would have appreciated, the league communicated its message through a combination of damning statistics and highly charged language. 'Anti-Game Law Rhymes' like the one in which the poaching Young Fustian is beaten to death by Lord Velvet's vicious gamekeeper, Old Bully, being a typical offering.<sup>36</sup>

Seeing it as a step towards abolition, Taylor and Bright both backed the Ground Game Act. The first law to be passed by Gladstone's second administration, it was indicative of what George Kitson Clark discerned as the decade's 'new politics'.<sup>37</sup> Central to this changing political landscape was the extension of the franchise in 1884, an event that afforded Bright a final chance to speak publicly on the game issue. Addressing himself to the agricultural labourers who had just been enfranchised, Bright claimed that only the Liberals could deliver on their legitimate aspirations and that by working together the 'land laws will be reformed' and the 'Game Laws, too, will come under revision'.<sup>38</sup> Yet if ageing Radicals like Bright remained a concern to game preservers, even more worrying was the emergence of his heir apparent, the man hailed by Lloyd George in 1884 as 'unquestionably the future leader of the people', the Birmingham-based Joseph Chamberlain.<sup>39</sup>

Formally launched in the summer of 1885, the 'Unauthorised Programme' was an ambitious attempt to establish Liberalism's (and thus Chamberlain's) relevance to this new political world. Alongside graduated taxation and more local government, it contained an eye-catching proposal to enlarge the number of smallholders. This evident anti-landlordism had been made even clearer by Chamberlain in a speech given in his home city in January. Demonstrating the more populist style of address that developed in response to the Third Reform Act, Chamberlain claimed that at one time every man had enjoyed 'a right to a part in the land of his birth.'<sup>40</sup> In developing his theme, the game laws were a valuable resource. 'Is it just to expect that the amusements of the rich, carried even to barbarous excess, should be protected by an anomalous and Draconian code of law' he asked, or that the 'community should be called upon to maintain in gaol men who are made criminal by this legislation?'<sup>41</sup> While the content of the Birmingham speech was subsequently moderated, with a general election drawing closer the anti-landlord line was resumed. Concluding his speech in Warrington in September, Chamberlain turned once again to the 'barbarous' laws that were intended for no other reason than to 'protect the sports of the well-to-do' and doubted that 'any Parliament freely elected by the whole people' would tolerate them for long.<sup>42</sup>

The coming split over home rule notwithstanding, use of the land and the workings of the game laws now formed an established part of the more radical Liberal platform and contributed to the party's 1885 success in the English counties. In Norfolk North-West, for example, a safe Conservative seat went Liberal as the agricultural labourers' leader, Joseph Arch, pushed the twin issues of land and game law reform.<sup>43</sup> The following decade found Arch as part of a group of MPs, including Lloyd George, that attempted to repeal the Poaching Prevention Act.<sup>44</sup> And while the Liberal MP and author of *Fishing and Shooting*, Sidney Buxton, might argue the contrary, moving into the Edwardian era the preservation of game continued to be a source of popular grievance and an abiding symbol of landlord tyranny and excess (Fig. 4).<sup>45</sup>

Although as the case of Buxton suggests, Liberal opposition to the game preserver was by no means universal, it suffuses *To Colonise England*, the 1907 collection of essays edited by the newly elected MP, and close associate of Lloyd George, Charles Masterman. Introduced by A. G. Gardiner of the *Daily News*, the tone was set by his poem 'A Song of the Land'. Using the kind of language associated with one of the great romantic heroes of nineteenth-century Radicalism, Ernest Jones, the poem recounts how 'The Squire has woods and acres wide, / Pheasants and fish and hounds beside, / A stable full of horses to ride'. In stark contrast the labourer, 'Giles', merely 'follows the plough to the workhouse door.' The

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poem concludes with the plaintive question: 'How long, O Lord, shall the people be / Aliens in their own country?'<sup>46</sup>

