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FARMERS, MERCHANTS & PRIESTS:  
THE IRISH AGRARIAN PETTY-BOURGEOISIE

FARMERS, MERCHANTS AND PRIESTS:  
THE RISE OF THE AGRARIAN PETTY-  
BOURGEOISIE IN IRELAND, 1850-85

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## ABSTRACT

While traditional modes of historical analysis of Irish development have justly focussed upon the national question, on the contradiction between the British Empire and the Irish nation, equally important questions of the development of class struggles within the Irish nation have tended to be obscured. This study seeks to redress the balance by examining the internal forces which determined the ultimate shape of the truncated, partitioned independence achieved in 1921.

The fundamental axis of this work can be simply stated. The principal motive force in social development is class conflict, the complex interplay of class contradictions which comprises the systematic framework of a given mode of production. In Ireland, the determinant class struggles in the nineteenth century were the Great Famine of 1848-50 and the Land War of 1879-82. These two events served as the temporal and systematic limits of the crucial formative period for the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, a class consisting of strong farmers, rural merchants and businessmen and Catholic clergy. Both Famine and Land War represented significant victories for the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. The first opened the way for them, clearing the social and economic ground for the consolidation of their economic strength; the second allowed them to translate economic strengths into social and political

power.

The Great Famine was neither the result of divine intervention nor the outcome of British malice. It was more systematic -- the outcome and resolution of the concrete class contradictions which characterised the tillage system, the predominant form of agriculture in the pre-Famine period. That system appeared as the contrast between commercial production of grain and subsistence cultivation of potatoes. The lynch-pin was the "potato-nexus", the primary economic form of the exploitation of the cottier-proletariat, upon whose labour depended the commercial output of corn. Around this potato-nexus clustered a set of distinctive features of pre-Famine rural society -- rapid population growth, increasing immiseration, structural unemployment, and the progressive alienation and subdivision of the land by middlemen, tenant-farmers and cottiers. The land was the fundamental condition of production in pre-eminently agrarian economy; not surprisingly, therefore, it was the source of the most important class struggles throughout the nineteenth century.

The potato blight destroyed the foundations of the tillage system; starvation and emigration drastically reduced the agricultural labour force; and the repeal of the Corn Laws quickly altered the central economic incentive for Irish agriculture. The Famine effected a rapid and decisive transformation in the rural class structure. Subdivision

was halted; farms became larger and more viable; the population fell steadily, reducing the pressure on the land; and a consistently rising market for animal products brought the key productive force, the strong farmers, into the foreground. Within two decades, Irish agriculture became relatively highly capitalised, as these farmers increased their livestock holdings. The boom during the quarter-century after the Famine generated a distinctive agrarian capitalism. Agriculture became almost entirely commercial; most transactions became monetarised. As the range and quantity of goods on offer and in demand increased, a burgeoning mercantile petty-bourgeoisie arose alongside the farmers. The great failing of the period, however, was the absence of the industrial development which might have absorbed the surplus labour generated by the rising organic composition of capital in agriculture.

The translation of economic strength into social and political power is not an automatic process. The second half of this study traces the development of the hegemony of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie within the Irish nation. The basic force in the process was the Catholic Church. The distinctive Puritanism of Irish Catholicism may be defined as the moral boundaries of the world-view of the rising class. Nor was religion and national identification the only bond, for priests, farmers and merchants were also linked by financial and personal ties.

Economic strength, moral authority and political power were tested in the most important arena: the material conflicts for control over the means of production (the Land War) and the subsequent political contest for representation of the Irish nation in the imperial parliament and in local administration. Under the banners of the Land League and Home Rule, a national united front was forged. Led by Parnell, this movement simultaneously reflected and engendered a qualitative advance in the maturity of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. In the early 1880s, the Irish farmers, merchants and priests established their claim to rule society, in the interests of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie but in the name of the whole nation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Now that this work, originally conceived in 1971, is finally complete, it is a happy task to recall and record my gratitude to those who have contributed towards its final form.

Looking back, I am amazed at the patience and friendship with which my supervisor, Dr. Peta Sheriff of the Department of Sociology, McMaster University, put up with my procrastination and kept her eye on the main thread in a series of frequently rambling, discursive drafts. The final definition and value of this work is very largely due to her insistence upon clarity of expression and argument. During much of this period, Dr. Sheriff was also carrying the burden of the Chairmanship of the Department -- handling my dissertation can hardly have lightened the load. So I offer apologies as well as thanks.

In the early stages of this work, I was fortunate to have the assistance of Professor George Rudé, of the History Department, Concordia University, as a member of the committee. His experience and insights were especially helpful in arriving at a sharp definition of the focus of the study. In particular, I have a fond memory of our long conversation in the bar of the Burlington Hotel in Dublin, where we hammered out the central proposition of this thesis.

Since our first meeting, at the 1978 meeting of the American Committee for Irish Studies at Cortland, New York, Dr. Samuel Clark



of the Department of Sociology, University of Western Ontario, has been a stern and challenging but always constructive critic. His intimate knowledge of much of the subject matter of this thesis has served as the essential goad towards the careful refinement of arguments which might otherwise have been left crudely under-developed or over-simplified.

The other member of my committee, Dr. Graham Knight of the Department of Sociology, McMaster University, made a complementary contribution. His main concern was with the theoretical framework. Both the introduction and conclusion bear the stamp of his persuasive appeals for an explicit statement of the Marxist themes which I had hitherto tended to leave implicit.

I should like to record also some occasional meetings and conversations which have played a part in this work. In May 1975, during the intermission in the proceedings of a meeting of the Irish Labour History Society in Dublin, I had a long, entertaining and instructive conversation with Dr. Rodney Green of the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's University, Belfast; we talked over a pint in a pub, of course! Dr. Theo Moody generously invited me to attend his graduate seminar, in his rooms at Trinity College Dublin, to hear a presentation by Dr. James Donnelly of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I have been fortunate to meet Dr. Donnelly twice since then, and to talk to him about my thesis. Finally, Professor Joseph Lee, of University College Cork, was most helpful in suggesting leads and resources to pursue in

developing the research for this study.

I owe a large debt to the libraries where most of the work on this dissertation was done. In Dublin, Trinity College Library, the City Public Library in Pearse Street, and the Royal Dublin Society Library in Ballsbridge; in Belfast, the Linenhall Library; and at McMaster, the Mills Memorial Library. To the staff of the Inter-Library Loan department of the last of these institutions I offer a special vote of thanks.

The final academic acknowledgement must be to the School of Graduate Studies, McMaster, for the research grant which enabled me to return to Ireland in 1975-76 to conduct the research embodied in this thesis.

Without the benefit of friends, the whole process of writing would be a thin and lonely one. I have been blessed with a number of exceptional friends -- perceptive, critical and supportive. And some of them have made substantial contributions to this thesis. Robert Kircher read and rejected the "metaphysical nightmare" of an early draft introduction, and told me how to write a straightforward statement of my theme. Marcia Kircher is always sensible; her suggestions clarified needless obscurities. With linguistic elegance and a logical analysis, Françoise Pfirrmann helped to strengthen the structure of my argument. Jean-Paul Pfirrmann enthused about the chapter on the Church

and underlined some ramifications I had missed. Phil Taylor, friend and comrade, stiffened my resolve when I despaired of ever reaching the end of the tunnel. With all of these friends, the creative process has occurred in the most civilized way, in conversation over good food and drink. To them all -- sláinte!

And then there is the seemingly inevitable cliché. Without the financial and moral support of Helen Slennett, my wife, the whole project would have had to be abandoned two years ago. She also did the most thankless task of all, proof-reading a text she had already seen in three versions. But on the positive side, she helped with some of the best parts of the research, the consideration of many pints of plain in Tommy Ryan's "51". So the road from Bandon to Ballydehob must get a nod for its unwitting part in this work.

The final acknowledgement is also a double dedication. I started this work for a political reason. The risen people of Northern Ireland and particularly their political and military leadership -- Sinn Fein and Provisional IRA -- inspired the need for this work; and the Canadian Party of Labour offered the indispensable organisational and ideological context for my theoretical development. "Those who do not learn from history . . ." -- it is my hope that this small piece of historical analysis might help in the advance towards a united, independent and socialist Ireland.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AHR:	<u>American Historical Review</u>
EcHR:	<u>Economic History Review</u>
IHS:	<u>Irish Historical Studies</u>
JSSISI:	<u>Journal of the Statistical &amp; Social Inquiry Society of Ireland</u>

CHAPTER ONE  
INTRODUCTION

Old Wine, New Bottle

This dissertation is an examination of the development of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie in Ireland, focussing on the critical formative period spanned by the Great Famine of 1845-50 and the Land War of 1879-82. It is my contention that the Famine and the Land War were decisive historical turning points which marked transformations in the economic, social and political conditions in Ireland; transformations which also characterised, therefore, the structure of class relations. More specifically, the Famine and the Land War were outstanding landmarks in the rising fortunes of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. Through the central organising focus of this analysis, on the concept of class struggles, both the Famine and the Land War will be seen in their truest light, as important victories for the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie over their class enemies, real and potential.

While it has been claimed, with some justice, that "ignorance of the facts was not one of the causes of Irish misery in the nineteenth century",<sup>1</sup> it remains a curiosity of Irish historical writing that the

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1. E. Strauss, Irish Nationalism & British Democracy, (London: Methuen, 1951), p. 80

central issue of social and economic development has, until very recently, been largely overlooked in favour of the more dramatic and seductive charms of political conflict and diplomatic intrigue. This lacuna is especially marked in the crucial matter of the development of classes. It is all the more surprising that this is true even in the field of Marxist historiography, for although Ireland played a major part in the development of the Marxist analysis of the national question, serving as an object-lesson for Marx and Engels and the First International, and as a focal issue in Lenin's disputes with the sectarian "leftists" in the Bolshevik ranks, substantive Marxist analysis of the class struggles and class relations in Ireland remains scarce. The two principal Marxist works are Strauss's Irish Nationalism and British Democracy and T. A. Jackson's Ireland Her Own. The latter is admittedly "an outline history of the Irish struggle"; a useful introduction, it remains a skeleton in need of a considerable amount of flesh.<sup>2</sup>

The difficulty with Strauss's work is more critical, for his analysis is marred by an overly mechanical search for the Irish

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2. T. A. Jackson, Ireland Her Own: An Outline History of the Irish Struggle, (London: Cobbett Press, 1946). Other Marxist works may be cited -- Elinor Burns, British Imperialism in Ireland, (Dublin: Workers Books, 1931); Michael Muir, The National Movement in Ireland, (Moscow-Leningrad: State Educational Publishing House, 1932); Brian O'Neill, The War for the Land in Ireland, (London: Martin Lawrence, 1933). But the indispensable work is still James Connolly's Labour in Irish History, (Dublin: Transport & General Workers Union, 1944)



replication of the classical British model of capitalist development through industrialisation. The result is a serious error. Strauss argued that "the middle class which occupied the vantage point" in the national bloc which was consolidated after the Land War was "nothing but an agglomeration of second-rate vested interests which had established themselves on the basis of the semi-colonial order maintained by British arms".<sup>3</sup> This work seeks to demonstrate that, on the contrary, the Irish agrarian petty-bourgeoisie was a distinctive class, and that while it was undoubtedly tied to the British Empire by a dense net of market relations, this class was fundamentally rooted in a set of identifiable economic and political grounds of its own making.

Non-Marxist historiography, too, has mainly eschewed analysis of class relations in Irish development, most often in favour of the polemics of Anglo-Irish relations. Even in the recent "revisionist" period in Irish historical writing, in which the central theme has been the exposure of the one-sidedness and inadequacy of the nationalist shibboleth of unremitting British iniquity, class relations have received a tangential rather than analytic treatment.<sup>4</sup> Within this

3. Strauss, Irish Nationalism & British Democracy, p. 209

4. The doyen of this "school", who argues primarily against the nationalist orthodoxy established around 1920 by George O'Brien, is Louis M. Cullen -- see his Anglo-Irish Trade, 1660-1800, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968) and An Economic History of Ireland since 1660, (London: Batsford, 1972). Another seminal work in recent analysis of Irish economic history is Raymond D. Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production: Its Volume & Structure, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1966)

modern oeuvre, the three most pertinent works must be cited, for although none of them has filled the gap in the class analysis of Irish history, each one is suggestive of the area in which my own study is concentrated.

The most sparkling of the trio is Joseph Lee's contribution to the Gill History of Ireland series, a short but dense and electric essay which Lee himself has described as no more than "a prolegomenon to a sustained study of the modernisation process in Ireland".<sup>5</sup> While it is most illuminating, Lee's study leaves largely uncovered the core of my concern with the structure and development of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. Another item in this list is the third essay in Emmet Larkin's trilogy on the expansion of the authority of the Catholic Church in nineteenth century Ireland.<sup>6</sup> In this study, Larkin explicitly proposes the existence of a "nation-forming class", consisting of the large tenant-farmers and their "urban cousins". While there is a clear area of congruence between this argument and my own, Larkin's primary emphasis remains upon the role and status of the Church. Moreover, Larkin generally leaves to one side both the processual matter of the rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie and the more contentious issue of their struggles with the other classes in the Irish countryside. Finally,

5. Joseph Lee, The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1848-1918, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1973), "Preface", n.p.

6. Emmet Larkin, "Church, State & Nation in Modern Ireland", AHR, LXXX, (1975), pp. 1244-76

Samuel Clark has recently emphasised the necessity to recognise class distinctions within the rural population in nineteenth century Ireland, specifically so as to arrive at an accurate identification of the different bases of collective action. Thus, in somewhat different terms and in a much briefer format, Clark's essay points towards the main concern of my own study.<sup>7</sup>

Readers already versed in Irish history will find much in this study which is familiar, but they will also discover something entirely distinctive. The use of the organising principle of the Marxist analysis of class struggles and the coherent focus upon the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie whose rise to power was the common thread in post-Famine development will constitute a significant renovation of apparently stale material. In other words, while I cannot claim to have presented any distinctly novel primary data, my theoretical focus, arrangement and reconstitution of the material does nevertheless comprise a significantly new synthesis. This study is designed to meet a need which has previously been overlooked in historical studies of nineteenth century Ireland. The analysis of the development of class structure and class relations in Irish rural society, from an Irish rather than an "Anglo-centric" perspective, has not hitherto been undertaken. This work, focussing upon the indigenous aspects and the

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7. Samuel Clark, "The importance of agrarian classes: agrarian class structure and collective action in nineteenth-century Ireland", British Journal of Sociology, XXIX, (1976), pp. 22-40

formative period in the rise of a distinctively Irish agrarian capitalist class, is a contribution towards filling that gap.

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles"<sup>8</sup>

La lutte des classes et l'existence des classes sont une seule et même chose . . . La lutte des classes n'est pas l'effet dérivé de l'existence des classes, qui existeraient antérieurement (en droit et en fait) à leur lutte: la lutte des classes est la forme historique de la contradiction (interne à un mode de production) qui divise les classes en classes.<sup>9</sup>

The opening line of the Communist Manifesto is the fundamental axis of a Marxist analysis. The struggle between classes is both the principal form and the ultimate determinant of the contradictions which propel social development. Left bare, this proposition begs several important questions. What are classes? What are the relationships among them? And what are the material foundations of their struggles? Logically as well as in reality, the first two questions are aspects of the same issue. The answer to the first question is deceptively simple, as in Lenin's definition -- "classes are large groups

8. Marx & Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party", in Selected Works, (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1958), i, p. 34

9. "Class struggles and the existence of classes are one and the same thing . . . Class struggle is not the after-effect of the existence of classes whose being (legal and actual) predates their struggle; class struggle is the historical form of the contradiction (inherent in the mode of production) which divides classes into classes": Louis Althusser, Réponse à John Lewis, (Paris: Maspero, 1973), p. 29 & n. (My translation)

of people which differ from each other by the place they occupy in a historically definite system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in laws) to the means of production, by their role in the social organisation of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions and method of acquiring the share of the social wealth that they obtain".<sup>10</sup> In this formulation, the critical point is occupied by the "means of production", which is the link between classes. Briefly, classes do not stand in isolation, on either side of an impenetrable wall called "means of production". On the contrary, they stand in relations of mutual dependence and conflict over the very same means of production.<sup>11</sup> Since the means of production are the fundamental economic structure of society, they supply and govern the tracks along which classes necessarily move. It follows then that the identification and analysis of classes is always tendential, an attempt to capture the immanent processes of going-out-of and coming-into-being. Brief definitions tend to offer still photographs, when the true requirement is film-footage.

If classes may only be identified in their struggles, then

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10. Lenin, "A Great Beginning", Selected Works, (New York: International Publishers, 1937), ix, pp. 432-33

11. Marx, Capital, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967), i, pp. 76-87; Marx, "Wage Labour & Capital", Selected Works, i, pp. 96-8; Georg Lukacs, "What is Orthodox Marxism?" and "Reification & the consciousness of the Proletariat", in History & Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics, (London: Merlin Press, 1971), pp. 1-26, 83-222; and the illuminating summary in E. P. Thompson's "Preface" to The Making of the English Working Class, (New York: Random House, 1963), pp. 8-12

the fundamental prizes or goals of their struggles must be defined. There are three main keys -- control over the means of production, ideological and moral superiority, and political domination of the state. These goals are evidently more than future-events. They are, simultaneously, the terrain on which the combats between classes are fought and the keys to the material grounding of those struggles.<sup>12</sup>

The essential aspect to pursue, first, is the practical-economic basis of class struggles. Formally, the mode of production may be defined as the entire system comprising the forces and relations of production -- in short, what goods are produced and how.<sup>13</sup> The set of contradictions which necessarily characterises the internal structure of a given mode of production has been succinctly defined as "a complex whole structured in dominance".<sup>14</sup> That is to say, historically and logically, some one or more of the contradictions within the whole take precedence. In contrast with previous writers who have emphasised,

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12. Engels, "Preface" to The Peasant War in Germany, (Moscow: Progress, 1956), p. 23; Lenin, "What is to be Done?", Selected Works, ii, pp. 48-50

13. The forces or conditions of production include land, mines, factories, machinery, technical developments, transport systems, etc., the material inanimate elements; the relations of production comprise the ways in which those forces are put to work by men and women, the organisation and division of labour and the distribution of its fruits. See Marx, Capital, passim; Marx, Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 497-514; Engels, Anti-Duhring, (Moscow: Progress, 1969), pp. 177-82, 316-38

14. Louis Althusser, "On the Materialist Dialectic", For Marx, (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 205; cf., the brief, excellent resume by Stalin, "Dialectical & Historical Materialism", History of the CPSU(B), (Toronto: Francis White, 1939), pp. 105-31

for instance, the political aspects of the contradictions between Irish national aspirations and Britain's imperial priorities, this analysis will seek to demonstrate that the principal contradiction was the conflict at the heart of the mode of production. The dynamics of class relations and class struggles over the land, the indispensable factor in an overwhelmingly agrarian economy, were the crucial determinant of Irish development in the nineteenth century.