In 'A Parish Meeting', a later piece in the collection by another beneficiary of the 1906 landslide, Athelstan Rendall, the figure of the squire is once more encountered. Here he is shown opposing the recent legislation on agricultural holdings, which included a compensation clause enabling tenant farmers to claim for damage done by winged game.<sup>47</sup> Bitterly opposed in the Lords, the proposal to give farmers the right to shoot the pheasants and partridges found on their holdings had had to be dropped, while the process for claiming damages was in turn made significantly harder. Although an Agricultural Holdings Act was finally passed at the end of 1906, albeit with a two-year deferment, the hostility generated between a 'rapacious' land reforming government and an opposition determined to defend the full rights of landowners, including those to do with sport, was an indication of the battles to come.<sup>48</sup> Reviewing the inordinate difficulties in achieving this moderate change to the law, Campbell Bannerman expressed the determination of Liberals to continue along the road of land reform:

When I am told that the only class of rural workers, and the census shows it, which has increased during the past few years is the game-keeping class, and when ... demand for land for the purposes of use and labour is met by blank denial, I say we should fail entirely in our duty if we sat with folded hands consenting to such a state of things.<sup>49</sup>

By the time that the Agricultural Holdings Act came into force Campbell Bannerman was dead and the new prime minister was Asquith. Not an instinctive land reformer himself, and given at times to sitting with folded hands, his replacement as chancellor was of a very different stripe.

### 'Down with Game and up with Lloyd George': the Land Campaign and the game issue, 1912-14

Late on the evening of 15 October 1912 the Commons descended into uproar. Amidst the unfolding scandal of Lloyd George's purchase of shares in Marconi, he was subjected to an aggressive line of questioning about the 'backstairs' committee he had established to investigate conditions on the land. Responding to Austen Chamberlain's enquiry as to the details of those giving evidence, Lloyd George seized his chance. 'Now I know what they want to get at ... They want to get the names of the men who dared to give information about wages, about the conditions of labour, about management, and about game'. It was at this point that the jeers and 'hooting' reached a crescendo: as a letter to his wife reported, 'Had a glorious row last night ... I ended deliberately on

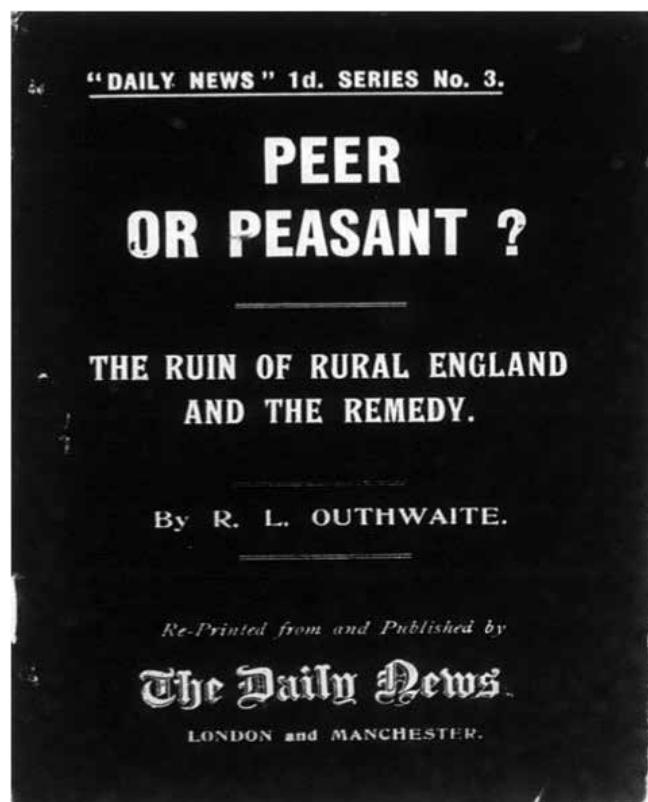


Fig. 4: Published in 1909, this collection of articles from the *Daily News* contained a fierce attack on game-preserves. The land-reforming Outhwaite won the industrial seat of Hanley for the Liberals at a by-election in July 1912.