This issue may be approached from another angle. Modern Irish history revolves around one inescapable bench-mark. In 1921, the country was partitioned into two bourgeois states. Ten years later, Peadar O'Donnell reminded his comrades in the left-wing of the Republican movement that "partition arises out of the uneven development of capitalism in Ireland".<sup>15</sup> Uneven development is the best short statement of the complex dance in time executed by the contradictions between the rural classes in southern Ireland, and between them and the industrial classes in north-east Ulster and the imperialist power in Britain. The specific and truncated resolution of these contradictions was Partition. The foundations of that outcome in the rising economic, social and political powers of the southern, Catholic, Irish agrarian petty-bourgeoisie have been disregarded for too long. This study will attempt to redress the balance.

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15. An Phoblacht, February 7, 1931, cited by British & Irish Communist Organisation, The Economics of Partition, (Belfast: B&ICO, 1972), p. 3; cf., Michael McInerney, Peadar O'Donnell: Irish Social Rebel, (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1976)

One useful point of departure for the analysis of class struggles during the formative post-Famine period is to outline briefly the main forces before and after that cataclysm. During the decades down to the Famine, while Irish agriculture was founded upon the tillage cultivation of grain and potatoes, four main classes may be identified.

The ruling class, indisputably, were the landowners. To their legal and actual monopoly over the means of production, they had added and exercised the full range of legislative, executive, judicial, administrative and military powers of the state. The majority of the landowning class belonged to the Protestant Ascendancy, the seven or eight thousand owners descended from the families which had been granted the territory of Ireland after the conquests and expropriations of the seventeenth century.

At the furthest extreme from the landowners were the large and growing ranks of the rural proletarians, who may be identified in three strata. Landless labourers constituted the "normal" core of this class. But to their numbers we must add the cottiers and a great many small farmers. Cottiers were sub-tenants, holding tiny plots of land which served as potato-gardens, for which the cottier paid dearly, in cash or labour-service, usually to a larger tenant-farmer. Many small farmers were sub-tenants too, holders of small, uneconomic plots, many of which were eliminated during the Famine years. The distinctions among small farmers, cottiers and landless labourers, no less real



for resting on increasingly tenuous notions of status, were frequently outweighed by their shared fate of poverty, hunger, unemployment and immiseration. The structural foundation of their position was their common reliance upon the stable diet of the potato.

Standing between these two extremes, there were two "middle classes". The first, drawn mainly from the lower reaches of the Protestant Ascendancy, were the gentry-middlemen. They were, essentially, head-tenants to whom the landowners had, in the latter half of the eighteenth century, granted long leases on large tracts of land. Initially, they were a managerial convenience for the great landed magnates: they offered rents in bulk, they served as a buffer between the landowner and the "mere Irish" tenantry, and they sometimes acted explicitly as land-agents or estate-managers. But, in general, the gentry-middlemen tended to be parasitic upon the means of production, rent-farmers rather than productive agriculturalists. During the three decades from 1815 to the Famine, as the profitability and rental incomes from the land tended to stagnate or shrink, these middlemen became an unwanted drain upon the landowner's potential rental income. One early stage in the nineteenth century conflicts over the land was the resumption by the landowners of more direct control over their property and the concomitant decline and eventual disappearance of the gentry-middlemen.

By contrast, the other "middle class" was stable, productive

and destined for greatness. At first glance, there is a potential source of confusion in the fact that, strictly speaking, many of the tenant-farmers who comprised the core of this "native" middle class were also middlemen. During the decades of the tillage system, it frequently made sound economic and political sense for the strong tenant-farmer to sublet some of his holding to cottiers and small farmers. This form of subdivision secured for the tenant-farmer a ready supply of labour-power, augmented his income, and afforded relief from the unwelcome attentions of the agrarian terrorists. Before and after the Famine, these tenant-farmers, who occupied and farmed the bulk of the land, were the lynch-pin of Irish agricultural production.

The crucial demarcation employed in this analysis, on the basis of the recognition that there were wide variations in the size of holding occupied by tenant-farmers, is designed to highlight the "strong farmers", the men and women who appear most clearly in the post-Famine data as the holders of at least thirty acres. In the strictest terms, of course, this strong farming class would not be called a petty-bourgeoisie since they did not own their own means of production until after the final stage in the transfer of juridical ownership of the land, under the terms of the Wyndham Act of 1903. Such a strict construction would, however, make nonsense of the stability, the productive domination and the informal but no less real control over the land which characterised this class. The strong farmers were the

core of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

The Famine was not neutral. It was, in effect, a particular form of class war. By virtually destroying the specifically pre-Famine rural cottier-proletariat, the Famine's most significant long-term effect was a radical transformation in the rapport des forces in the rural class structure. At the polar extremes, the Famine simplified matters.

A minority, perhaps one in ten, of the landowners were permanently bankrupted and their land was sold to new, more solvent owners, most of whom were drawn from the ranks of the Ascendancy itself. The landowners still ruled, for their legal and economic powers remained practically unimpaired and were even, to some extent, enhanced by the removal of the more indebted weaker elements among them.

Both the number and complexity of the rural proletariat were drastically reduced by the Famine. Two results followed. In the first place, the cottier system, with its tenuous landed connotations, was severely curtailed and the rural working class tended increasingly to adopt the more "normal" characteristics of landless wage-labour. Secondly, this process significantly lowered the pressure of competition for access to the land and thus served to open the way for a marked expansion and consolidation of the landholdings of the strong farmers at the heart of the agrarian economy.

By definition, all tenants holding land and growing crops or rearing livestock may be called farmers. But there was, clearly, some sharp distinction among "farmers". The provisional, and necessarily somewhat arbitrary, definition of the strong farmer must rest initially upon the official statistical categories employed by the government. In general, then, the strong farmer will be taken to mean a tenant holding thirty or more acres. There remain some obvious qualifications. At one end of the scale, a tenant holding, say, 75 acres of rough upland pasture and bog in Connemara could fail to classify as a strong farmer, while, at the other extreme, a dairy farmer on 20 acres of fine pasture in Limerick might well be counted in the ranks of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

The land was obviously the fundamental basis for the rise of an agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. In an overwhelmingly agricultural economy, whose essential aspect was the cattle-rearing industry, the post-Famine pastoral system, the strong farmers or "thirty-acre men" or "men of bullocks" were the heart of the class. By the eve of the Land War, they occupied more than two-thirds of the land; and a generation later, with the passage of the land purchase acts of 1903 and 1909, they won juridical as well as actual control over the means of production.

The pastoral economy of the graziers and dairy farmers generated and sustained an extensive wholesale and retail trading

system, a highly developed transport network, and widespread credit and banking facilities. The men and women who operated this infrastructure for the pastoral economy constituted the second major stratum of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. This more traditional petty-bourgeoisie, whom Larkin calls the "urban cousins", comprising merchants, shopkeepers, publicans, traders, dealers and small businessmen, expanded rapidly in the hundreds of small towns across post-Famine Ireland. The ties between the farmers and these businessmen were elaborate and manifold, often founded on mutual dependency. The businessmen relied upon the farmers for the latter's surplus produce and for their custom; in return, they often offered credit to the farmers. Moreover, many of these "urban" businessmen were still intimately tied to the land by bonds of kinship and contract.

There was, finally, a third stratum of this agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, whose personnel was mainly drawn from the ranks of the other two. While the farmers and businessmen registered the material gains for the class in the form of rising rural living conditions, enlarged land holdings and a growing volume of savings, this third segment elaborated the moral, ideological and political strong-points from which the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie launched the second decisive round in their class struggle. If the Famine resulted, primarily, in the victory of the farmers over the cottier-proletarians in the competition for access to and control over the land, the Land War must be defined as

the moment at which their assault was turned definitively against the formidable powers of the landowning Ascendancy.

This third fraction of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie consisted of the ideological and political leaderships, the functionaries of the national movements, whose crucial role was to provide the determinant forms for the class struggle under the national banner. These forces were theoretically provided for in Gramsci's comment that "every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function, not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields".<sup>16</sup>

There were two main elements in the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie's "organic intelligentsia" -- lay and clerical. At one extreme, England's colonial domination of Ireland continually reproduced "a small hard stratum of discontented men possessed with pride, ambition and ability, but with no prospects and no cause to love England"; from the United Irishmen of the 1790s to the Republican Sinn Fein of 1920, the "professional men of the middle class made a permanent knot of leaders for Irish nationalism".<sup>17</sup>

The other group of intellectuals was recruited, trained and

16. Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 5

17. Malcolm Brown, The Politics of Irish Literature: From Thomas Davis to W. B. Yeats, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), p. 27

provided by the sole organisation which spanned the whole country during the entire nineteenth century -- the Catholic Church. The commonplace identification of "Irish" and "Catholic" captures part of the significance of the Church, but a more systematic approach will reveal the development of quite complex relations of mutual dependence, characterised by conflict as well as cooperation, between the clergy and the leading sections of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. In essence, the clergy played two main roles in the rise of their class. On the one hand, they often acted as national and local political leaders, whether in collaboration or in competition with the secular nationalists. Secondly, the bishops elaborated and the priests expounded the moral teachings which offered a rationale for the demographic restraint which underpinned the farmers' conquest of the land.

In summary, then, three critical theoretical issues must be underlined. The first is a temporal or dialectical matter of analysis. While there can be little doubt that each of the key elements required for the rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie already existed before the Famine, and that they had already begun to play a leading role, the definitive period, analytically and in reality, occurred after that disaster. The development and rise, the coming-into-being, the process by which the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie was transformed from a class-in-itself into a class-for-itself can only be adequately analysed after the Famine had so altered the structure of class contradictions in

rural Ireland as to propel the class struggles of this particular class into the forefront.

The second point refers back to the problem to which I have alluded in reference to Strauss's analysis. The central political aspect of the constantly reiterated "Irish Question" was the issue of the bourgeois revolution. It is my argument that the first and crucial stage in that bourgeois revolution was accomplished by the Land War and its immediate aftermath. This proposition flies in the face of that style of mechanical "marxism" which seeks a precise replication of the conditions which characterised the classical British model of industrial-capitalist development. How is one to account for a bourgeois revolution which occurs behind the backs, as it were, of the industrial bourgeoisie, or, more to the point of the Irish case, in the face of the armed resistance of the industrial bourgeoisie of Belfast and the north-east? That the form of the Irish bourgeois revolution differed quite radically from the English model must not be allowed to distract attention from the fundamental content of that process. Indeed, it might be suggested that it is inevitable, given the uneven nature of capitalist development, that the agency for bourgeois revolutions throughout much of the "under-developed" world will be the petty-bourgeoisie, precisely because the channels of large-scale industrial development have already been choked off by prior development in the advanced capitalist states. In this respect, Ireland, rather than Britain, would serve as the model.



If this is the case, the third and thorniest question assumes a heightened theoretical significance. This analysis is a case-study of the development and rise to power of a particular petty-bourgeoisie, rooted in agricultural production, under the conditions and constraints of colonialism. If Ireland was a prototype for liberation movements elsewhere in the imperialist system, then the analysis of the essential characteristics of the Irish agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, its strengths and weaknesses, its vision and its blinkers, should suggest fruitful directions and illuminating parallels for other, historical and contemporary, developments.

In shorthand terms, the most important structural issues concern the relationship between base and superstructure. What were the fundamental characteristics of the economic basis of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie? How and to what extent were these economic factors transposed into the social and political realms? In other words, there is no immediate or automatic congruence between economic strength and political power. Indeed, the relationship between them is the central problematic of a Marxist analysis of any concrete set of circumstances. The specific focus, in the Irish case is to define the adequacy of the class consciousness elaborated by the intellectual wing, almost invariably in a national form, for the rise to power of the farmers and businessmen who determined the economic shape of Irish society. From another angle, the question asks how these farmers and businessmen

came to dominate the social and political landscape.

### The Dialectics of Class and Nation

The reader of this study can hardly fail to be struck by the marked change in tone which occurs at the midway point. This shift is dictated by the necessity to impose some organisational clarity upon a large body of quite complex evidence. There are, in fact, two aspects to the thesis as a whole. First of all, it is necessary to demonstrate the existence and economic advancement of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. Secondly, it is proposed that the rising powers of that class provide the common thread of explanation running through the tangled skein of Irish nationalism.

The principal emphasis in the first half of the work (in Chapters Two to Four) will be upon the fundamental economic structures and class contradictions in the southern Irish agrarian economy. The first substantive chapter will present a brief outline of the main features of the pre-Famine tillage economy, based upon the dualism of grain and potatoes. This will be followed by several sections analysing the main class forces -- landowners, cottier-proletarians, middlemen and farmers. The focal point of this chapter is the disastrous climax, the vast bloodletting of the Famine.

The following two chapters (Three and Four) will examine the reconstruction or readjustment of the agricultural economy after

the Famine. The first step, in Chapter Three, will involve a sectoral analysis of the productive forces, demonstrating the continued primacy of agriculture and the rapidly growing pre-eminence of cattle-rearing and dairying within the agricultural ensemble. The second aspect of this post-Famine economy was the continuation of a pre-Famine pattern of industrial decline, accompanied by expanding investment in the infrastructural development which served mainly to enhance the value of pastoral production. The first half of the thesis will conclude with Chapter Four's detailed consideration of the transformations in the class structure which followed the Famine. The pastoral economy involved a significantly altered balance of class forces. At the simplest level, this flowed from the falling demand for labour which accompanied the switch from tillage to pastoral production. The key developments in the shifting series of relations between landowners, farmers and agricultural workers, during the period from the Famine to the Land War, will be closely traced. This class analysis is essential to set the stage for the subsequent examination of political and ideological struggles which foreshadowed and led to the Land War and the eventual political victory of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie during the national revolutionary guerrilla war of 1916-23.

The principal task of the second half of this study is to provide an account of the organisational frameworks within which the

agrarian petty-bourgeoisie accomplished the transformation from "class-in-itself" into "class-for-itself".<sup>18</sup> A useful point of departure for an analysis of this process can be found in Marx's derisive commentary on the French peasantry on the eve of Louis Bonaparte's coup d'état. All alike, they shared a common relation to the means of production, but their unity was no more than a "simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes". Thus, "in so far as there is merely a local inter-connection among these smallholding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organisation among them, they do not form a class".<sup>19</sup> The focal point of the second half of this study is precisely how the community, the national bond and the political organisation of the Irish "peasantry"<sup>20</sup> were forged during the successive struggles for religious, social and national emancipation, for control over the land and for political power.

Two theoretical keys underpin this second half of the study. The first is the proposition that the class which aspires to rule society, in its own interests and in the name of the whole nation, must base its claims on something more than a declaration of its own wealth. It must

18. This distinction was first clarified by Marx, in "The Poverty of Philosophy", Collected Works, (Moscow: Progress, 1976), vi, pp. 211-12

19. Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", Selected Works, i, p. 344

20. I have used "peasantry" for congruence, but not to signify that I consider all Irish tenant-farmers to have been indifferently grouped in the same category.

have a moral ground, a justification in the sight of God, Liberty or some other higher value. The second point is the interpenetration of the various fronts or aspects of class struggle, a feature which was sharply summarised in Marx's explanation to his German correspondents that "in Ireland the land question has hitherto been the exclusive form of the social question, because it is a question of existence, of life and death, for the immense majority of the Irish people, and because it is at the same time inseparable from the national question".<sup>21</sup>

Arriving at an appropriate moral position; dealing with, or avoiding, the social questions; and co-ordinating the ideological and practical aspects of the struggles for the land and for national independence -- these were the crucial tasks facing the national intelligentsia. They comprise, equally, the main axes of the analysis of the development of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

It may seem curious to commence the study of the worldly pomps of the rising class with an excursion into the by-ways of the soul. The Protestant Orangemen would have no trouble understanding the need to do so; just as the most superficial observer will recognise the existence of religious divisions in Ireland. While religion clearly plays a disproportionately significant role in the country's life, the deeper sources of the religious divide and the long-standing integration

21. Marx to Meyer & Vogt, April 9, 1870, in Marx & Engels, Selected Correspondence, (Moscow: Progress, 1965), p. 236

of religion in the social order are less obvious. It is, therefore, crucial to decipher the connections, to identify the part played by the Church in the development and ascendancy of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

Some of the answers will undoubtedly remain inaccessible, shrouded in the mists of individual religious belief, but the structural foundations can be uncovered. Broadly speaking, the issue revolves around common class interests. The patterns of ecclesiastical political and economic activity suggest that, corporate and sectional disagreements notwithstanding, the clergy and the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie were bound together by ties of common interest and outlook, of kinship, of financial benefit. The key to the matter is the underlying fact that the Church cannot be said to have usurped its economic and political powers from another, presumably secular, body. Instead, the Church's position rested upon a bedrock of moral authority which tended to serve, in practice, the interests of the rising class. This coincidence was most clearly evident in the relationship between the stern Jansenistic code of sexual repression advocated by the Irish clergy and the demographic decision to prolong adolescence and defer or deny sexuality; the one provided moral sanctification and a form of spiritual enforcement for a clearly temporal pattern rooted in pastoral production. It would be misleading to avoid stating that the analysis of the Church's role is bedevilled by a shortage of conclusive evidence. The issues

raised and the conclusions suggested, in Chapter Five, are inferential and controversial.<sup>22</sup>

The chapters which follow the analysis of ecclesiastical power are less problematic, less hypothetical. They trace, respectively, the changing forms of agrarian class struggle which culminated in the Land War and the establishment of the national united front which evolved from the Land War.

In Chapter Six, devoted to agrarian class struggles, the focal point must be the climactic conflict for control over the means of production, the Land War of 1879-82, for that was the second decisive moment in the rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. The gains which the strong farmers, and their business, political and clerical allies, had made during the quarter-century after the Famine were translated into formidable social and political power through the medium of the Land League. The Land War was the struggle which shook the foundations of the Protestant Ascendancy's landed powers; its principal outcome was the Land Act of 1881, accurately described by one of the prime movers in the Land War as "a legislative sentence of death by slow processes against Irish landlordism".<sup>23</sup>

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22. The most recent contributions to the long-standing debate over the critical issue of the Church's role in Irish economic development are Emmet Larkin, "Economic Growth, Capital Investment and the Roman Catholic Church in Nineteenth Century Ireland", AHR, LXXII, (1967), pp. 852-94 and Liam Kennedy, "The Roman Catholic Church & Economic Growth in Nineteenth Century Ireland", Economic & Social Review, X, (1978), pp. 45-60

23. Michael Davitt, The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland (1904), (reprint, Shannon: Irish University Press, 1970), p. 317

To understand the proper significance of the Land War requires a prior confrontation with the myth which prevails in what Clark has aptly called "the storybook history of Ireland".<sup>24</sup> This myth comprises two parts: the proposition that the landowners were rack-renting tyrants and the claim that the agrarian struggle from the 1760s to 1920 was all of one piece. The facts are otherwise. Landowners were seldom as brutal or vicious as they were portrayed. Indeed, one of the more radical "revisionist" arguments suggests that the landlords' reluctance to maximise their profits and to pursue their legal rights to the hilt was at least partly responsible for the relatively backward condition of Irish agriculture and, by extension, of the Irish economy as a whole.<sup>25</sup> The Irish tenant population, for its part, was deeply riven by class contradictions. Thus, while there was certainly a long pre-history of agrarian class struggles before the Land War, a central concern of this chapter will be to disentangle the very distinct forms and strategies pursued by the different Irish rural classes. The analysis of the Land War will concentrate upon the question of the rapport des forces in the countryside, particularly on the radical transformations which followed the Famine, focussing on relations among the different strata of tenant-farmers and between them and the agricultural working class.

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24. Clark, "Importance of agrarian classes", p. 24

25. Barbara L. Solow, The Land Question & the Irish Economy, 1870-1903, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971)



Flowing out of the Land War, but taking its stand on a quite different terrain, the political movement for Ireland's independence was the last and greatest achievement in the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie's long march towards power. The guerrilla war in 1919-21, which forced the British to relinquish their claim to govern southern Ireland and to abandon the fiction of the "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland" and the Civil War of 1922-23, which settled the internal, class accounts within the national movement, were the outcome of a long historical trajectory. Irish independence was founded upon the development, organisation, education and leadership of a politically mature national movement. In Chapter Seven, I shall argue that the Irish national movement was given its definitive modern form in the united front which was organised under the leadership of Charles Stewart Parnell, within the specific framework of the Irish National League, established by Parnell in October 1882.

Two aspects, in particular, of the development of this national movement must be emphasised. In the first place, by definition, the national movement represents an alliance of distinct and potentially contradictory class forces. Equally, the successful resolution of the national struggle for political independence, the creation of a sovereign state, entails the domination of one class over the others. The victorious class within the national bloc must establish its hegemony, its moral, political and material claims to the right to rule society in

the name of the whole nation. If these may be taken as the general rules, each concrete situation displays its own particularities.<sup>26</sup> The essential fact of the Irish national movement was the domination of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, and the outstanding characteristic of this national movement, founded on this class basis, was the peculiar significance of the leader. In more systematic or theoretical terms, the Irish national movement may be seen as a case-study in "Bonapartism".<sup>27</sup> But let there be no misunderstanding. There was never a perfect parallel between Louis Bonaparte and Parnell -- after all, the Nephew was but a caricature of the Emperor -- nor even between the French small-holding peasantry of 1850 and the Irish agrarian petty-bourgeoisie of 1880. The question is one of distinctive types of social formation, of similar sets of class contradictions. The decisive importance of the "Parnellite decade", and the utility of the Bonapartist conception, stem from the peculiarities of uneven development in Ireland. The agrarian petty-bourgeoisie faced a two-fold task -- to

carry through a bourgeois revolution and to stamp it with the hegemonic

26. The key theoretical texts are Stalin, Marxism & the National Question, (1913), and Lenin, The Socialist Revolution & the Rights of Nations to Self-Determination: Theses, (1916); cf., Horace B. Davis, Nationalism and Socialism: Marxist & Labour Theories of Nationalism to 1917, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967)

27. Marx's luminous analysis, in "The 18 Brumaire", must be supplemented by the insights in two biographies and the analysis in a modern monograph: Sean O'Faolain, King of the Beggars: A Life of Daniel O'Connell, (1937, re-issue: Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1970); Desmond Ryan, Unique Dictator: A Study of Eamon de Valera, (London: Arthur Barker, 1936); and Brian Farrell, Chairman or Chief? - The Role of Taoiseach in Irish Government, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1972)

brand of their own distinctive interests and outlook. In order to achieve these ends, the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie called forth a leader who came from outside their struggle and their immediate class boundaries, a leader who appeared to dominate them. In short, this final substantive chapter of political analysis hinges on the decipherment of the dialectics of class and nation, party and leader.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LAND, LABOUR & THE POTATO: RURAL CLASS STRUCTURE IN THE PRE-FAMINE TILLAGE SYSTEM

#### Introduction: Tillage and Famine

Mythical pre-history and modern statistical surveys both agree that cattle-raising on extensive pastures is the key to Irish agricultural prosperity.<sup>1</sup> Three conditions predispose Ireland to pastoral agriculture: climate, soil geography and historical development. The first two are givens, since the temperate climate and high rainfall facilitate the growth of grass but tend to leach the mineral content of tilled soil.<sup>2</sup> Historical development is more complicated. Its first appearance, for the purposes of this study, is in the guise of a case of "national amnesia". For roughly a century, down to the Great Famine of 1845-50, Ireland seemed to forget that she was a country best suited to cattle-raising. The spread of intensive cereal cultivation during the later decades of the eighteenth century led ultimately to the vast blood-

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1. For the former, see the numerous versions of An Táin Bó Cuailnge, the epic history of the Cattle Raid of Cooley, a war for control of the best breeding bull in Ireland. The best is the modern version by Thomas Kinsella, The Tain, (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1970). OECD's Report on the Irish economy for 1962 noted that agricultural land was distributed in the proportions of 70% pastoral and a mere 15% tillage.

2. Raymond D. Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production: Its Structure and Volume, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1966), p. 4

letting of the F amine.

The physical dimensions of the Famine were literally awful. The potato harvest, upon which at least one-third of the population was utterly dependent, failed almost entirely in 1845, in 1846 and again in 1848. As a result, close to one million people died of starvation or of the diseases attendant upon hunger -- dysentery, typhus fever, cholera. Two million more people left the country aboard the emigrant ships, bound for Britain and North America. Within the span of a decade, the population of Ireland fell by at least one-quarter.<sup>3</sup>

Why the Famine occurred is more problematic. The contemporary Malthusian economists tended to blame the Irish for their troubles: they wed too early, they bore too many children, they were simply too populous.<sup>4</sup> Nassau Senior, economist and governmental adviser, offered an alliterative explanation, the trinity of Indolence, Ignorance and Insecurity.<sup>5</sup> Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to the Treasury and permanent head of the British Civil Service, who was

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3. The best accounts of the Famine are Cecil Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, (London: Four Square Books, 1964); R. Dudley Edwards & T. Desmond Williams, eds., The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History, 1845-52, (Dublin: Browne & Nolan, 1956. See also R. N. Salaman, The History and Social Influence of the Potato, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949); and the official Correspondence on relief measures, in the Parliamentary Papers: 1846, (735), xxxvii; 1847, (761), li; 1847, (797), lii; and Sir William Wilde's socio-medical report in the Census of Ireland, 1851, 1856, (2087-I), xxix, pp. 242-43

4. This was the burden of their analysis of "surplus population": see R. D. Collison Black, Economic Thought & the Irish Question, 1817-70, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 86-133 passim.

5. Nassau W. Senior, Journals, Conversations & Essays Relating to Ireland, 2 vols., (London: Longmans Green, 1868), i, pp. 33-52

also in command of Famine relief operations, waxed more lyrical when he remarked that "it is hard upon the poor people that they should be deprived of knowing that they are suffering from an affliction of God's providence".<sup>6</sup> The popular analysis, especially in the savage nationalist version offered by John Mitchel, directly rebutted Trevelyan: "God sent the blight, but the English made the Famine".<sup>7</sup>

The first main proposition of this study is that the Famine was the logical outcome, and the most brutal resolution, of the contradictions which characterised the tillage economy. It was one of those determinant moments which mark significant turning points in historical development. The principal significance of both the Great Hunger and the tillage economy from which it derived was that it helped lay the foundations for the rise to power of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. In short, I shall argue, contrary to some recent revisionist opinions, particularly those of Louis Cullen and Raymond Crotty, that the Famine was neither "accidental" nor of less than cardinal importance.

The Famine was an explosion in the rural class structure. The pre-Famine rural proletariat, founded upon the domestic economy of potato-subsistence from tiny plots of land, was virtually destroyed. The weakest, most indebted section of the landowning Protestant

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6. Letter of Trevelyan to a famine relief inspector, February 1, 1847, cited by Woodham-Smith, Great Hunger, p. 172

7. John Mitchel, The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps), (Glasgow: R. & T. Washbourne, 1876), p. 116

Ascendancy was pushed into financial bankruptcy, while the entire class's incapacity or unwillingness to deal with the crisis rendered them morally bankrupt in the view of the developing nationalist position. Finally, the Famine opened the way for the rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, as the combination of evictions, death and emigration eased the pressure on the land. The strong farmers and rural businessmen who did well out of the Famine, or who simply survived, became more secure on larger holdings, made more money and acquired greater social and political power. The Famine was, therefore, a pivotal event, the decisive intersection between two dissimilar periods of economic, social and political development.

### The Tillage Economy in Outline

In order to understand the transformation wreaked by the Famine, and to place the post-Famine re-organisation of the economy into perspective, it is necessary to start with a brief summary of the main aspects of the tillage system. This pre-Famine economy was characterised by two features: it was relatively short-lived and it was divided into two periods. During the early decades, between roughly the 1770s and the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, grain production was the motive force of an expansionist and confident economy whose main aspects were rising prices, profits and output. By contrast, the

three decades between Bonaparte's defeat and the onset of the Famine in 1845 were marked by stagnation or decline (the latter especially in industrial production), by sharply falling price levels and by increasingly shrill auguries of doom. Both boom and slump were phases in the life-cycle of the same economic system.

The outstanding fact of Irish society from 1770 to 1845 was very rapid population growth, from about four million people to more than eight millions recorded by the 1841 Census.<sup>8</sup> This demographic position was not unique, but it was distinguished in Ireland by being heavily concentrated in the poorest strata of the rural population. Few towns outside Dublin, Cork and Belfast kept pace with the rising tide in the countryside.<sup>9</sup> Rural population growth was a fundamental feature of the tillage system, for plentiful labour implied increasing scarcity of land and impelled the move towards more intensive arable farming. But other stimuli played their part too. One of these was the industrial revolution in England, which generated a growing demand for bread. This was subsequently augmented by the larger "surplus" demand created by the blockades initiated during the continental wars,<sup>10</sup> and

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8. K. H. Connell, The Population of Ireland, 1780-1845, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), pp. 1-25

9. Ibid., pp. 24-5; L. M. Cullen, An Economic History of Ireland since 1660, (London: Batsford, 1973), pp. 99, 121-22; T. W. Freeman, Pre-Famine Ireland: A Study in Historical Geography, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1957), pp. 25-35

10. See the illuminating contemporary warning against undue reliance on the "artificial" wartime monopoly: William Greig, General Report on the Gosford Estates in County Armagh (1821), (reprint: Belfast: HMSO, 1976), pp. 106-13



then codified by the Corn Laws. Nor were Irish incentives lacking, for the financial bounties offered by Foster's Corn Law, passed by the Irish Parliament in 1784, were underscored by the final collapse of the Irish monopoly of the provision trade in salt-beef and pork during the last two decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> It must be emphasised, however, that it was the squeeze between the principal factors of agrarian production, land and labour-power, which was the primary factor in the growth of the tillage economy.

The most graphic illustration of the expansion of tillage can be found in the import-export ledgers. In the five years down to 1758, Ireland imported some 20,000 tons of corn and meal annually; in the five years ending on January 5, 1818, Ireland exported an annual average of 118,000 tons of flour, corn and meal.<sup>12</sup> The main tillage crops were corn (used generically to mean wheat, oats and barley), flax and potatoes. With the crucial exception of the potato, these products were grown for the market, especially for the focal market in England.<sup>13</sup> Annual exports of oats doubled five times between 1783 and 1833, rising to a peak of more than 375,000 tons per annum in the mid-1830s.<sup>14</sup>

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11. Cullen, Anglo-Irish Trade, pp. 68-74; Cullen, Economic History, pp. 54-9, 95-6

12. Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, p. 19; Cullen, Anglo-Irish Trade, pp. 120-21; D. A. Chart, "Two Centuries of Irish Agriculture: A Statistical Retrospect", JSSISI, XII, (1908), pp. 162-74

13. But, note also that in 1845, "two-thirds of total output was consumed at home": J. Lee, "Irish Agriculture", Agricultural History Review, XVII, (1969), pp. 64-76

14. Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, Table 65A, p. 276

The pinnacle of almost half a million tons of grain exports, reached in the years 1835-39, represented an advance of 215 per cent within twenty years.<sup>15</sup>

The most important expansion of the area under the plough seems to have occurred in two phases -- during the 1770s and again during the continental wars,<sup>16</sup> The prices of Irish agricultural products fell sharply in the immediate post-war period (1816-21),<sup>17</sup> but the continued growth of the rural population, particularly in the numbers of cottiers tied to the potato-subsistence base, fuelled the continuing expansion in the volume of exports. The parallel growth of exports and output, especially during the three decades down to the Famine, was largely accomplished without a commensurate increase in the acreage under the plough. Furthermore, although there was room for more intensive cultivation of grains, principally through more efficient employment of the ample supply of labour-power, Irish

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15. F. J. Carney, "Pre-Famine Irish Population: The Evidence from the Trinity College Estates", Irish Economic & Social History, II, (1975), p. 36n; cf., Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, p. 276; P. M. Austin Bourke, "The Irish Grain Trade, 1839-48", IHS, XX, (1978), pp. 159-69, esp. Table 3, p. 168; James S. Donnelly, Jr., The Land & People of Nineteenth Century Cork: The Rural Economy & The Land Question, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 31-3

16. Arthur Young, A Tour in Ireland, 1776-79, (2 vols., reprint: Shannon: Irish University Press, 1970), ii, pp. 157-91; Greig, General Report, p. 109

17. The price declines were particularly steep between 1818 and 1822. More generally, for the period 1815-45, grain prices were about 10 per cent and animal product prices about 20 per cent below their wartime levels. Cullen, Economic History, pp. 100-2; Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, pp. 281-87

agriculture remained generally backward, particularly in the technical sphere.<sup>18</sup> The essential feature of the final phase of the tillage system was that the widespread cultivation of potatoes freed a large proportion of grain production for the domestic and export markets.<sup>19</sup>

The potato was the fundamental tillage crop. Yet it never appeared in the main commercial ledgers, but it came to symbolise the whole tillage system and to lead to its ultimate downfall. The potato served, partly at least, as a substitute for wages, as the staple nourishment for a large majority of the labourers and small tenants who grew and harvested the cash crops (mainly barley and oats) which paid their rents. In the northern counties, where flax was an essential crop for thousands of small-holding tenants, supplying the raw material for their looms, the connection between employment, income and the potato was recognised quite explicitly, especially in retrospect.<sup>20</sup> In

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18. During the pre-Famine period, over most of the country, the main agricultural tools were the wooden plough and the hand sickle.. Although iron ploughs were adopted in parts of the north and in the prime grain-growing areas near Dublin shortly after their introduction in the 1810s, the more advanced, steam-powered threshing and winnowing machines were not widely employed until after the Famine. See E. R. R. Green, The Lagan Valley, 1800-50: A Local History of the Industrial Revolution, (London: Faber & Faber, 1949), pp. 128-31; E. R. R. Green, "Agriculture" in Edwards & Williams, Great Famine, p. 100; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 19, 31, 37-9

19. This is clearly indicated in the correlation between temporary declines in grain exports and partial failures of the potato harvest: Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 32-3

20. W. Charley, a Belfast linen manufacturer, explained both low wages and the delayed introduction of machinery in the linen industry by reference to the weavers' potato-gardens: Flax & Its Products in Ireland (1862), cited by Conrad Gill, The Rise of the Irish Linen Industry, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), p. 328

the rest of the country, in the absence of cash employment at the loom, the potato was the foundation-stone of the domestic economy of the growing number of small tenants. In contrast with flax, the potato occupied vast amounts of land. By the 1840s, on the most reliable estimates, potatoes were grown on between 2 and 2.5 million acres -- on almost one-sixth of the cultivated land, and on the enormous proportion of one-third of all the tilled land.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, the overall expansion of tillage occurred at the expense of land which had formerly been left to pasture, as well as through the use of poorer lands in the bogs and on the mountain-sides which were "reclaimed" for the potato. Arthur Young was particularly outraged, in the 1770s, by the breaking up of grasslands, demanding "ought you to turn some of the finest pastures in the world . . . into the most execrable tillage that is to be found on the face of the globe?"<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, the conversion of pasture to tillage did not mean that cattle-raising had ceased, for even at the greatest extent of the tillage system in the 1830s and 1840s, more than half of the land in agricultural use in Ireland was still under grass.<sup>23</sup> The long-term trend which had

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21. See the important debate on this issue in the following -- P. M. A. Bourke, "The Extent of the Potato Crop in Ireland at the time of the Famine", JSSISI, XX, pt. iii, (1959-60), pp. 1-35; Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, Appendix Note III, "The pre-Famine Potato Acreage", pp. 308-18; Lee, "Irish Agriculture", pp. 65-71

22. Young, Tour, ii, p. 186

23. See above, note 21

commenced in the last quarter of the eighteenth century ran explicitly towards the extinction of the provision trade. In its place, Irish farmers laid the foundations for their later rise to power, by shifting away from fat and dead cattle towards rearing stores, young cattle of up to two or three years, raised for fattening elsewhere (including the grasslands of England). This change of emphasis began before 1800, and while resistance on both sides of the Irish Sea delayed the development of a trade in stores, by the 1830s Ireland was exporting some 100,000 head of live cattle each year.<sup>24</sup>

The other elements in the pastoral sector may be briefly summarised. Irish dairying, down to the last decades of the nineteenth century, was conducted as a cottage industry, frequently on the most primitive basis. The "herd", as the dairyman was often called, usually rented both his cows and their pasture, and his holding seldom amounted to more than a mere handful of cows. The butter was made as the milk was collected, over a period of several weeks in separate batches of uneven quality, heavily salted (as much as ten per cent salt by weight), packed in small barrels (firkins of between 56 and 70 lbs.), and sold through the Butter Market in Cork City. Increased output of butter

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24. Cullen, Anglo-Irish Trade, pp. 69-74; Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, Table 65B, p. 277; and the Second Report . . . on a System of Railways for Ireland, 1837-38, (145), xxxv, p. 492 (hereafter cited as Drummond). By 1846-48, the annual figure for live cattle exports had doubled again, to just under 200,000 head: Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, Ireland Before the Famine, 1798-1848, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1972), p. 136

during the tillage period did not signify modernisation of the dairying process, but only that it was more widespread -- there were more small dairymen on more small grazing lots.<sup>25</sup>

The importance of the pig was even more fundamental. The growth of the human and pig populations in Ireland proceeded in tandem. The pig's great virtue was that it could be reared as a marketable commodity without requiring the major capital investment called for by tillage and young cattle. The pig was raised on forage and surplus potatoes on the cottier's plot; and on the somewhat larger holding of the small farmer, the pig was reared on the skim milk from dairying. Like linen and butter, pork production was a small-scale domestic industry.<sup>26</sup>

The structural significance of these developments in the agrarian economy -- the shift from pasture to tillage and the change of emphasis within the pastoral sector from beef-cattle to stores, dairying and pig-rearing -- was manifold. In the first instance, the expansion of the area under the plough, in a period of almost entirely manual, unmechanised farming, called for a growing supply of rural labour. Tillage generated employment also in the ancillary industries which it

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25. James S. Donnelly, Jr., "Cork Market: Its Role in the Nineteenth Century Irish Butter Trade", Studia Hibernica, XI, (1971), pp. 130-63; John O'Donovan, The Economic History of Live Stock in Ireland, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1940)

26. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 39-40, 42-3; Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, pp. 16-17; O'Donovan, Live Stock, pp. 190ff.

tended to encourage, such as milling, transportation and brewing and distilling.<sup>27</sup> Although the decline of the provision trade caused some unemployment, the coopers at least were sustained by the growing demand from the brewers, distillers and butter producers. The unequal distribution of the wealth generated by the early tillage boom left some concrete remains. The rural mansions, the canals, the urban squares and terraces and public buildings which the ruling class built during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and which "still stand as memorials to their wealth, their taste and their sense of power and security",<sup>28</sup> all required labour. Nevertheless, the main form of the contradiction which beset the tillage economy was the widening gap between these employment opportunities and the rate of population increase in the countryside.