Fig. 5: The poacher turned Chancellor – *Punch's* response to the uproar over Lloyd George's 'secret land enquiry', 4 November 1912.



the word "game". This produced pandemonium' (Fig. 5).<sup>50</sup>

Under the overall direction of Seebohm Rowntree, and with the full knowledge of Asquith, the Land Enquiry Committee had begun its work in the summer of 1912. At a time when sociological surveys and Cobbett-like journeys through the English countryside were commonplace, the establishment of such a group was not of itself unusual. What was unusual was Lloyd George's close involvement in the project, and the not wholly unjustified sense that its purpose was less to uncover the 'facts' of contemporary rural life than to furnish evidence for him to exploit on the platform. In other words, critics claimed, the 'secret' work of the committee – funded by personal friends and supporters of the chancellor – was an elaborate exercise in confirmation bias.

The stakes were certainly high. With the immediate future likely to be dominated by Irish home rule, and with National Insurance proving a hard sell, a sweeping package of land reform offered the chance to reconnect with the kind of popular reformist energy last seen during the constitutional struggle with the Lords. Enabling the Liberals to present themselves as the most effective counter to the wasteful privilege of the game preserve, while simultaneously pushing a commitment to improved national efficiency, this renewed focus on the land offered a powerful synthesis of 'old' and 'new'. It might also address the growing problem of Labour. If not yet able to offer a head-on challenge themselves, by-election results from the period show how the party's splitting of the progressive vote was indirectly beneficial to the Conservatives.

Contained within a wider package of land reforms, the offer to tackle the game laws (though not, as the *Daily News* reported, abolish them), and to rein in the excesses of the sporting land-lord, was to speak directly to Labour's own political base. This archetypally urban movement had a significant interest in the past and present state of the countryside and hostility to the game laws and sympathy for those who broke them were commonplace.<sup>51</sup> In what could easily have been a speech of Lloyd George's, an ILP pamphlet on the 'Curse of the Country' roundly condemned a situation where landowners were 'permitted to preserve game which devastates farmer's crops, but if a starving hind so much as kills and takes a rabbit he is liable to be sent to jail by a bench of landlord magistrates.'<sup>52</sup>

At the core of the rural land enquiry (a separate study was commissioned for urban areas) was the circulation of two questionnaires by teams of regionally based fieldworkers. The first was concerned with wages and housing conditions, while the second focused on land use, conditions of tenure and the presumed negative impact of game preservation.<sup>53</sup> With informants given the promise of anonymity, responses were quickly forthcoming. Referring him to a lengthy memorandum on the historical development of the game laws recently produced under the auspices of the Liberal MP and fellow member of the enquiry committee, Richard Winfrey, Rowntree was able to tell Lloyd George in September 1912 that 'we are getting a lot of information with regard to present conditions'.<sup>54</sup> And as those engaged on the report well knew, not least because Lloyd George told them, the worse the conditions the more usable they would be.

There was an obvious sense of regret, therefore, when a case involving smallholders and excessively preserved game fell through because of witness unreliability. Adding to the frustration was that the estate in question belonged to Lord Rendlesham, a former Tory MP and until recently the chairman of the Suffolk Quarter Sessions – the embodiment, as it were, of the game preserving Tory bigwig. More promising were the reports from Angmering in Sussex – a village where conditions were 'shockingly bad' and where 'memories of enclosure' remained 'vivid'. Eager to know more, Lloyd George instructed the enquiry committee's secretary to produce information relating to game in the area: 'what kind ... the number of gamekeepers [and] the extent of the preservation.'<sup>55</sup>

Appearing in the space between Lloyd George's speeches at Bedford and Swindon, the *Land Report* gave detailed testimony on the poor state of affairs in rural areas. While acknowledging that compared to the years of agricultural depression the countryside was now in a less parlous state, the serious difficulties remaining were repeatedly stressed. Citing crop damage and under-cultivation as major problems in game preserving areas, and recommending that significant parts of the Poaching Prevention Act be repealed, it concluded that 'considerable amendments' to the present laws were necessary 'both in the interests of agriculture and of the nation at large.'<sup>56</sup> Nowhere did the report give the positive arguments for game preserving. Whatever the benefits it might bring to its surrounding area, and arguably there were some, they were studiously overlooked by Rowntree and his team.

Published commercially by Hodder & Stoughton, the report coincided with a series of cabinet meetings to approve Lloyd George's plans. Not only did this mean that a well-funded publicity drive became possible, it also meant that other ministers were obliged to speak on the subject and would, if necessary, defend any of the more controversial claims made. A carefully produced memorandum circulated for use in these meetings had contained only a passing reference to the game issue and no indication of the extent to which Lloyd George would use it in the forthcoming campaign.<sup>57</sup> But although the chancellor could now claim to speak with the voice of the whole government, it also led to charges of hypocrisy. Not only did Lloyd George make frequent visits to land-swallowing golf clubs, but senior figures such as Sir Edward Grey, and especially the colonial secretary, Lewis Harcourt, were well-known shooters of game (Fig. 6). 'He speaks of pheasants and Mr Harcourt has a spasm', noted one 'exposure' of the chancellor's numerous expedients and inconsistencies.<sup>58</sup>

When Lloyd George took to the stage at the Bedford skating rink his purpose was less to outline the forthcoming programme of land reform, in part because it had not yet been agreed, than to

create a rhetoric for change. According to one of the event organisers, in decking the venue in red, white and blue the aim was not just to hide the ugliness of the building but to be 'emblematic of the new patriotism.'<sup>59</sup> In choosing this literal and figurative approximation to middle England, the electorally marginal county town of Bedford was a calculated choice. Reclaimed by the Liberals in December 1910, the town was closely linked to one of country's biggest landowners, and a 'Die-hard' in the recent struggle over constitutional reform, the Eleventh Duke of Bedford. Exemplifying the kind of 'feudalism' that many Liberals insisted was still to be found in rural areas, the game-preserving duke had engaged the distinguished agricultural historian, Rowland Prothero, to act on his behalf in local politics and in 1905 he had become a county alderman. With the magistracy in Bedford, and elsewhere, still dominated by the landed interest, it could be argued that on any number of grounds the 'landlord class' remained preponderant and that in essence the countryside was still the 'delectable pleasure ground of a fortunate minority.'<sup>60</sup>

During the periods when parliament was in recess, as it was between August 1913 and the following February, the public address became the principal means of shaping the political agenda. Rejecting Churchill's advice not to be too hard on the landlords, Lloyd George chose instead to give them 'snuff'.<sup>61</sup> Just as a cartoon from *Punch* predicted, game was once more included in his pungent blend of anti-landlordism. 'DIE HAPPY, BIRD!' a sporting Lloyd George exclaims to a pheasant awaiting its doom at the start of October, for soon 'I'M GOING FOR THEM!'<sup>62</sup> As he knew from earlier campaigns, popular prejudice could not only be used to sell a radical package of reform, but to keep the chief reformer in the public eye. It would also serve to move the focus on from Marconi as well as draw attention from other problems of the day. 'Down with Game and up with Mr Lloyd George' was Bonar Law's typically acerbic, but not wholly unfounded, response when forced to speak on an issue he considered far less important than events in Ulster.<sup>63</sup>

Compared to his critical references to game in 1909–10, those made around the launching of the Land Campaign were notably more specific.<sup>64</sup> They also substituted the pheasant for the partridge as the species to be singled out. In part this reflects the work of the land enquiry, but it also demonstrates Lloyd George's understanding of what would now be termed sound-bite politics. Central to the case against the landlord were two easily repeatable claims, neither of which appeared in the *Land Report* in quite the same form. The first was the growing number of gamekeepers alongside the falling number of agricultural labourers. Since 1851, 9,000 keepers had become 23,000; while the number of those working the land had declined by 600,000. What this 'perfect specimen of a Lloyd-Georgian syllogism'

**The *Land Report* gave detailed testimony on the poor state of affairs in rural areas ... Citing crop damage and under-cultivation as major problems in game preserving areas, and recommending that significant parts of the Poaching Prevention Act be repealed, it concluded that 'considerable amendments' to the present laws were necessary 'both in the interests of agriculture and of the nation at large.'**



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Fig. 6: The cartoon references a speech given by the Conservative MP and founder of the Land Union, George Pretyman, at Swindon on 17 October 1913. Lloyd George's love of golf was used as an example of his 'humbug' over game preserving.