The connection between employment, wages, subsistence

27. Arthur Young remarked that the corn-mill at Slane, county Meath was "such as no mill I have seen in England can be compared with"; but whilst its annual capacity was about 120 tons, it only employed a dozen full-time workers. (Tour, i, pp. 44-6) Young also lamented the spate of canal-building, on the grounds that the bounties paid for the inland carriage of corn encouraged wasteful (i.e., labour-intensive) use of men and horses, at a much higher cost than coastal shipping would have incurred. (Tour, ii, pp. 179-82). On the canals, see W. A. McCutcheon, The Canals of the North of Ireland, (London: Dawlish, 1965); V. T. H. & D. R. Delany, The Canals of the South of Ireland, (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1966); Ruth Delany, The Grand Canal of Ireland, (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973). On the most successful Irish brewery, see Patrick Lynch & John Vaizey, Guinness's Brewery in the Irish Economy, 1759-1876, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

28. J. C. Beckett, The Anglo-Irish Tradition, (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), p. 66; cf., J. G. Simms, Colonial Nationalism, 1698-1776, (Cork: Mercier Press for the Cultural Relations Committee of Ireland, 1976)

and rapid population growth may be recast. It is clear that the shift to tillage and the population explosion coincided temporally. It is more difficult to assign cause and effect, although strong circumstantial evidence points to population increase as the principal causal factor.<sup>29</sup> The class form of the question can be asserted with a lot more assurance. The potato and the pig, and in Ulster, the hand-loom, were the visible signs of the proletarianisation of Irish rural society. This process rested on two very insecure foundations: the blight-prone potato and the land-tenure system. The latter was the crucial set of property relations which governed the class contradictions in the countryside. Access to the land was the fundamental question. Even though the class structure came increasingly to appear as a confrontation between rapacious landowners and impoverished tenants, the situation was more complex. In order to bring the picture into sharper focus, it is necessary to examine the conditions facing each of the main classes in greater detail. For instance, the landowners' alleged rapacity was constrained by political as well as economic considerations. More

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29. The indispensable, brilliant, pioneering work on Irish demographic problems is that of the late K. H. Connell -- The Population of Ireland, 1780-1845; Irish Peasant Society, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); : "Land & Population in Ireland, 1780-1845", EcHR, 2nd series, II, (1950), pp. 278-89; "The Potato in Ireland", Past & Present, 22, (1962), pp. 57-71. Naturally, some of Connell's theses have been subject to critical re-examination; see, for instance, L. M. Cullen, "Irish History without the potato", Past & Present, 40, (1968), pp. 72-83; Michael Drake, "Marriage & Population Growth in Ireland, 1750-1845", EcHR, 2nd series, XVI, (1963), pp. 301-13; Joseph Lee, "Marriage & Population in pre-Famine Ireland", EcHR, 2nd series, XXI, (1968), pp. 283-95



fundamentally, of course, there were significant class distinctions among the ranks of the tenants, and these cleavages gave rise to important, and often violent, class conflicts which pitted cottiers against farmers. The remaining sections of this chapter will analyse this rural class structure in more detail.

### The Big House: Aspects of Landlordism

Between 1815 and 1845, parliamentary commissioners, travellers and resident observers, bishops and economists returned the unanimous verdict that there was a crisis afoot in the Irish countryside. What particularly caught their attention, and it was repeated often enough to make almost tedious reading, was the glaring discrepancy between the evidence which could be adduced to prove the general improvement in the country's wealth and the manifest squalor and misery of the growing ranks of the "labouring poor". The specific diagnoses varied, but some common themes tended to recur. The land system was cited as the over-riding problem. Its principal deficiencies were said to be absentee landowners, rackrenting middlemen and idle peasants. The landowners were despots whose oppression of the peasantry caused the outrages which, in turn, created the conditions of insecurity which deterred capital accumulation and investment.<sup>30</sup> In

30. The first half of this sentence is Arthur Young's view (Tour, i, pp. 81-4, 398-99, ii, pp. 55-6); the second half, Nassau Senior's (Journals, i, pp. 33-45).

this composite view, another major problem was the absence of a middle class, a mediating social buffer between the landowning Ascendancy and the Catholic Irish helotry. While this picture, in its overwhelming bleakness, will need some serious modification, its general outline may be taken as a useful point of departure for treating the central contradiction between those who owned the land and those who occupied and worked on the land.

In the 1770s, Arthur Young estimated that some 95 per cent of the land in Ireland was in the hands of about five thousand mostly Protestant landlords.<sup>31</sup> A large majority of the landowners were of English, Scottish and Anglo-Irish descent (a small minority of the original Gaelic landowning families had managed to hold onto their property). The Ascendancy's title to the land was violent expropriation; they were the beneficiaries of the great land confiscations and grants which had followed the conquests in the seventeenth century, and their possession had been confirmed, compounded and rationalised by the anti-Catholic penal legislation of the eighteenth century. The second half of the eighteenth century had been the Ascendancy's heyday, when they had felt secure enough in their possession of property and power to build the graceful mansions and demesne parks which have recently been described as "strong points of a class spread in a close network . . . that explicit social declaration: a mutually competitive but still

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31. Young, Tour, ii, p. 59

uniform exposition, at every turn, of an established and commanding class power".<sup>32</sup>

The extent of the class power of the Protestant Ascendancy can be stated quite briefly. As landowners, they held legislative, executive, judicial, military and administrative authority. They elected representatives from among themselves to legislate in their collective interest. They made up the grand juries in the counties, which had administrative and taxing authority as well as judicial functions. They commanded the armed forces of the state, regular and militia. They were justices of the peace. Most of all, they owned the land which was the indispensable condition of life for the vast bulk of the people. Finally, it must be added that the class abyss between the landowners and the tenants appeared to be completely unspanned, and even unbridgeable, throughout most of the country, since they confronted one another across barriers of religion, culture and even language.<sup>33</sup>

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32. Raymond Williams, The Country & The City, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 105, 106 - Williams' primary reference is to England, but the point holds true for Ascendancy Ireland.

33. This point must be qualified. In the first place, and leaving aside the necessary allowances for self-congratulatory delusions, Ascendancy memoirs for this period suggest that the gap was often bridged by quasi-feudal relations of obligation and deference. See the examples cited by Constantia Maxwell, Country & Town in Ireland under the Georges, (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1949), pp. 179-84, and the scathing remarks on "inward thralldom", implied by these relations, in O'Faolain, King of the Beggars, pp. 144-47. On the other side of the coin, shared religion, culture and language, as in Ulster, did not prevent outbursts of open class conflict, especially over tithes and county cess (tax). See W. H. Crawford and B. Trainor, Aspects of Irish Social History, 1750-1800, (Belfast: HMSO, 1973), pp. 34-48

Among the charges levelled at the landlords, a central issue was the alleged deleterious effects of absenteeism. From the 1720s onwards, it was commonly claimed that one in three Irish land-owners lived more or less permanently outside Ireland, and that perhaps as many again were seldom seen on their estates, preferring to live in Dublin and delegate the task of managing their property to agents.<sup>34</sup> The apparently tenuous relation between proprietor and tenant which resulted from absenteeism was deemed to have had two main effects upon Irish society. The economic problem was usually posed as a drain of revenues and a subsequent imbalance in the trade figures. This argument was rebutted in the 1830s by J. R. McCulloch, who pointed out that residence or absence made little difference in the sums which landlords spent in Ireland, since the principal items in the landlords' expenditures were debt-service charges on land mortgages and purchases of goods which were not produced in Ireland.<sup>35</sup>

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34. Jonathan Swift excoriated absentees. Lists of absentees were compiled by Thomas Prior in 1729 and 1769 and by Arthur Young in 1779 (Tour, ii, pp. 114-17). In the course of a debate in the Irish House of Commons, in 1797, Hely-Hutchinson asserted that absentee rents leaving the country amounted to £1.5 millions each year (about 20-25 per cent of the total rental value). For the best statement of the nineteenth century view of the matter, see W. E. H. Lecky, A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century, (Abridged edition, edited by L. P. Curtis, Jr.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 64-7; cf., A. P. W. Malcolmson, "Absenteeism in Eighteenth Century Ireland", Irish Economic & Social History, I, (1974), pp. 15-35

35. See Black, Economic Thought & the Irish Question, pp. 72-81; cf., Joseph Lee, "Capital in the Irish Economy", in L. M. Cullen, ed., The Formation of the Irish Economy, (Cork: Mercier Press, 1969), pp. 58-9

The other effect was the real focus of the debate on absenteeism -- the point was made most bluntly in Lecky's claim that "the moral effects of absenteeism . . . can hardly be exaggerated".<sup>36</sup> The central tenor of this moral argument was captured in McCulloch's summary. Absentees were "said to be injurious . . . because the country is deprived of the moral benefits which would have resulted from their residence, and the peasantry left to be plundered and fleeced by those who have no permanent interest in their welfare, and whose only object is to enrich themselves".<sup>37</sup> This argument was problematic on at least two levels. First, it assumed rather than analysed the "moral benefits" conferred by a resident gentry. It rested upon the unspoken claim that the landowning class represented a superior level of civilisation, that they were willing and able to promote improvements in land-use and agricultural technique, that they were calm and disinterested. Unfortunately, both the undeniable strain of brutality in the legal structures which defended the landowners' property,<sup>38</sup> and the hard-drinking, fox-hunting, spendthrift character of the Irish squireen who can be found in the literary remains of the times, tend to contradict

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36. Lecky, History, p. 65

37. Cited by Black, Economic Thought & the Irish Question, pp. 81-2

38. See E. P. Thompson, Whigs and Hunters: The Origins of the Black Act, (London: Allen Lane, 1975); Douglas Hay et al., Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime & Society in Eighteenth Century England, (New York: Random House, 1975); and, for the Irish experience of ruling class brutality under pressure, Thomas Pakenham, The Year of Liberty, (London: Fontana, 1969)

the claims for calm civilisation.<sup>39</sup>

The second problem was more serious, for the major omission in the moral argument was the practical-economic issue of whether the landowner was primarily concerned with the welfare of his tenants or the size of his rent-roll. In fact, the landowners were clearly far from disinterested. Just as the land was the basic condition of life for the tenant, so it was the principal source of the landowner's income. In theory and in practice alike, estate management was primarily concerned with maximising that rental income. It is necessary, therefore, to pursue the question of rents, in order to indicate the patterns of distribution of the surplus value realised in agriculture. This pattern, indeed, will provide a preliminary definition of the main structures of rural class relations.

The main difficulty is that a global analysis of Irish rents is a fairly speculative business. In the first place, there is simply no reliable register of rent-rolls. Secondly, even if such a thing did exist, its main use would be to indicate trends rather than absolute values, since the rents which a landowner might charge and even collect often represented only a fraction of the total amount which was being

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39. The novels and stories of Maria Edgeworth, William Carleton, John and Michael Banim are a valuable source of information and insight into rural society in pre-Famine Ireland. See Thomas Flanagan, The Irish Novelists, 1800-50, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958); Benedict Kiely, Poor Scholar: A Study of William Carleton, (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1947); Oliver MacDonagh, The Nineteenth Century Novel & Irish Social History: Some Aspects, (The O'Donnell Lecture: Dublin: National University of Ireland, 1970)

paid by the actual occupants of the land. The discrepancy stemmed from two aspects of the land system -- first, the fact that subdivision and sub-tenancy often interposed several individuals between the landowner and the working occupier of a given holding; and second, the gap between the nominal rent and the amount which tenants were willing or able to pay.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, rental levels could vary widely, according to such factors as region, fertility, proximity to markets, size of holding, the existence of a lease and the use to which the land was put. Generally speaking, cottiers paid more per acre for land taken in "conacre" than larger farmers; and grazing land tended to be more expensive than tillage.

These qualifications stated, some estimate of the movement of rents must be attempted. Arthur Young's contemporaries usually agreed with him that "no country can ever be held in a just estimation when the rental of it is unknown",<sup>41</sup> and they accordingly tried to arrive at that valuation. The series of estimates thus produced suggests that rents tripled between the 1720s and the 1770s, that they rose by another third during the last two decades of the eighteenth century, and that they

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40. One witness at the Poor Inquiry of 1836 captured the gap between will and capacity in a striking phrase: "The poor man will promise more, but the larger holder will pay more". (1836, (38), xxxiii, Appendix F, p. 92). See also the analysis of the problems of a middleman in F. S. L. Lyons, "The Vicissitudes of a Middleman in County Leitrim, 1810-27", IHS, IX, (1954-55), pp. 300-18

41. Young, Tour, ii, p. 10

doubled again during the continental wars.<sup>42</sup> Across the span of the rise of the tillage system (from the 1770s to 1815), the contemporary estimates indicate that rents rose roughly three-fold. During the same decades, the prices of all the main agricultural commodities (wheat, oats, barley, butter and beef) doubled; Cullen suggests a slightly sharper upward trend, reporting that the value of exports "at current prices, rose by 120 per cent" between 1792 and 1815.<sup>43</sup> The highest estimate of rents was Wakefield's figure of more than £17 millions in 1812; one recent study suggests that this figure is greatly inflated.<sup>44</sup> Certainly, if rents had reached this level it would imply that the landowners had gained the lion's share of the windfall profits generated by the wartime boom. But the landowners' gains must not be exaggerated for, as

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42. The series is as follows (in pounds sterling per annum):

1724:	2,000,000	(Swift, <u>Drapier's Letters</u> )
1777:	6,000,000	(Young, <u>Tour in Ireland</u> )
1800:	8,000,000	(Mulhall, <u>Dictionary of Statistics</u> )
1809:	15,300,000	(Newenham, <u>View of Ireland</u> )
1812:	17,200,000	(Wakefield, <u>Account of Ireland</u> )

These figures are variously cited by Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, p. 294; Cullen, Economic History, pp. 83, 112-13; L. M. Cullen, "Problems in the Interpretation of Eighteenth Century Irish Economic History", Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, XVII, (1967), pp. 1-22. Another estimate, which Crotty apparently accepts, suggests that rents rose four-fold between 1760 and 1815: J. E. Cairnes, Political Essays (1873), cited by Maxwell, Country & Town, p. 136; Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, pp. 23, 306

43. Cullen, Economic History, p. 100; other price series may be found in Cullen, Anglo-Irish Trade, pp. 53-74; Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, Tables 67-8, pp. 282-84

44. Cormac Ó Gráda, "Agricultural Head Rents, Pre-Famine and Post-Famine", Economic & Social Review, V, (1973-4), pp. 385-92. Ó Gráda suggests that head rents, in 1845, were probably no higher than £12 millions, well below Crotty's adoption of Wakefield's figure.



we shall see, even the greatest landed families found themselves in financial difficulties.

Recent research in the accounts of the Irish landowners suggests that the rate of increase in rental values was considerably below that which the Wakefield-Crotty estimate would indicate. One survey of the finances of the great magnates, owners of some of the largest estates, found that the general trend was for rents to double between the 1770s and the war years;<sup>45</sup> in the somewhat distinctive conditions obtaining in the north, rents rose faster and earlier.<sup>46</sup> It must be remarked that Irish tillage was a generally inflationary economy, set in the context of rising land values throughout Britain,<sup>47</sup> and so the rising demand for agricultural produce and thus for arable land, spurred on by population growth and competition for land in lieu of employment, would have ensured that rents at least kept pace with the twofold rise in prices. Therefore, it should be suggested that while Cullen's claim that "rents can hardly have doubled between 1778 and 1815" is probably too conservative,<sup>48</sup> the central conclusion would be

45. David Large, "The Wealth of the Greater Irish Landowners, 1780-1815", IHS, XV, (1966), pp. 21-47

46. W. A. Maguire, The Downshire Estates in Ireland, 1800-45, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 28-46; W. H. Crawford, "Landlord-Tenant Relations in Ulster, 1609-1820", Irish Economic & Social History, II, (1975), pp. 5-22. The crucial distinction in the north was the diffusion of flax cultivation and the domestic linen industry, which made small farming more resilient than elsewhere in Ireland.