Fig. 7: Such was the reach of Lloyd George's claims about the damage done by pheasants that manufacturers of avian pest repellents quickly recruited him to their cause.

overlooked, however, was that even if there was a causal relationship between the two sets of data, the most recent figures revealed that the rural workforce had, albeit slightly, begun to expand.<sup>65</sup> The 23,000 figure also included Scotland, an area where keeper numbers were rising more rapidly than elsewhere in Britain. Whether in error, or as deliberate distortion, a pamphlet produced in support of the Land Campaign would later give the figure of 23,000 for England and Wales alone.<sup>66</sup>

The second claim related to the damage done by game to crops, and especially that done by pheasants to the hitherto obscure mangold. From at least the time of the select committee initiated by Bright, the nature and extent of the damage done by winged game had been hotly disputed. Prone to roaming beyond their home preserve, and reared in increasingly large numbers, the brilliantly coloured and mocking pheasants of Byron's 'Don Juan' had become a highly visible, and audible, presence in many rural areas. Yet while its feeding habits were known to be omnivorous, just how destructive the bird was remained a moot point. Although the *Land Report* could claim that where large numbers of pheasants were preserved the damage was 'very great', the only reference to mangolds being harmed was in relation to hares – a species that in theory at least farmers had some control over.<sup>67</sup>

In producing the most controversial statement ever made by a British politician about a vegetable, Lloyd George was doing more than what his eldest son, Richard, later recalled as having a joke with Fleet Street.<sup>68</sup> Not to be found in the published version of the enquiry's report, Lloyd George was almost certainly influenced by an unsigned submission from one of its investigators. Though names and location are absent, the report recounts in some detail the losses sustained by an experienced farmer whose land bordered an estate that preserved pheasants. In addition to their being so numerous that labourers were 'unable to grow green stuff in their gardens', the individual in question had suffered the 'wholesale destruction' of his mangold crop because of the underfed birds that 'swarm[ed]' on his land. No doubt adding to the appeal of the case was the distinct odour of game law tyranny. Legally entitled to compensation, the farmer had apparently lowered his claim so as not to antagonise his landlord. Being a 'well known Liberal in politics' he felt himself to be a marked man already and did not want any further trouble.<sup>69</sup>

The example of a carefully tended crop being destroyed by an animal that existed merely to provide a pastime for a privileged few was too good for Lloyd George to miss. Not only might such a narrative appeal to tenant farmers, it could also play with those agricultural labourers with a long history of anti-game law feeling behind them. If Bright saw the game laws as a means of winning over the farmers, and Chamberlain saw the same possibility with the newly enfranchised

agricultural labourer, Lloyd George's deployment of the mangold-eating pheasant was aimed at drawing both camps to the cause of wider reform. Equally, there was a deep vein of dislike at the idea, if not necessarily the actuality, of the game-preserving landlord to be tapped in urban areas. Offering a striking image of landlord irresponsibility, the allegedly destructive habits of the pheasant reduced a complex problem to a more explicable form. 'The truth is', claimed the Yorkshire Conservative, Viscount Helmsley, that 'talk about game and the arbitrary power of the landlord is not so much for the consumption of the country voter as of the town voter' (Fig. 7).<sup>70</sup>

As he was fully aware, in attacking the landlord through his highly prized game, Lloyd George was bound to provoke a response. Speaking as both an expert in agricultural matters, and as the trusted land agent of a duke, Rowland Prothero contributed some of the most forceful criticism in the *Morning Post*. Characterising the speech as 'one long prolonged scream of violent and often ignorant abuse', he reported how 'English farmers grinned broadly at the fabulous pheasant which devoured the field of mangolds'.<sup>71</sup> Hoping to steer attention back to the Conservative's favoured ground of Ulster, the *Saturday Review* declared that 'fooleries over pheasants merely nauseate at a time when men are arming in defence against their fellows'.<sup>72</sup>

Yet it would be wrong to assume that this negative publicity was necessarily bad for the Liberal cause. From the perspective of the early 1920s, the journalist and political biographer, E. T. Raymond, felt that the 'fuss made about the habits of the pheasant ... confirmed popular suspicion concerning the pampered nature of these birds' and raised the profile of the issue with industrial workers.<sup>73</sup> Coming at a time when the Conservatives had more newsprint at their disposal than their opponents, any appearance in the 'enemy camp' was potentially useful and a detailed report on a Liberal speech was in effect a form of advertisement.<sup>74</sup>