47. Large, "Wealth of Landowners", pp. 28-9; F. M. L. Thompson, English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963)

48. Cullen, Economic History, pp. 112-13

that landowners did indeed enjoy a substantial share of the profits generated by the rising tillage economy. The total amount of head rents, for the period from 1815 to 1845, should be estimated at about £12 millions -- the more significant calculation suggests that this sum represented at least 25 per cent of the total output of the agrarian economy and fully 40 per cent of the disposable money income of the country.<sup>49</sup>

What did the landowners do with their income? At first, the question may be posed polemically. Did they use it to fulfil the task for which they were allegedly ordained: the improvement of the condition of the land, its occupants and their agricultural techniques? How much did the landowners spend? What impact did their expenditures have on the state of society? Most succinctly, the bare fact is that the landowners did not live up to the expectations of the theorists such as Young and Senior.<sup>50</sup> It was unusual for the landlord to spend large sums on his Irish estate. Even such enlightened owners as Lords Gosford and Downshire, in the north, spent less than ten per cent of their gross rental income on improvements. On the larger

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49. Ó Gráda, "Agricultural Head Rents", p. 389; the same total, and the proportional calculations, were indicated by Joseph Lee, in an unpublished paper on "Landlordism & Economic Development", presented at the 1978 annual meeting of the American Committee for Irish Studies.

50. This failure of the landlords played a part in the apparently vindictive spirit with which they were reproached during the Famine years by such notable opponents of "levelling" as The Times and Sir Robert Peel: see the comments in Woodham-Smith, Great Hunger, and in Pádraig G. Lane, "The Encumbered Estates Court, Ireland, 1848-49", Economic & Social Review, III, (1971-2), pp. 413-53

southern estates, the proportion was usually smaller, between 4 and 8 per cent. Finally, the owners of small estates, working with smaller margins of profit, were the least likely to engage in large-scale improvement.<sup>51</sup> At first glance, the achievements of the improving landlords were impressive. They erected fences and drained wet lands; they built houses, barns and byres for their more solvent tenants; they introduced new breeding and stocking methods and new systems of crop-rotation; some built factories, breweries, quarries, harbours and even entire villages.<sup>52</sup> But improving landlords were always in a minority, and during the post-war recession, when price-levels tumbled and rents became increasingly difficult to collect, even the most progressive landowners found their vocation prohibitively expensive.

The fiscal problems of the landowners were real enough. Although the revenues of the great magnates were enormous,<sup>53</sup> they also faced huge outlays. One source of the chaos which entered the landowners' finances was "the style to which they had become accustomed".

Gracious living in stately homes, smuggled wines and brandy, a large

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51. Maguire, Downshire Estates, pp. 76-8; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 66-7; Large, "Wealth of Landowners", pp. 29, 33-4; and for improvements during the more prosperous period towards the end of the eighteenth century, Maxwell, Country & Town, pp. 188-96

52. Young, Tour, i, passim; Maxwell, Country & Town, p. 193, cites the "exceptional" case of Colonel Hugh Boyd of Ballycastle, county Antrim, who built an inn, a brewery, a soap and salt factory, a tannery, a bleach yard, a colliery and a harbour, creating three hundred jobs.

53. Large, "Wealth of Landowners"; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 67n.

retinue of servants, the maintenance of a stable and a pack of hounds, political campaigns for contested seats, frequent travels to London and Europe all ate up large amounts. The principal outlays, however, arose out of the aristocratic kinship system, which required the settlement of dowries upon eligible daughters and sisters and substantial incomes upon dowager mothers and aunts. These obligations frequently, and increasingly during the decades down to the Famine, outran the liquid assets of the estate. But they still had to be met, and they were the main cause of the high level of debts on Irish estates.<sup>54</sup>

Eloquent testimony to the relative insecurity of Irish landed property may be seen in the fact that the English capital market usually charged higher rates of interest on Irish than on English mortgages.<sup>55</sup> By the time the tillage system fell into disarray under the impact of the Famine, the encumbrances on Irish estates had reached serious proportions. In 1844, the courts of Chancery, Exchequer and Equity held £904,000 worth of land (by rental value) for prospective sale to meet creditors' notes. The total increased to between £1 and £1.3 millions in 1847 and finally topped £2 millions in 1849.<sup>56</sup> In other words, up to one-sixth of the land, measured again in terms of rental

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54. Large, "Wealth of Landowners", pp. 37-42; Maguire, Downshire Estates, pp. 65, 83-94

55. Maguire, Downshire Estates, p. 99

56. James S. Donnelly, Jr., Landlord & Tenant in Nineteenth Century Ireland, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1973), p. 18; Lane, "Encumbered Estates Court", pp. 425, 432

value, had become so deeply indebted as to have passed out of the hands of its nominal owners. Even so-called solvent estates were hardly less burdened -- during the 1847 debate on famine relief, Lord Mountcashel told the House of Lords that fully 80 per cent of the gross rental income of Ireland was swallowed up by debt-service charges!<sup>57</sup>

Supposing, for the moment, that the landowners' finances had been on a sounder footing, there still remained two main obstacles between their will and their capacity to effect the changes which might have led to the capitalisation of Irish agriculture on the English model.<sup>58</sup> In the first place, the English and Irish land systems were sharply distinguished on the question of the precise constitution of the landlord's obligations.<sup>59</sup> In 1845, the Report of the Devon Commission summarised the general opinion:

It is admitted on all hands that, according to the general practice in Ireland, the landlord neither builds dwelling-houses nor farm-houses, nor puts fences, gates, etc., in good order before he lets his land to a tenant. The cases where the landlord does any of these things are the exceptions . . . In most cases, whatever is done in the way

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57. Cited by Woodham-Smith, Great Hunger, p. 294. According to de Tocqueville (cited by Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, p. 19), Lord Kingston's debts were astonishing -- £400,000 against an annual rental income of £40,000!

58. See Lane, "Encumbered Estates Court", pp. 418-23, 442-48; W. L. Burn, "Free Trade in Land: An Aspect of the Irish Question", Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, XXXI, (1949), pp. 61-74; Black, Economic Thought & the Irish Question, pp. 14-40

59. Thomas Drummond, Under-Secretary at Dublin Castle and author of the Railway Report, defined the issue in his justly famous retort to the Tipperary landlords, that they would need fewer coercion measures if they recalled that property had its duties as well as its rights.

of building and fencing is done by the tenant; and, in the ordinary language of the country, dwelling-houses, farm-buildings, and even the making of fences, are described by the general word of "improvements", which is thus employed to denote the necessary adjuncts without which, in England or Scotland, no tenant could be found to rent it.<sup>60</sup>

The Commissioners added that the evidence which they had collected was "unfortunately too uniform in representing the unimproved state of extensive districts".<sup>61</sup>

The second, and more fundamental, problem was that even the improving landowners faced an uphill battle. The value of some of the improvements which were undertaken, particularly during the three decades after 1815, was doubtful at best. This was especially true in the case of the "reclamation" of waste land. Reclaimed land tended to be bog and mountain and, generally speaking, of only marginal value to the production of the main cash crops. A young officer in the Ordnance Survey, Lieutenant John Chayter, left a graphic description of the process of reclamation as it was carried out around Enniskillen in the north-west in the 1820s. "Labouring peasants", he explained, "get as much mountain gratis as they can break up and cultivate for three successive years, when it reverts to the landlord, who either takes it

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60. Report from H. M. Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of the Law and Practice in respect to the Occupation of Land in Ireland, 1845, (605), xix, p. 26. This is the Devon Report (hereafter cited as such), a mine of information on all aspects of the land question on the eve of the Famine.

61. Ibid., p. 16

into his own hand or lets it to someone who is able to pay him a rent, or as is often done, takes a crop of oats off it and again lays it out in pasture. The peasant then selects another spot whereon to commence his heartless labour, again builds a similar cot, thus living and rearing a family from year to year in abject poverty and wretchedness".<sup>62</sup> The main danger in this sort of reclamation was that it tended to exacerbate the underlying problem of the "surplus rural population", since the reclaimed land was frequently suitable only for growing potatoes. The result was that where landowners (or farmers) were able to consolidate small, subdivided holdings into more solvent units on better land, more of the poorest squatters, cottiers and under-tenants were crowded onto the worst land, in the bogs and up the mountain sides.<sup>63</sup>

While the progress of estate-improvement, whether in the form of direct assistance to the stronger tenantry or of reclamation of wastes, tended to be constantly undercut by the rising level of poverty among the rural masses, some important achievements were made during the pre-Famine decades. Landlord assistance to the stronger farmers was a significant direct contribution towards their later advances. The main improvement effected during the tillage era

62. Cited by J. H. Andrews, A Paper Landscape: The Ordnance Survey in Nineteenth Century Ireland, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 151

63. The evidence on reclamation is discussed by K. H. Connell, "The Colonisation of Waste Land in Ireland, 1780-1845", EcHR, 2nd series, III, (1950), pp. 44-71; the bulk of the evidence was collected by the Devon Commission, 1845, (605, 606, 616, 657, 672-3), xix-xxii.

occurred on a more systematic level; it too served the interests of the stronger farmers, if less immediately. This was the foundation of the infrastructure for commercial agriculture.

The last quarter of the eighteenth century was the formative period for canal-building, which was financed by private subscription and state investment. The Grand and Royal Canals, running westward from Dublin, the Barrow Navigation in the south-east, and the Newry and Lagan Canals which opened up the linen-making areas west of Belfast, were all in operation before the end of the century.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, and in similar fashion, by private investment and through the levying of county cess (property taxes) by the grand juries, turnpike and public roads were built and widened to accommodate the growing volume of traffic in goods carts and passenger coaches.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, drainage and harbour construction projects initiated by improving landowners were often assisted by loans and grants furnished by the Board of Public Works, from its establishment in 1831.<sup>66</sup> These

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64. See the histories of the canals, cited above, note 27. Also -- Freeman, Pre-Famine Ireland, pp. 116-24; R. R. Kane, The Industrial Resources of Ireland (1844), (reprint: Shannon: Irish University Press, 1971), pp. 351-63; Cullen, Economic History, pp. 88-9. The Newry Canal was opened in 1742, making that town an important inland port (whose former glory can still be read in the warehouses lining the canal in the centre of the town) long before the rise of Belfast.

65. Freeman, Pre-Famine Ireland, pp. 109-16; Green, Lagan Valley, pp. 39-51; Ivor J. Herring, "Ulster Roads on the eve of the Railway Age, c. 1800-40", IHS, II, (1940), pp. 160-88; J. H. Andrews, "Road Planning in Ireland before the Railway Age", Irish Geography, V, (1964), pp. 17-41

66. Connell, "Colonisation of Waste Land"; Black, Economic Thought & the Irish Question, pp. 159-202; and the Reports of the Board of Public Works, Ireland, e.g., First, 1835, (537), xx, and Fifth, 1837, (243), xxxiii; and Devon, passim



expanding facilities for the distribution and sale of agricultural produce were buttressed by the provision, also in the late eighteenth century, of bounties for the inland carriage of corn.<sup>67</sup>

In summary, then, it should be said that the economic activity of both the landowners and their state, especially in the creation of the first major Irish transport networks, was of signal importance for the development of the tillage economy. Both the basic structures and the commercial system which they had fostered adapted easily and rapidly to the post-Famine switch towards pastoral production. But the critical failure in all this pre-Famine economic activity was the absence of a commensurate capital investment in industrial enterprise. The fundamentally agrarian character of the Irish economy was firmly established before the Famine.<sup>68</sup>

An adequate composite picture of the position of the landowners in the pre-Famine rural class structure must take into account the balance between their undoubted powers and the equally real constraints upon their exercise of those powers. For instance, during

67. Young, Tour, esp. ii, pp. 157-70; Cullen, Economic History, pp. 96-7

68. The most thorough survey of the Irish economy, with particular emphasis on the problems of industry, was conducted by the Railway Commissioners: Drummond, passim, esp. Appendices A, B, pp. 724-825. Also, Kane, Industrial Resources; Freeman, Pre-Famine Ireland, pp. 74-106; Cullen, Economic History, pp. 105-9; 122-29; and the essays by Lee on "Capital" and "The Railways" and by Green on "Industrial Decline", in Cullen, ed., Formation, pp. 53-64, 77-100; Black, Economic Thought & the Irish Question, pp. 178-89

the first half of the nineteenth century, the Imperial parliament passed several acts which were explicitly aimed at enhancing the landowners' property rights , by easing the prosecution of eviction and by imposing strict limits upon subdivision. Yet evictions remained generally difficult to carry through and infrequent, while sub-tenancy became more common.

The contrast appears more sharply in the discrepancy between the myth of the rapacious rack-renter and the actuality of landlord assistance to the productive farmers. The main limits on the powers of the landowners were structural -- their own frequently parlous financial condition and their alienation from most of the society over which they presided. They failed to live up to the expectations of the economic theorists, that they should clear the land and install English-style capitalist agriculture, for the very simple reason that they were largely incapable of doing so. The other calls on their income, for personal expenses, for costly litigation,<sup>69</sup> for family jointures and for capital-debts, comprised the financial aspect of their difficulties. The politics of the matter hinged on the landlords' preference for peace over "agrarian outrage", a combination of noblesse oblige and incomprehension of the "natives", which had the practical

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69. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 69-70. Cf., the fascinating and detailed account of her own family's lengthy legal travails in struggle over the title to properties in county Cork, in Elizabeth Bowen, Bowen's Court, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948)

result of failing to halt the advance of subdivision and, more significantly, of the growing ranks of the final sub-tenants, the cottier-proletarians. Underlying both the financial and political problems, the crucial factor was the economic structure of the tillage economy, especially as it was reflected in the class structure. The landowners may have had the formal powers and the moral responsibility for Irish rural society, but their practical authority over the everyday world of production was greatly limited by the central core of the property relations on the land. As proprietors, letting to tenants who carried on the bulk of the actual production, the landowners had effectively ceded a large measure of their direct power. It required a social disaster on the order of the Famine to enable the landowners to re-organise their own position, if only to create a temporary breathing-space before the climactic storm of the Land War.

#### The Condition of the Working Class in Ireland in 1844

Between the 1770s and the Famine, the population of Ireland increased by at least 100 per cent.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, this register of resident

70. Connell, Population of Ireland, p. 25, suggests these figures:

1781 . . .	4,048,000
1791 . . .	4,753,000
1821 . . .	6,802,000*
1831 . . .	7,767,000*
1841 . . .	8,175,000*

(\*: Census returns). Cf., Freeman, Pre-Famine Ireland, Table I, p. 15, for a slightly different series of estimates of eighteenth century population.

population understated the extent of the increase, since some 1,175,000 people emigrated from Ireland before the Famine.<sup>71</sup> While the industrial revolution in England witnessed rapid growth in the urban population, the same period in Ireland was characterised by industrial decline and by a generally stagnant urban population. The great bulk of the population increase during the tillage period was concentrated on the land.<sup>72</sup> The outcome may be read in the Census of 1841, which recorded that fully 85 per cent of the population resided outside the "urban settlements" (defined as a minimum of 1,500 inhabitants). A more accurate measure was provided by the classification of families by occupation. Two-thirds of all families were principally dependent upon agriculture, and more than half of the 3.4 million individuals whose occupations were registered were engaged in agriculture. The latter figure is an underestimate since it excludes 700,000 people who were listed as "textile workers": both the declining woollen industry and the linen trade in the north were still predominantly domestic industries in the 1840s, providing employment and income for small-farming tenants at the hand-loom and for their wives carding and spinning

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71. W. F. Adams, Ireland and Irish Emigration to the New World from 1815 to the Famine, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), esp., Appendix, pp. 410-28; Connell, Population of Ireland, p. 29; Black, Economic Thought & the Irish Question, pp. 203-35. Another source of under-statement in the Census figures is the fact that the enumeration was conducted during the summer, when the migratory workers would have been away on the harvests in England and Scotland.

72. Cullen, Economic History, pp. 84-7, 118-22; Connell, Population of Ireland, pp. 37, 90

the yarn.<sup>73</sup> Taken together, the Census categories of "agriculture" and "textiles" accounted for more than 70 per cent of the employed population in 1841.<sup>74</sup>

There can be no doubt that the bulk of the population increase was not only rural but also concentrated at the bottom of the social scale.<sup>75</sup> Most briefly stated, the growth of the population during the tillage period constituted the creation of a large, very cheap,<sup>76</sup> and miserable rural proletariat, comprising cottiers, squatters, sub-tenants on very small holdings, the unemployed and the beggars, bound labourers and landless day-labourers, and a large body of migratory farm workers. The living conditions of this class, particularly during

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73. In 1776, Arthur Young visited the northern linen districts, and remarked that weavers "are in general very bad farmers" and that "the farms are very small, being nothing but patches for the convenience of the weavers"; Tour, i, p. 148, ii, pp. 205-17. By 1840, the weavers' conditions had greatly deteriorated: see Reports of the Assistant Commissioners (Otway & Muggeridge), 1840, (43-II), xxiii, pp. 435-644; Gill, Irish Linen Industry; Green, Lagan Valley; and W, H, Crawford, Domestic Industry in Ireland: The Experience of the Linen Industry, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1972). It is noteworthy that, as late as 1870, the Poor Law Inspectors reported that the only industry worth mentioning in wide areas of north-western Ireland was domestic textile production: 1870, (35), xiv, pp. 1-34

74. Census of Ireland, 1841, (Dublin: Thoms, 1843), pp. xvii-xxvii and Appendix; cf., the detailed discussion by Freeman, Pre-Famine Ireland, pp. 56-8, 74-8

75. Connell, Population of Ireland, passim.

76. Caveat emptor: "cheap" refers specifically to rural labour-power. Irish trade unions, particularly among the skilled workers in Dublin, were notoriously combative in the pre-Famine decades. As a result, wages in Dublin were equal to or higher than those in England. See the Report & Evidence of the Select Committee on Combination of Workmen, 1837-38, (646), viii, pp. 315ff; J. Dunsmore Clarkson, Labour & Nationalism in Ireland, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925), pp. 58-125

the years of decline down to the Famine, must be described in a single word -- squalid. The classical orthodoxy was captured by the doyen of nationalist economic historians, George O'Brien, in the remark that "the agricultural population of Ireland remained as poor as ever -- or rather, grew poorer from year to year".<sup>77</sup> This blanket assertion requires some fundamental qualifications, for the most basic reason that the concept "agricultural population" clearly masks significant class divisions. Even on its own terms, O'Brien's definition is faulty, since a score of parliamentary inquiries produced plenty of evidence of growing wealth in the agrarian economy; indeed, the constant expansion of agricultural output suggests that the economy was not entirely bankrupt. The critical point, overlooked by O'Brien, was the unequal distribution of the wealth. It is this class question which must be brought to the fore.

On each of the most important dimensions -- housing, clothing, nutrition, wages, employment -- the conditions of the labouring classes in the Irish countryside were atrocious. The evidence to substantiate this proposition may be found in the series of parliamentary reports on "the condition of the labouring poor" and on the more general question of the recurrently troublesome "state of Ireland".

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77. George O'Brien, Economic History of Ireland from the Union to the Famine, (London: Longmans, Green, 1921), p. 222. But cf., the revised version in Cullen, Economic History, pp. 100-33 passim, and the useful summary by Ó Tuathaigh, Ireland Before the Famine, Chapter 4.

One useful starting point, among so many, is the housing figures in the 1841 Census data. The commissioners divided Irish housing into four broad categories. (The first two need not detain us here). The third and fourth classes, comprising respectively 37 and 40 per cent of the total, were described in bare outline. "In the lowest or fourth class, were comprised all mud cabins having only one room; in the third, a better description of cottage, still built of mud, but varying from two to four rooms and windows".<sup>78</sup> Assuming only a simple correspondence between houses and population, which is certainly an under-estimate, these mud "houses" were home to some six million people out of a total population of over eight millions. The bald Census description must be fleshed out with the salient features, particularly with regard to the fourth class "houses". These mud cabins were easily built, frequently completed and occupied within a couple of days. The floor was the ground; a good roof would be thatched (often the roof was no more than sods laid on a frame). Instead of glass, stretched sheepskin would serve to admit light in the rare event that windows had been cut in the walls. There was no drainage and seldom a proper chimney. The furnishings were equally rudimentary -- a cauldron for cooking the staple potatoes and perhaps

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78. Quoted in the Census of Ireland, 1851, 1852-53, (1550), xci, p. xxiii

a few stools; tables, chairs and beds were rarities. One graphic description can serve for the many extant examples:<sup>79</sup>

Imagine four walls of dried mud, (which the rain, as it falls, easily restores to its primitive condition) having for its roof a little straw or some sods, for its chimney a hole cut in the roof, or very frequently the door through which alone the smoke finds an issue. One single apartment contains father, mother, children and sometimes a grandfather or a grandmother; there is no furniture in this wretched hovel; a single bed of straw serves the entire family. Five or six half-naked children may be seen crouched near a miserable fire, the ashes of which cover a few potatoes, the sole nourishment of the family.

Some of the comments of the parliamentary reports are worth quoting for their unanimity on one central point -- the extent of rural poverty. The Poor Inquiry of 1830, for instance, noted that much of the evidence that they had gathered testified to "an augmentation of national wealth". But they also concluded, in a superb example of bureaucratic circumlocution, that "however consolatory is this accumulation of testimony, it would lead to a false inference were it to induce a disbelief in the existence of very great distress and misery in Ireland".<sup>80</sup> Hardly an immoderate statement! Eight years later,

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79. Gustave de Beaumont, cited by T. P. O'Neill, "Rural Life", in R. B. McDowell, ed., Social Life in Ireland, 1800-45, (Cork: Mercier Press for the Cultural Relations Committee of Ireland, 1957), p. 44. Similar comments were made by Arthur Young, de Tocqueville, and other travellers in Ireland -- see Constantia Maxwell, The Stranger in Ireland, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954); Maxwell, Country & Town, pp. 120-25; Freeman, Pre-Famine Ireland, pp. 147-52; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 23-5. See also the harrowing account by Michael Doheny of the cabin in which he sheltered near Glengariff, county Kerry, while on the run after the failure of the 1848 uprising, in The Felon's Track, (Dublin: Gill & Son, 1914), pp. 234-37

80. On the State of the Poor in Ireland, 1830, (667), vii, p. 6



the Railway Commissioners reiterated the point that while "from north to south indications of improvement are everywhere visible . . . these signs of growing prosperity are unhappily not so discernible in the condition of the labouring people, as in the amount of the produce of their labour".<sup>81</sup> Again, on the very eve of the Famine, the Devon Commission collected three volumes of evidence to the effect that "the agricultural labourer of Ireland suffers the greatest privations and hardships -- that he continues to depend upon casual and precarious employment for his subsistence -- that he is still badly housed, badly fed, badly clothed and badly paid for his labour".<sup>82</sup> In his valuable topical collation of the Devon Commission evidence, John Pitt Kennedy, Secretary to the Commission, expanded on this issue of rural poverty, by emphasising that similar conditions afflicted also the "small farmer" in the Irish sense, that is, "the occupiers of two, three or four acres". Their situation was "in general very wretched. . . . It appears that in most parts of Ireland their sole food was the potato, accompanied with milk, salt or salt-herrings where procurable".<sup>83</sup> Any of the score of similar reports on Ireland which were released between 1820 and 1845 could be gleaned for more of the same evidence, but some essential qualifications to the picture of utter gloom must be introduced.

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81. Drummond Report, p. 483

82. Devon Report, p. 12

83. John Pitt Kennedy, ed., Digest of Evidence taken before H. M. Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of the Law and Practice in respect to the Occupation of Land in Ireland, (2 vols., Dublin: Thoms, 1847), i, p. 364

While it is beyond question that very many country people lived in these rural slums, their squalor did not always entail absolute poverty. Thus, a perceptive Englishwoman noted that "the fearful apparent wretchedness of the people is no necessary indication of poverty. The five pigs wallowing near the bed's head is an instance. At the present value of pigs here . . . these five must be worth many pounds. Elsewhere we have seen a fine cow, or perhaps two, belonging to a hovel so wretched that you would suppose the people had no prospect of another meal".<sup>84</sup> A more extreme example was provided by the house in which Otway stayed in 1813 -- the owner had no beds, one cauldron, one stool and one drinking cup, but he also possessed a fine herd of one hundred head of cattle and 200 sheep!<sup>85</sup>

The ragged clothing of the Irish "peasantry" also came in for unfavourable comment, but the continued expansion of the linen industry and, particularly, the short-lived boom in Belfast's cotton industry,<sup>86</sup> pointed to a rising domestic consumption as well as to

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84. Harriet Martineau, Letters from Ireland, (1852), cited by Connell, Population of Ireland, p. 87; exactly the same point was made by de Beaumont, in the words which follow directly after the passage quoted above

85. C. G. Otway, Sketches in Erris & Tyrawly, (1841), cited by Maxwell, Country & Town, p. 139; cf., Wakefield's remarks, also cited in ibid., p. 140

86. J. J. Monaghan, "The Rise & Fall of the Belfast Cotton Industry", IHS, III, (1942), pp. 1-17; Green, Lagan Valley, pp. 95-111; Green, "Early Industrial Belfast", in J. C. Beckett & R. E. Glasscock, eds., Belfast: Origin & Growth of an Industrial City, (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1967), pp. 78-88

export markets. By way of an examination of the tables of Irish exports and imports, Drummond commented that the recent past had witnessed "a greatly increased consumption of the articles most conducive to the comfort of its inhabitants". The crucial point, however, was relegated to a footnote:<sup>87</sup>

We regret that the state of the labouring population does not warrant us in assuming that any considerable proportion of this increased consumption is shared by them. The demand seems to proceed, almost exclusively, from the superior class of landholders and the inhabitants of the towns.

As we shall see, the "superior class of landholders" included the sturdy tenant farmers who comprised the core of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

The nutritional element in the ensemble of living conditions is the most important because it entailed all the implicit structures of the class relations in the countryside. The staple of the Irish diet was the potato. By the end of the continental wars, at the very latest, the potato had gained control of the rural diet, largely supplanting oatmeal and other grain products. Drummond dealt with this issue, in a brief regional contrast.<sup>88</sup> In the north, the people "are better lodged, better clothed and fed than the others . . . their food consists chiefly of meal, potatoes and milk"; in the south, conditions were "in every respect, inferior . . . their habitations are worse; their food inferior, consisting at best of potatoes or milk, without meal"; but things were

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87. Drummond Report, p. 491

88. Ibid., pp. 479-80

worst of all in the west, where "their food consists of the potato alone, without meal and in most cases without milk". The Devon Report was blunter and more succinct -- "in many districts their only food in the potato, their only beverage water".<sup>89</sup> Even in misery, uneven development was already clearly at work before the Famine.

The dangers of such a widespread reliance on a single crop were increasingly obvious long before the Great Famine. More or less severe partial failures of the potato harvest occurred in twenty-two of the first forty-four years of the nineteenth century.<sup>90</sup> The reports in the 1830s and 1840s all repeated what had become a commonplace remark about the Irish, that they lived by the grace of the potato. Even when the harvest was blight-free and bounteous, a large part of the poorest levels of rural society was still likely to go hungry for at least a couple of months during the summer, between the exhaustion of last year's and the harvest of this year's crop. Another of the inquiries into the condition of the poor, this time in 1836, referred directly to this seasonal hunger. The labourer's potatoes, it noted, never lasted a whole year and "the greater number have used them all at the beginning of April, and scarcely one has a potato remaining at the 1st

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89. Devon Report, p. 35

90. The years of partial or major potato-crop failures were: 1800, 1801, 1807, 1809, 1811, 1812, 1816, 1817, 1821, 1825, 1829, 1830, 1831, 1832, 1833, 1835-37, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842. Salaman, History and Social Influence of the Potato, Appendix I, pp. 603-8

of May".<sup>91</sup>

The seriousness of the extensive dependence upon the potato had been underlined by the events of the winter of 1821-22. The parliamentary report which followed described an extraordinary contradiction, which was, unfortunately, only too common in Ireland. There was famine in the midst of plenty. On the one hand, "the crops of grain had been far from deficient, and the prices of corn and of oatmeal were very moderate", but the blighted areas, in the south and west, "presented a remarkable example of possessing a surplus of food whilst the inhabitants were suffering from actual want". How to explain this situation? The Inquiry offered the beginnings of an analysis of what lay behind the Famine. "The calamity of 1822 may therefore be said to have proceeded less from the want of food itself than from the want of adequate means of purchasing it, in other words from the want of profitable employment".<sup>92</sup>

When the full-scale Famine finally struck, twenty-five years later, the relationship between the potato and distress, and the underlying debility of a social order which rested upon such a fragile basis, had been subjected to a more rigorous analysis. This is best exemplified in Jasper Rogers' coinage of "the potato-truck system" which sought to capture the crucial position of the potato in the domestic economy of the labourers and cottiers. Rogers explained

91. Poor Inquiry, 1836, (37), xxxii, p. 1

92. On the Condition of the Labouring Poor, 1823, (561), vi, pp. 334-35

that if the labourer's food "fails or becomes scarce, he dies or is half-famished, because the barbarous custom of making the potato the labour-coin of the country deprives him of food and money together".<sup>93</sup> Another version of this point, probably apocryphal and possibly a case of gulling the Englishman, was the story related by Campbell Foster, special correspondent for The Times during the Famine, to the effect that a Galway City pawnbroker had taken a £10 note for 10s. in coin. Both Foster's sweeping generalisation -- "so little do the people know of the commercial value of money that they are constantly [sic] in the habit of pawning it"<sup>94</sup> -- and Rogers' more measured conception must be seriously modified. The potato did not, despite appearances, become an absolute substitute for cash; it was neither medium of exchange nor method of payment. Even more significant is the fact that almost all tenants, down to the holders of the smallest patches of "conacre", were accustomed to at least one financial transaction every six months -- the payment of rent!<sup>95</sup>

Nevertheless, since the cultivation of the potato was both the densest form and the essential basis of the tillage system, this

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93. J. W. Rogers, The Potato-Truck System in Ireland, (1847), cited by Connell, Population of Ireland, p. 142

94. Cited by Woodham-Smith, Great Hunger, p. 77

95. See the illuminating discussion of commercial activity, precisely among the most "backward" western cottiers, founded on the illicit distillation of poitín, by J. H. Johnson, "The Two 'Irelands' at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century", in N. Stephens & R. E. Glasscock, eds., Irish Geographical Studies: Essays in Honour of E. Estyn Evans, (Belfast: Queen's University, Department of Geography, 1970), pp. 224-43

"potato-nexus" deserves a closer examination. A sure sign of its importance was the fact that all the ills of Irish society -- industrial decline, rack-renting, rapid population growth, widespread poverty -- were blamed on the potato. Although Belfast's textile capitalists were, characteristically, most conscious of the potato's role in supplementing and therefore depressing money-wages, the heart of the matter lay in the countryside. The constant growth of the rural population during the tillage period was the premise and the main form of the cycle of unemployment-subdivision-potato, the essence of the potato-nexus.

Taken, first, from the angle of unemployment, the issue was straightforward. From about 1815, sources of employment in Ireland became increasingly scarce. The immediate cause of unemployment was the coincidence of the post-war recession and the demobilisation of the counter-revolutionary armies. Then, the abolition of the preferential tariffs for Irish goods (in 1824) immediately preceded the first fully-fledged cyclical depression in modern capitalism (1825-27). While I see no reason to doubt that the removal of protective tariffs (in the pursuit of the greater glory of Union and Free Trade) served to accentuate the process of industrial decline, the blunt assertion that "the industrial decay of Ireland . . . was the result of the fiscal changes which were introduced at the Union, and completed twenty years later",<sup>96</sup>

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96. George O'Brien, "Historical Introduction" to E. J. Riordan, Modern Irish Trade & Industry, (London: Methuen, 1920), p. 50; the point is elaborated in O'Brien's Economic History from the Union to the Famine

is too categorical. The main weaknesses in Irish industrialisation were not helped by those fiscal provisions, but they were relatively independent of them. The most apparent problem was the shortage of the key raw materials upon which the early industrial revolution was founded; without coal and iron ore, Ireland was dependent upon English manufacturers.<sup>97</sup> This problem was nicely stated by the Poor Inquiry of 1830: "It is vain to think that the rude hand-labour of Ireland can compete with the machinery of Great Britain. If the manufactures of Ireland are therefore to be sustained, it can only be by the application of machinery. But this is impeded by the duty on coals".<sup>98</sup>

The more fundamental difficulty was the very nature of capitalism itself. One practical capitalist, at least, understood this aspect of the situation most clearly. In 1837, William Willans, a textile manufacturer from Leeds who had transplanted himself to Ireland, explained to the Drummond Commission that the question did not hinge on tariffs or their abolition. It was, instead, a matter of the normal operation of the economic laws of capitalist competition:

The effect of the panic in England of 1825 occasioned great reductions in the price of wool in 1826, and large

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97. This point was stressed by Engels, in the opening pages of his fragmentary "History of Ireland", in Marx & Engels, Ireland & The Irish Question, (Moscow: Progress, 1971), p. 174

98. Poor Inquiry, 1830, (667), vii, p. 16. Willans confirmed this conclusion, noting that the Irish manufacturer was placed at a serious disadvantage by the need to employ steam-power, since "the high price of fuel is a disadvantage to him, the coals being in Yorkshire from 5s. to 6s. a ton, and in Dublin seldom less than 16s. to 18s.": Drummond Report, "Letter of William Willans", Appendix A, No. 8, p. 726



accumulated stocks were sacrificed on ruinous terms . . . large quantities of cloth were bought up, and imported into Ireland for sale. Competition under such circumstances was utterly impossible with the Irish manufacturers, and their business was at a standstill for many months. The effect of this state of the trade was destructive to nearly all the small manufacturers, and ended either in their ruin or their withdrawal from business, and it was nearly two years before the larger manufacturers recovered the shock.<sup>99</sup>

Willans' partial figures suggest that up to 7,000 workers lost their jobs as a result of the decline in the woollen trade alone. Even in the exceptional circumstances in the Belfast area, where cotton and linen alternated as the predominant industrial employers, the slump-boom cycle in the cotton industry frequently threw thousands out of work for longer or shorter periods, before the final and permanent decline set in around 1825.<sup>100</sup> Decline, or simple concentration of production, in other Irish industries further reduced the prospects for employment outside the agrarian sector.<sup>101</sup>

Lack of work, however, was only one aspect of the problem, for if wages are forced below a certain minimum level the same result is achieved. In the north, for instance, where living conditions and

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99. Ibid., pp. 725-26

100. "About every third year there was a temporary depression in the industry caused by over-production"; in 1825, more than one-third of the cotton weavers were out of work -- Monaghan, "Rise & Fall of the Belfast Cotton Industry", pp. 8-9

101. For a series of figures on loss of employment in the pre-Famine period, see Karl Marx, "Outline of a Report on the Irish Question to the Communist Educational Association of German Workers in London", in Marx & Engels, Ireland & the Irish Question, pp. 126-39

incomes were generally most advanced, wages were steadily forced downwards between the 1790s and the 1830s. In the cotton industry, rapid mechanisation led to massive reductions in the average weekly income of the handloom weaver, from 46s. in 1792 to 6s. or less between 1827 and 1838.<sup>102</sup> In the linen industry, it was primarily the supplementary income of the women spinners which was affected; again, the turning point came with the development of a mechanical advance, the invention of the wet-spinning process which allowed machines to produce the fine yarns which had previously required hand labour. By the 1830s, female employment as hand-spinners in the linen industry had been effectively abolished in north-east Ulster. The resultant fall in family incomes was not, of course, met by a commensurate rise in the wages of the largely male linen handloom weavers.<sup>103</sup> While mechanisation was the proximate cause of the

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102. Reports of the Assistant Commissioners on Hand-Loom Weavers, 1840, (43), xxiii, pp. 444, 465-66, 560; Crawford, Domestic Industry, pp. 40-1; Monaghan, "Rise & Fall of Belfast Cotton Industry", pp. 12-17; Green, Lagan Valley, pp. 95ff.

103. Reports . . . Hand-Loom Weavers, pp. 553-616; Green, Lagan Valley, pp. 76-81, 118-19; Crawford, Domestic Industry, pp. 61-4. One of the north's leading linen manufacturers, Joseph Nicholson of Bessbrook, explained the situation in 1811: "The leading cause against the extension of machinery is the low price of labour; yarn spun by women is much cheaper than the same article manufactured by machinery in England. . . . To one unacquainted with Ireland, the small earnings of the poorer females -- frequently not more than two-pence per day working diligently from morning till night for months together -- must appear very extraordinary" -- cited by John Horner, The Linen Trade of Europe during the Spinning Wheel Period, (Belfast: McCaw, Stephenson & Orr, Ltd., 1920), pp. 251-52

debasement of wages in the northern textile industries, it must be emphasised that the real pre-condition lay elsewhere. The existence of industries in the north-east was exceptional, but the fundamentally agrarian basis of the economy was common to the whole country. In this respect, the value of the northern experience is its clarity -- the weavers' wages were forced down because the capitalists could rely on the safety-valve effect provided by the weavers' patches of potato-ground. In this limited sense alone, it is possible to speak of the potato as a substitute for cash.