Lloyd George readily joined the war of words. On the same day that Prothero's attack appeared in the *Morning Post*, other hostile publications such as *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* carried a letter from the chancellor in which studied incredulity was expressed at the outrage his comments had stirred. The accuracy of the claims made at Bedford were restated and a further point scored by noting that 'pheasants generally prefer to damage more expensive and luxurious fare than mangolds'.<sup>75</sup> By the time that Lloyd George appeared at Swindon, the Land Campaign was at the forefront of political debate and sales of the *Land Report* had risen sharply. With W. H. Smith carrying the report on its bookstalls, the Conservatives struggled to find an effective counter. Employing a suitably sporting simile, an internal party memorandum recorded how 'our own men are already going in all directions like foxes in a cornfield'.<sup>76</sup>

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Even the threat of major unrest had now to compete for attention. Likening Lloyd George to the Artful Dodger, Lord Newton observed tetchily that 'to judge from what appears in the press, it would almost seem that the question of whether pheasants eat mangolds or not is more important than the possibility of civil war in Ireland'.<sup>77</sup>

Having successfully defended the government's land policy at the Oxford Union on 21 November, Lloyd George was on excellent form when he took to the stage at the Holloway Empire at the end of the month. Although the speech was mainly focused on the Urban Land Problem, the game issue was referenced at several points. Unfairly dismissing Conservative proposals for reform as little more than the 'landlord must not be meddled with', and revelling in his own hyperbole, Lloyd George gleefully described the 'pagan thralldom that stifles liberty in our villages.' An appreciative audience went on to learn how in the depths of the English countryside the 'squire is god; the parson, the agent, the gamekeeper – they are his priests. The pheasant, the hares – they are the sacred birds and beasts of the tabernacle. The game laws – they are the ark of the covenant'.<sup>78</sup>

Judged by some to be his best effort since Limehouse, the speech was followed by a well-timed letter to the prime minister. On 5 December he told Asquith of the enthusiastic reception the government's proposals were getting 'from every part of England' and that according to the *Manchester Guardian's* editor, C. P. Scott, they had also 'given great satisfaction to the middle classes'.<sup>79</sup> At a National Liberal Club dinner a few days later – an event occasioned by the establishment of the Central Land and Housing Council (CLHC), the organisation now tasked with the promotion of land reform – Lloyd George reflected that over recent months his primary role had been to act as a 'sort of scout', locating the 'enemy' and drawing its fire, a phrase that was readily seized on by *Punch* (Fig. 8).<sup>80</sup>

But he had been much more than this. The public face of his party's last great reforming drive before the First World War, he was also its major creative force and chief attraction. More than two months after his appearance at Holloway, his mockery of the 'sacred' game laws and his claims about pheasants were topics for debate in the reopened parliament as Conservatives tried unsuccessfully to turn the tables. While expert barristers like F. E. Smith could point to 'the repeated inaccuracies of the Chancellor of the Exchequer', on the street it was apparently a different story.<sup>81</sup> In the view of another critic: 'If one were to collect a hundred men in any street of any town and ask them to describe Mr Lloyd George's land proposals, ninety-five per cent of them would reply, "He talked of how pheasants eat mangolds"'.<sup>82</sup> And if he now had less to say in public on game, behind the scenes Lloyd George was continuing to gather examples of pheasants damaging crops and receiving delegations of farmers

angry at the 'operative restrictions' attaching to the Ground Game Act.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, the game preserving landlord was given a significant role in the CLHC's widening propaganda effort. Moving in to the fateful summer of 1914, for all that it was being shot at game was still very much a live issue.

### Conclusion

In February 1917 an order for the destruction of pheasants was issued by one of Lloyd George's first appointments as prime minister, the Liberal peer and founder of International Stores, Lord Devonport.<sup>84</sup> Formalised as Regulation 2R of the Defence of the Realm Act, the order allowed for the killing of pheasants beyond the close season and, more importantly, by tenant farmers whose crops were at risk of being damaged.<sup>85</sup> With agricultural production at an absolute premium, there was little objection from game preservers. But the war that gave Lloyd George his victory over pheasants also meant that the vote-winning appeal of the Land Campaign was never tested.

THE DAILY GRAPHIC, MONDAY, OCTOBER 20, 1913.



**THE COUNTER ATTACK.**  
In sporting circles it is believed that pheasants will, in view of the Chancellor's rude remarks, abandon the mangold-wurzel habit in favour of golf balls.



Mr. Lloyd George on Bird Pests.

**PROTECTION**  
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Qrs.	Wheat, Peas, Maize, Vetches, etc.	Barley, Rye, etc.	Oats, etc.	Set extra from Manufact.	Carriage extra from Manufact.
100 lbs.	1/6	1/6	1/6	1/6	1/6
50 lbs.	8d	8d	8d	8d	8d
25 lbs.	4d	4d	4d	4d	4d
12 1/2 lbs.	2d	2d	2d	2d	2d



**CORVUSINE D.G.**





Fig. 8: Lloyd George of 'Pheasant Patrol' reports to his scoutmaster (Asquith) on the progress of the campaign. Note the banner. *Punch*, 17 December 1913.

On the evidence available, however, historians of the Land Campaign have suggested that if the planned abolition of plural voting is also factored in, a gain of around twenty seats 'probably the absolute minimum' the Liberals could have expected from rural England at the election scheduled for 1915.<sup>86</sup>

On the basis of reports received by the CLHC, it would indeed appear that the Liberal package of rural reform was finding its mark – at least amongst those farmers and labourers who were not 'hopeless Tories'.<sup>87</sup> Likewise, a Conservative Party investigation into the 'effect of Lloyd George's propaganda' concluded in the spring of 1914 that the campaign was working well.<sup>88</sup> While, in the final analysis, the pledges relating to minimum wages and greater security of tenure were likely to have been the key determinants on voting behaviour, the commitment to reform the almost universally disliked game laws, and to make the game preserver more socially responsible, had an obvious attraction. In criticising one of John Bright's statements on the game laws in the mid-1860s, the *Saturday Review* nevertheless agreed that the issue provided 'a desirable opening for an attack upon landowners because preserving is really one of the weakest points in the character of their class.'<sup>89</sup> With much greater quantities of game now being preserved, and with more being said and written about it than ever, this point of weakness was increasingly visible.

The level of hostility that Lloyd George's comments on game generated in the Conservative and sporting press was not only fuelled by anger at

what was seen to be an ill-informed and overly personal attack, but by concern at their possible influence on wider opinion. Reflecting on his speeches at Bedford and Swindon, the *Gamekeeper* worried that the 'words of so eminent a speaker cannot fail to carry weight' and that it will be 'difficult to correct his misstatements.'<sup>90</sup> More specifically, the *Shooting Times* believed that it was among town-dwellers that Lloyd George's 'wild talk about game' was likely to do the most harm.<sup>91</sup>

Fusing personal belief with political opportunism, the perception of the game-preserving landlord as a regressive presence in the countryside whose selfish interests were entirely against modern needs and moralities was pushed to its maximum extent by Lloyd George. He spoke so fluently, and so frequently, on game partly because he enjoyed doing so, but also because he thought it made good politics. Following his highly publicised speeches in the autumn and winter of 1913–14, his enemies accused him of 'vote-catching' because that is what they feared he was doing. In what was likely to be a tight election, the game issue had little chance of alienating traditional supporters, but every chance of helping to rally possible waverers to the cause of Liberal reform. And almost as importantly for Lloyd George, by focusing on the unreformed Edwardian countryside, and the unpalatable amounts of vegetable-eating game that roamed it, he also reasserted himself as the best political show around.

*Stephen Ridgwell completed a PhD in history at Sussex University in 2017. His research focused on cultural representations of the poacher in England c. 1831–1920. He has recently published work in The Journal of Victorian Culture and The Kipling Journal. An article on the Edwardian poacher for Rural History is forthcoming.*

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