In the rest of the country, where even the domestic industry of the hand-loom weaver was absent, the demand for labour on tilled land simply failed to match the ever-growing supply. Even the retardation of mechanisation in Irish tillage could not stem the rise of structural unemployment. One manifest result of the contradiction between supply and demand in the labour market was a growing trend towards labour migration within the British Isles -- Union was most effectively realised at the level of proletarian life. Within Ireland, labourers moved west from Donegal and Connacht to the rich pastoral and arable lands in Leinster; and from Ireland, they went on to the harvests in the English Home Counties and the Scottish Lowlands.<sup>104</sup>

104. A recent essay suggests that there were as many as 40,000 migrant workers in the 1830s and more than 60,000 in the 1840s: Cormac Ó Gráda, "Seasonal Migration & Post-Famine Adjustment in the West of Ireland", *Studia Hibernica*, XIII, (1973), pp. 49-52. Cf., Barbara Kerr, "Irish Seasonal Migration to Great Britain, 1800-38", *IHS*, III, (1942), pp. 365-80

Ireland's significance within the regional division of labour in Britain was not lost on British capitalists -- one Paisley employer described the situation in a strikingly cynical phrase: "Ireland is our market for labour, the supplies of which are regulated on the same principles which regulate the supplies of articles of consumption and commerce".<sup>105</sup>

Even though some English critics were tempted to attribute the difficulties of the Irish rural poor to their own "indolence",<sup>106</sup> the more serious problem of the chronic shortage of work was also recognised. The Board of Public Works, in 1837, reported that "it has frequently been remarked, and with perfect truth, that the labourer in most parts of the interior of Ireland shows a want of energy", but they denied the charge that this was the result of "a natural defect of character". Instead, they underlined the burden of rents and, in particular, the strong possibility that increased exertion by the tenant, in the form of improvements, would lead to increased rents -- these would tend to explain the farmers' apparent sloth. As to the labourer, "the habit of giving low wages leads to inferior exertions, and to but little efforts being made to improve the system; the labourer is degraded

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105. Cited by Arthur Redford, Labour Migration in England, 1800-50, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964), p. 161

106. Although Nassau Senior used this word, he did not apply it in a moral sense; he explained the indolence of the rural labourer as arising "principally from his labour being almost always day-work, and in great measure a mere payment of debt -- a mere mode of working out his rent"; Journals, i, p. 48. Seventy years earlier, Arthur Young had been more equivocal, being in some doubt "whether their miserable working arises from any such weakness [of character], or from an habitual laziness"; Tour, ii, p. 44

while the employer obtains very little advantage".<sup>107</sup> One well-qualified witness who appeared before the Devon Commission was Sir John MacNeill, a civil engineer who had employed thousands of men on a variety of public works projects. On being asked whether he detected any tendency towards "listlessness or carelessness" among his employees, MacNeill replied, "No, nothing of the kind. An Irish man is the most active fellow possible if remunerated for his work; there is no idleness among them if they can turn their work to a fair remuneration".<sup>108</sup>

In his summary of the evidence collected by the Devon Commission, John Pitt Kennedy identified three "classes" within this rural proletariat, whom he described respectively as "the most fortunate", "the least miserable" and "the most wretched amongst the many wretched classes in Ireland".<sup>109</sup> The first were "unmarried farm servants, who reside with their employers". They were housed, fed and paid wages; and though they were not paid well, they were usually able to buy clothes and even to save some money.<sup>110</sup> But as subdivision proceeded, the average farm-size declined and with it the need for labour other than that provided by the farmer's own family. Moreover, uncertain and falling price-levels added sound economic incentives to dispense with additional hired labour. It must be surmised

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107. Fifth Annual Report from the Board of Public Works, Ireland, 1837, (243), xxxiii, p. 236

108. Kennedy, ed., Devon Digest, i, p. 506

109. Ibid., i, pp. 474-75

110. Ibid., i, p. 474

that this section of the rural proletariat had tended to shrink during the pre-Famine decades, particularly as a proportion of the whole, if not in absolute numbers.<sup>111</sup>

The second group were the cottiers proper, that is, sub-tenants holding "a small lot of ground at a fixed rate, generally payable in labour". The predominant form of this sort of sub-tenancy was a contractual relationship between cottier and farmer. The latter allowed the cottier to "rent" some or all of his needs -- a cabin, a patch of potato-ground, some extra land for pasture, forage or more commonly to raise a crop of oats, and a section of bog for fuel. In return, the cottier pledged to work out the value of his holding, at the farmer's requirement. Thus, the cottier system often involved the substitution of land and labour for wages and rent.<sup>112</sup>

The final, "most wretched" group in Kennedy's analysis were the landless day-labourers, men who did not enjoy the patronage of a farmer and who therefore remained more or less permanently unemployed. On two key facts, the evidence collected by the Devon Commission was absolutely unequivocal. First of all, the number of landless labourers was increasing rapidly on the eve of the Famine, and secondly, it was the greatest fear of the cottier and the small

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111. This point must be posed hypothetically because, unfortunately, the occupational categories employed in the Censuses of 1831 and 1841 are simply not comparable; see the remarks to this effect, Census of Ireland, 1841, 1843, (504), xxiv, p. xxiii

112. Kennedy, ed., Devon Digest, i, p. 474

farmer alike that he might lose his hold on the land and be driven down into the ranks of the labourers. Of all the varieties of tenuous "land-tenure", that of the labourer was the least secure. Since the best they could manage was "merely a wretched cabin, or, with it, only a so-called garden", they were entirely "dependent for their subsistence on the success of their speculation in conacre".<sup>113</sup>

This practice of "taking land in conacre" (also known as "quarter-ground" and "rood-land") was the final step in the process of sub-letting and subdivision. Conacre land, most commonly, was "a letting for a single crop, the land being generally manured and prepared for seed by the lessor, and the lessee paying a money rent for it".<sup>114</sup> In effect, this was the key to the survival of those at the bottom. The availability of land for conacre, whether for potatoes, oats or dairy-grazing, if necessary by digging up pasture, was a critical focus of land struggles in the "disturbed counties" such as Tipperary and Limerick during the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>115</sup> Conacre lessees frequently complained of the quality of the land, that it had not been manured or that it was exhausted. Whether it was prepared

113. Kennedy, ed., Devon Digest, i, p. 475 -- each of these composite pictures is based on the evidence which is presented at pp. 477-513

114. Black, Economic Thought & the Irish Question, p. 8

115. George Cornewall Lewis, On Local Disturbances in Ireland, (London: B. Fellowes, 1838); Joseph Lee, "The Ribbonmen", in T. D. Williams, ed., Secret Societies in Ireland, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1973), pp. 26-35; and the evidence of Lt.-Col. William Miller, Deputy Inspector General of the Constabulary of Ireland, on the nature of agrarian unrest in Tipperary, in Devon, 1845, (657), xxi, p. 915

or not, the conacre "tenant's" principal contributions were the seed-potatoes and his own labour; given the prevalent "lazy bed" or trench-and-ridge method of cultivation, the labour seldom amounted to more than a few day's spade-work.<sup>116</sup> What Kennedy aptly called the "speculation" in conacre was two-fold, for the cottier was gambling on a good crop of potatoes to feed himself and his family through the winter, while he faced the problem of finding the money to pay for the land.

Once again, the question returns to the potato-nexus, to the mutually reinforcing relations between the potato, subdivision and unemployment. The basic problem was that "employment for the agricultural labourer is almost universally deficient".<sup>117</sup> Most obviously, employment in the tillage system was seasonal; in the mid-1830s, the average agricultural labourer only worked for twenty-two weeks in the year.<sup>118</sup> Even when employment could be found, the wages were meagre. Several witnesses told the Devon Commission that wages had fallen by two-thirds since 1815 and by one-third in the decade since 1833-34.<sup>119</sup> On the eve of the Famine, daily wage-rates in agriculture ranged between 8d. and 1s., the higher rates being paid in the north-east and around Dublin. Of course, wages tended to be

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116. Green, "Agriculture", in Edwards & Williams, eds., The Great Famine, p. 101

117. Devon Digest, i, p. 473

118. O'Neill, "Rural Life", in McDowell, ed., Social Life, p. 43

119. Devon Digest, i, p. 477



highest during the peak sewing and harvesting periods.<sup>120</sup>

Apart from agriculture, the main source of employment on the eve of the Famine were public-works projects. The scarcity of alternative employment was underlined by "the avidity with which they seek it, and the desire to be employed". Nor was it only the day-labourers who sought employment on the public-works; applicants included "those who have carts and horses and a small portion of land". The reason was not obscure. Workers on the public contracts "get much better wages from the contractors than they are in the habit of getting in the country; they work harder, and get better pay".<sup>121</sup> Other evidence in the Devon Report tends to substantiate the last point, suggesting that daily wage-rates were between 10d. and 1s. 2d., or about twenty per cent above the prevailing agricultural level.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, one marked feature of public employment was that wages seem to have remained stable since the 1820s, when the Board of Inland Navigation had been paying between 8d. and 1s. 3d. per day.<sup>123</sup> But against this it must be remembered that employment on the public-works was no less impermanent than agricultural labour. The common aspect was, in fact, apparently well understood, since it was not an

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120. Devon Digest, i, pp. 475-76

121. Ibid., i, pp. 503-5 (evidence of Sir John MacNeill)

122. Ibid., i, p. 31. Two years later, in the very different Famine circumstances, the public-works paid only 6d.-8d. per day; Woodham-Smith, Great Hunger, p. 122

123. Poor Inquiry, 1830, (667), vii, Appendix C. The variation was regional: highest in Newry and Limerick, lowest in the south-centre.

uncommon practice for the great landowners to summon their county grand juries for the express purpose of levying a cess or tax in order to provide employment on road- or harbour-construction during periods of more than normal distress.<sup>124</sup>

Before concluding this section, it is necessary to add to Kennedy's tripartite definition of the rural proletariat. In the first place, there was a group of people who were completely omitted from his summary. The truly "surplus" rural population constituted what should, in strict accuracy, be called a lumpen-proletariat of beggars, squatters, "travelling people". They were almost completely destitute. They were most densely settled on the poorest lands along the Atlantic seaboard, in south-west Cork, Kerry, Connemara, Mayo and Donegal, on the barren mountain-sides and in boggy glens. They squatted in the interstices between estates and farms, where supervision of the land and resistance to subdivision, by landowner and farmer alike, were at their weakest. As the Famine approached, these people became more visible in the richer areas of central Ireland. Where subdivision was resisted, they erected their miserable cabins in road-side ditches or

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124. In the frequently distressed county of Donegal, Lord George Hill was one of the greatest landowners, a consistent improver and a renowned benefactor. One sample -- "In the course of last summer distress to a considerable extent prevailed in part of the county of Donegal . . . The Lord Lieutenant was pleased to appropriate a sum of money to the purchase of meal and potatoes to be applied to the relief of the inhabitants, paying them in provisions for their labour, applied to the construction of short branch roads in that wild uncultivated district"; Fifth Report, Board of Public Works, Ireland, 1837, (243), xxxiii, p. 239

on waste land and they attempted to live by begging the price of a pot of potatoes from passers-by. That thousands of these people did not starve to death was due primarily to the generosity of those only barely more fortunate than themselves. The open-handed hospitality with which the cottier shared his potatoes was often enough remarked to become proverbial.<sup>125</sup>

The other group, at the other end of the proletarian scale, included large numbers of the very "small farmers". By 1845, "a great weight of evidence" argued that they barely merited the name of farmer, other than that Irish usage included them in that category, since their condition was "in general very wretched . . . even lower than that of the labourers".<sup>126</sup> There was, indeed, a grey area of overlap, where "cottier" and "small farmer" were virtually interchangeable terms to describe the large number of smallholders.<sup>127</sup> The significance of this stratum is evident in the fact that at least one-third of all holdings on the eve of the Famine were smaller than five acres.<sup>128</sup> The surest sign of its proletarianisation was the

125. Poor Inquiry, 1819, (314), viii, p. 434; Maxwell, Stranger in Ireland, Pt. IV, pp. 209-314; Maxwell, Country & Town, pp. 132-35; Gale E. Christianson, "Population, the Potato and Depression in Ireland, 1800-30", Eire-Ireland, VII, (1972), pp. 70-95

126. Devon Digest, i, p. 364; and for the evidence on the deplorable conditions facing small farmers all over Ireland, ibid., pp. 363-92

127. Michael Beames, "Cottiers & Conacre in Pre-Famine Ireland", Journal of Peasant Studies, II, (1974), pp. 352-54

128. See the discussion of land-holdings and farm-sizes, below, pp. 103-8.

striking increase in pig-production since 1800. In the period from 1801-5 to 1835, pig exports (live and dead) had increased by 350 per cent.<sup>129</sup> The intimacy of the relationship between the smallholder and his pig was underlined during the Famine, when human and pig populations declined together. While the rural proletariat starved or fled, the pigs were slaughtered; pig numbers fell from over 1.4 millions in 1841 to 622,000 in 1847.<sup>130</sup>

Unemployment forced Irish country people to rely on the land -- the press of population hastened the process of subdivision -- as plots grew smaller, the land had to be used as intensively as possible, to produce the most prolific food-crop, potatoes. However, even the potato only solved one half of the problem, for while it supplied the basic diet, it was not a cash crop. There remained the question of paying for the potato-ground. Small farmers generally relied on three basic items. Barley, always more prolific than wheat, was grown for sale either as grain or as illicitly distilled poitín.<sup>131</sup> In the linen-making areas in Ulster, long hours of poorly-paid labour at the hand-loom were the crucial supplement.<sup>132</sup> In most of the country

129. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 40; Drummond, p. 492

130. B. R. Mitchell & Phyllis Deane, Abstract of British Historical Statistics, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 84; the original sources for these figures were the 1841 Census and the first of the annual series of Agricultural Statistics of Ireland, 1847-8, (1000), lvii

131. Johnson, "The 'Two' Irelands", in Stephens & Glasscock, eds., Irish Geographical Studies, pp. 231-32; Connell, "Illicit Distillation: An Irish Peasant Industry", in Irish Peasant Society,

132. Cf., notes 20, 73 supra

it was the proverbial "gentleman who pays the rent", the pig, which played the role of the commodity which could be produced for sale with very little capital investment. While it is clear that pigs were not raised exclusively on small holdings, it is equally certain that the pig tended to be the indispensable item in the cottier's and small farmer's output, the commodity which marked the distinction between the landed status, however tenuous, of the cottier and smallholder and the landless plight of the labourer.<sup>133</sup>

The potato-nexus, this unrelenting connection between unemployment, subdivision and reliance on the potato, was therefore the basic condition of the living standards of the entire rural working class. Although there were some very real tenurial and status distinctions between small farmers, cottiers and labourers,<sup>134</sup> they tended to become blurred or obscured by the progressive extension and intensification of the potato-nexus during the three decades from 1815.

The specific features of the potato-nexus varied from place to place, depending upon a number of subjective and objective factors. Among the subjective factors, the more important included the closeness of the landowner's supervision of his estate, the attitudes of landowners and tenant-farmers alike towards subdivision, and the extent of

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133. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 43; Green, "Agriculture", in Edwards & Williams, eds., The Great Famine, pp. 96, 100-1; Freeman, Pre-Famine Ireland, pp. 56, 71, 79; Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, pp. 16-17, 49; O'Donovan, History of Live Stock, pp. 191-93

134. Green, "Agriculture", in Edwards & Williams, eds., The Great Famine, pp. 91-5

organisation and degree of determination among the cottiers and small farmers to fight for the right to possess a piece of land.<sup>135</sup> The objective determinants of the potato-nexus generally followed regional lines, and mainly involved the balance between arable and pastoral land-use, population density and, therefore, the availability of land. But there were two underlying factors at work across the country. They may be briefly identified as the land system and the tillage economy.

The potato-nexus must be seen, finally, as symptomatic of a broader movement. The source of the problems which centred on the potato-nexus lay in the boom period in tillage, before the post-war slump of 1816-22, when rising prices and rents had fuelled the drive towards extensive subdivision. The progressive immiseration and eventual destruction of the pre-Famine rural proletariat was the ultimate expression of the tillage economy. Neither the potato-nexus nor the proletarianisation of the Irish countryside which it entailed were the whole story, for alongside the impoverished cottiers there was a class of productive, thrifty, hard-fisted commercial farmers, many of whom were direct beneficiaries of the potato-nexus and most of whom emerged unscathed from the Famine. It is, therefore, necessary to examine more directly this productive core of the land system, for it was there that the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie had its origins.

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135. The conduct of agrarian class struggles, before and after the Famine, will be examined in detail in Chapter Six, below.

The Land System: Landlords, Middlemen, Farmers and Subdivision

The potato was not the only culprit held to account for the defects of Irish rural society. The over-arching system of property relations also received due credit. It was, many commentators affirmed, a bad land system. What they meant, frequently, was a lament for the alleged absence of a middle class to stand between and mediate the confrontation between landowner and cottier. The notion was posed in a classical form by Gustave de Beaumont, the minor French nobleman who visited Ireland in the 1830s and recorded his impression that he saw "only magnificent castles or miserable hovels, but no edifice holding a middle rank between the palace of the great and the cabins of the poor".<sup>136</sup> Since the Irish land system did not accord with the prescribed model of English capitalist agriculture, which should consist of large enclosed farms employing a minimum of labour and allowing "a race of yeomanry . . . to be encouraged",<sup>137</sup> Nassau Senior, John Croker and a series of parliamentary commissioners

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136. L'Irlande Sociale, Politique et Religieuse (1839), cited by Black, Economic Thought & the Irish Question, p. 9n; cf., Nicholas Mansergh, The Irish Question, 1840-1921, (3rd edition, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975), pp. 41-8; Maxwell, Stranger in Ireland, pp. 209-314

137. Poor Inquiry, 1830, (667), vii, p. 8. Cf., the classical political-economists cited by Black, Economic Thought & the Irish Question, pp. 18-20, 86-8, for instance, Hutches Trower to Ricardo, in 1822: "the improvement of economic conditions in Ireland must depend on the cottier system being supplanted by capitalist farming, on the English model".

re-affirmed the idea.<sup>138</sup> Although it has received some endorsement among modern historians,<sup>139</sup> the notion that Ireland had no "middle class" before the Famine will not stand up to a critical examination.

In fact, two distinct "middle classes" may be identified in the pre-Famine countryside. Despite the marked differences between them, often amounting to open enmity, they must be considered together because they both played critical parts in the development of the tillage economy. Each had good reasons to equivocate about the fatal dangers inherent in extensive subdivision. Both stood at the literal heart of the land system; neither owned the land, but both profited from it. They were the middlemen and the farmers.<sup>140</sup>

"Middleman" was a portmanteau word whose significance

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138. Senior: "But where there is little capital, and there are few small proprietors, society is divided into the very rich and the very poor, with scarcely any intermediate class"; Journals, i, p. 27. Croker: "Here is no yeomanry--no agricultural capitalist; no degree between the landlord and the labourer", from A Sketch of the State of Ireland (1808), cited by Maxwell, Country & Town, p. 113. Even the more nuanced Devon Report inclined towards this viewpoint.

139. Black, Economic Thought & the Irish Question, pp. 8-10; Connell, Population of Ireland, p. 63; Salaman, History of the Potato, p. 336 -- all generally accept this idea.

140. This definition consciously excludes both townsmen (who were important, but less directly linked to the land system) and the separate process of class differentiation which took place in the linen-making areas of Ulster. In his account of the "weaver's rising" of 1762, Conrad Gill identified three "proletarian" and two "bourgeois" class-fractions: independent weavers, small manufacturers and journeymen-employees opposed to drapers and bleachers. By the early years of the nineteenth century, the class formation had become more simplified and more "normal" -- the weavers (factory employed or quasi-independent) now faced the bleachers, who controlled virtually the entire production process. Gill, Irish Linen Industry, pp. 110-12, 138-51, 276-79; Green, Lagan Valley, pp. 59-94



altered somewhat during the century before the Famine. In the most basic sense, a middleman was simply a head-tenant, one who rented land and sub-let all or part of it to under-tenants. In its origins, the middleman system was a managerial convenience for the landowners. In the middle decades of the eighteenth century, many of the great landed magnates were prepared to issue long leases on large tracts of land, so as to guarantee a stable income and to shift the burden of overseeing their property onto other shoulders. Since the land let to these middlemen was not, generally speaking, offered as farms, the lease-holder was less likely to be a farmer than a member of the minor Protestant gentry, the hard-drinking, brutal and extravagant squirearchy which gave Irish landed society its ill-repute in the eighteenth century. Later, with the relaxation of the penal laws from the 1780s, Catholic merchants with landed pretensions (and not infrequently with fortunes made in the smuggling trade) were admitted to the ranks of the middlemen.<sup>141</sup> At this stage, that is, from about 1800 to the Famine, the middleman's main function was parasitic. He relieved the landowner of the necessity and painful chore of having to deal with the actual occupiers of his land.<sup>142</sup>

In its own right, the middleman system was a major

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141. See Maureen Wall, "The Rise of a Catholic Middle Class in Eighteenth Century Ireland", IHS, XI, (1958), pp. 91-115; Cullen, Anglo-Irish Trade, pp. 139-54; Maxwell, Country & Town, pp. 112-15; Young, Tour, i, pp. 46-7, 146, 462; ii. 24-9

142. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 11; Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, pp. 5-9

contributor to the Famine, since the basic assumption underlying the middleman's lease was that he would, in turn, sub-let the land in smaller tenancies. During the rising period of arable production, the short-term interests of all the main classes in rural society converged on the desirability of subdivision. The middleman, holding a large amount of land on a long lease at a fixed rent during a period of rising prices, stood to gain the bulk of the windfall profits through a continuous process of subdivision. Rising prices encouraged farmers, too, to enlarge their holdings by sub-letting from the middlemen. The growing ranks of cottiers and weavers continued to demand a patch of ground.<sup>143</sup> For some landowners, especially the politically ambitious and the paternalistic, there was a political incentive. In 1793, the 40s. freehold franchise was extended to Catholic tenants; in the anticipation of large and docile blocs of Catholic electors, landowners were prone to extend "freehold leases" at this low value and thus contribute to the further formalisation of the subdivision of their property.<sup>144</sup>

Unfortunately, the coincidence of these economic and

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143. Subdivision proceeded earlier and faster in the northern linen counties. Crawford argues that the "substantial farmer class gradually disappeared by the 1770s to be replaced by a multitude of tenants paying their rents directly to the landlord"; "Landlord-Tenant Relations in Ulster", p. 14

144. Maguire, Downshire Estates, pp. 22-3, 80, 129-30; Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, p. 6. Daniel O'Connell was the first Irish Catholic politician to harness this tenant electorate to another cause than that of the landowning Ascendancy. A major contributory factor in the decision to limit the franchise in 1829 was O'Connell's victories in Waterford and Clare in the preceding couple of years, where he had broken the hitherto inviolable monopoly of parliamentary seats by the local magnates.

political incentives with a rapid growth in the population produced not only a swelling number of officially sanctioned tenants,<sup>145</sup> but also "a concealed class of occupiers", namely the cottiers.<sup>146</sup> In Arthur Young's view, the blame for this rapid expansion of the "illicit" tenantry was laid squarely at the feet of the middlemen. "Not satisfied with screwing up the rent to the uttermost farthing, they are rapacious and relentless in the collection of it".<sup>147</sup> Similarly, while Constantia Maxwell acknowledges that there were some decent middlemen, "the evildoers must have been the most numerous, for the whole race of middlemen was universally condemned".<sup>148</sup> The profits which could be made by a middleman are best exemplified by the case of Lord Antrim's estates north of Belfast, which were leased in the 1770s for £8,000 a year, but which brought in a gross annual rental of £64,000.<sup>149</sup> That was in the "good old days" -- forty years later, Robert Jones Lloyd was so far from making a profit that it took him three years to pay the first year's rent on the 700 acres in county Leitrim which he had leased

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145. Official sanction included a range of forms of tenancy, from a lease "with lives" to "tenure at will"; see below

146. Maguire, Downshire Estates, p. 121

147. Young, Tour, ii, p. 26

148. Maxwell, Country & Town, p. 115. Cf., Lecky's characteristically Victorian strictures on the subject of middlemen: "A hybrid and ambiguous class, without any of the solid qualities of the English yeomen, they combined the education and manners of farmers with the pretensions of gentlemen, and they endeavoured to support those pretensions by idleness, extravagance and ostentatious arrogance"; History of Ireland, p. 87

149. Young, Tour, i, p. 146

from John King.<sup>150</sup>

What had happened in the interim was the first major blow in the attenuated struggle for control of the land which occupied the whole of the nineteenth century. The landowners fired the first shot, and the main target was the middleman. From the 1790s onwards, landowners became increasingly reluctant to issue or renew long leases, and as those which had commenced in mid-century began to fall in, they sought a new system of estate-management. In principle, the quasi-independent middleman, standing between the landowner and the occupying tenants, was replaced by a land-agent, an employee who was paid either by salary or by a commission on the rents he collected.<sup>151</sup> There were several very good reasons why the landowners should have attempted to eliminate the middlemen. Financial considerations ranked uppermost. The anticipation of continued high prices and profits from arable production and exasperation at the loss of profit-rents to the middlemen coincided with the need for larger rental incomes to offset the growing level of charges with which many estates were encumbered. In addition, the more far-sighted and intelligent magnates began, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, to recognise the dangers inherent in unrestricted subdivision, and therefore to seek ways in

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150. Lyons, "Vicissitudes of a Middleman", p. 305

151. See Maguire, Downshire Estates, pp. 183-217, for a thorough analysis of the various duties of an agent and the process by which he replaced the middleman. Cf., Devon Digest, ii, pp. 1026ff. for the contemporary view.

which to re-organise and consolidate the management of their estates.<sup>152</sup>

For their part, the middlemen in various parts of the country saw their profits sharply reduced by the widespread demands for rent-abatements which followed the collapse in tillage prices between 1816 and 1822. No longer sanguine about their prospects, some middlemen sought to be freed from their leases.<sup>153</sup> By 1845, it was asserted that the landowners' "struggle . . . to overthrow the middleman system . . . had been in a considerable degree successful", and that "the practice of letting land to middlemen is now rare".<sup>154</sup> Strictly speaking, the middleman system had largely disappeared before the Famine, even though some middlemen held leases which did not expire until the 1850s or 1860s.<sup>155</sup> While the system evaporated, the men did not. Some of the former middlemen simply followed the transformation of estate-management policy by becoming land-agents while retaining a demesne farm as a superior tenant; others converted profit-rents into landed property by purchasing bankrupt estates from the courts.<sup>156</sup> However,

152. Crawford, "Landlord-Tenant Relations in Ulster", p. 18; Greig, General Report, pp. 63-4, 148-49; Maguire, Downshire Estates, pp. 123ff.

153. Lyons, "Vicissitudes of a Middleman", passim

154. Devon Digest, ii, p. 1029; Devon Report, p. 15

155. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 12-13, 50-53, 116

156. Some of the most notorious figures in the land system, men like S. M. Hussey and W. Steuart Trench, combined all three roles, being middlemen, land-agents and demesne farmers, at once or successively. Cf., Maguire, Downshire Estates, pp. 183-217; and the comments on middlemen by Greig, General Report, pp. 148-49

the abolition of the middleman system came too late. The damage had already been done; when the Famine finally arrived, Irish land was subdivided into thousands of small holdings.

One sign of the downfall of the middlemen was the widespread changes in leasing policy which took place around the turn of the century. The liberal leases under which the middlemen had prospered seem to have normally run for three lives, that is, for the duration of the lives of three individuals named in the lease.<sup>157</sup> Within a short period, certainly between the 1790s and 1820, many landowners moved to limit the term offered to one life or twenty-one years.<sup>158</sup> Moreover, it was not simply the form or duration of the lease which changed, for the removal of the middlemen and the development of a more direct relationship between owner and occupier did not necessarily lead to an extension of lease-hold to the tenants. The landowners' reluctance to issue leases was paraphrased by Lord Monteaule, in conversation with Nassau Senior -- "the Irish tenant is not to be trusted with a lease. His instinct is, while he is alive, to sublet the land, in order to have an income without trouble; and on his death to divide it among his children".<sup>159</sup>

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157. On the Downshires' northern estates, the three-life lease had an average duration of 50-60 years; Maguire, Downshire Estates, pp. 118-19; cf., Cullen, "Problems of Irish Economic History"

158. This shift was graphically illustrated on the Charlemont estates in Armagh and Tyrone. Of 437 leases granted in the 1790s, 417 were for three lives; twenty years later, all but eight of the 429 leases issued were for one life or 21 years; Crawford, "Landlord-Tenant Relations in Ulster", Table II, p. 19. Cf., similar evidence in Maguire, Downshire Estates, pp. 123-25, 129-32; Greig, General Report, pp. 7, 23-27, 137-44

159. Senior, Journals, i, p. 298

Contrary to the noble lord, it was not a question of "instinct", but rather a matter of sound economic and social consideration which led to the apparent anomaly that, for instance, on the Downshires' Edenderry estate in county Offaly, "all the large farmers were middlemen in the most general sense of the word, in that part of their land was sublet to cottiers".<sup>160</sup>

The nub of the matter has two aspects. On the one hand, while the middlemen may have initiated and encouraged the process, the farmers who actually occupied the land were at least as active in subdividing and subletting. More significant was the real distinction between the middleman's essentially parasitic functions and the farmer's location at the heart of the productive system. Middlemen farmed rents, tenants farmed the land. The two functions must not be confused. With this qualification in mind, the farmer's part in the process of subdivision may be briefly outlined. At first glance, subletting was simply a humane gesture which allowed the cottier to survive by affording him access to a patch of potato-ground. Closer to home, as Monteagle suggested, farmers often did prefer to provide for their children by dividing their holdings. But there were more serious economic and political reasons why the farmer should sublet. On the large tillage farm, in a largely pre-mechanical era, cottiers represented a guaranteed supply of indispensable labour-power. Since land taken in

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160. Maguire, Downshire Estates, p. 224

conacre was generally the most expensive, per acre, cottiers also offered the farmers a good potential income. Finally, in areas of high population density and intensified agrarian struggle by the rural proletariat, factors which tended to coincide,<sup>161</sup> the farmer's decision to subdivide and create conacre-lettings represented a form of insurance policy. In the celebrated words of the Devon Commission, this final stage in the process of subdivision could be seen as a "mere purchase of immunity from outrage".<sup>162</sup> In summary, subdivision may be defined as a way in which the tenant-farmer covered his flanks: he met the landowner's or middlemen's demands for rent and he avoided the attentions of the agrarian terrorists.

This being said, it remains to determine whether the tenant was secure in his holding. As we have seen, there was a marked tendency towards shorter leases and then to a disinclination on the part of the landowners to issue, and of tenants to desire, leases. The landowners had two main reasons. The first, a desire to re-organise their estates and limit the progress of subdivision, was reflected, as early as 1773, in Lord Abercorn's comment to his agent that "I think it an act of lunacy to enter into covenants, for a long term, which I am

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161. The best short account is Lee, "Ribbonmen", in Williams, ed., Secret Societies, pp. 26-35; cf., Clark, "Importance of agrarian classes"; and G. E. Christianson, "Secret Societies & Agrarian Violence in Ireland, 1790-1840", Agricultural History, XLVI, (1972), pp. 369-84

162. Devon Digest, i, p. 291: although the phrase was originally coined for a slightly different purpose, it accurately reflects the link between agrarian terrorism and the paucity of potato-ground.



bound and intend to perform, with people who profess not to think themselves bound on their part".<sup>163</sup> This complaint acknowledges a real problem, the difficulty of enforcing the terms of a lease, for whether a landowner was absentee or not, it was difficult for him to exercise adequate control over his estate. The difficulty had been compounded by the middleman system, but the removal of the latter did not solve the problem, since the underlying pressure of population growth persisted. The landowners' second reason for reducing leasehold was economic. Many landowners rightly feared that, should price-levels continue to fall after the war, their tenants would persist in their demands for rent-abatements. In that case, the burden of the loss would fall on the landowners. Alternatively, should prices recover, the leaseholding tenant would enjoy the profits. These fears were obviously not misplaced, since even some of the best-managed properties amassed huge amounts of rent-arrears.<sup>164</sup>

For their part, many tenants were prepared to forego the putative benefits of leasehold. It is clear, in fact, that the essential basis of the shift from leasehold to "tenancy-at-will" was the tenant's confident expectation that he would be left undisturbed in possession of his holding, so long as he paid the rent. Some such confidence clearly

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163. Cited by Crawford, "Landlord-Tenant Relations in Ulster", p. 18

164. Arrears piled up on the Downshire estates in 1817-19 and in 1821-23, periods of falling grain prices: Maguire, Downshire Estates, pp. 31, 225-27. Cf., Greig, General Report, pp. 33-4, 139-41; Large, "Wealth of Irish Landowners", pp. 31-2; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 52-4

existed, for when the Devon Commission examined this question in 1844, they found that only one in seven Irish farms was held on a lease with lives and that "the larger proportion of the land is occupied by tenants-at-will".<sup>165</sup> Since the Ejectment Act of 1816 and the Subletting Act of 1826 had offered additional legal sanction to the allegedly despotic will of the landowners,<sup>166</sup> it may seem that "tenancy-at-will" was an insecure tenure. In practice, the normal standing of the tenant-at-will was yearly occupancy, requiring six months notice to quit on either side; and it was, in fact, a generally secure hold on the land, given the proviso that the rent was paid. Behind the legal questions, land-tenure was infinitely complicated by a wide range of traditional usages and daily practices which had accumulated over the decades and which hedged about the landowners' apparently absolute power.<sup>167</sup>

This question of security of tenure can also be approached by examining the contradiction between the theoretical desirability of consolidation and the actual progress of subdivision which persisted down to the Famine. Since the landowners had sought to eliminate the middlemen, at least in part, so as to end the alienation and devaluation

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165. Devon Report, pp. 13, 15

166. The Ejectment Act of 1816 enabled the landowner to prosecute an eviction by civil bill decree, chargeable to the tenant; the Subletting Act attempted to reinforce the landowners' power to limit subletting. The aim of both acts was to simplify and amplify the landowners' control over their estates.

167. The generic term for the real limitations on the landowners' powers was the conception of "tenant-right" -- see below, Chapter Six, for a fuller discussion of this issue.

of their property through subdivision, we might expect to find evidence of landowners consolidating smaller holdings into larger, more viable units. Certainly, this was the express recommendation of the classical economists, who viewed small farms as "the curse of Ireland"<sup>168</sup> and subdivision as the root cause of the country's "surplus population". Indeed, the leading nationalist economic historian, George O'Brien, asserted that the landowners did translate theory into reality and that "the dominant feature of Irish agriculture in the early nineteenth century was the consolidation of holdings and the consequent evictions".<sup>169</sup> The voluminous testimony collected by the Poor Inquiries and by the Devon Commission, and the statistical evidence on the distribution of landholdings in the 1840s, all point conclusively in the opposite direction.

The Poor Inquiry of 1830, for instance, published 400 pages of evidence from nearly two thousand parishes across Ireland, bearing on this very question. Fewer than one hundred parishes had recorded any significant amount of consolidation.<sup>170</sup> Fifteen years later, the Devon Commission reported that the landowners had been much maligned, that the extensive consolidation and "clearances" of which they had been accused were exceptional rather than common occurrences during the

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168. Trower to Ricardo, 1822, cited by Black, Economic Thought & the Irish Question, pp. 18-19

169. O'Brien, Economic History from Union to Famine, p. 60

170. Poor Inquiry, 1830, (667), vii, Appendix F, pp. 428-819; cf., the useful summary in Connell, Population of Ireland, pp. 176-78

entire period since 1815.<sup>171</sup> One witness who was certainly in a position to know the real meaning of "consolidation" was Anthony Richard Blake, Chief Remembrancer of the Court of Exchequer. He told the Poor Inquiry of an area where "the proprietor of extensive tracts of mountain, as he dispossesses the occupiers of small portions which he wishes to consolidate, provides for them by giving them land in the mountains, which they are very glad to get".<sup>172</sup> This was, apparently, a description which applied fairly widely. Most consolidation, in other words, involved less actual enclosure and dispossession than attempts to re-arrange existing holdings and to rationalise land-distribution, particularly in the far west, where the older forms of communal tenancy, such as "rundale", persisted.<sup>173</sup>

Why were the landowners reluctant or unable to consolidate?

One historian has suggested the coincidence of three factors -- fear of retaliatory outrage, paternalistic concern for the tenants, and a lack of tenants with skill and capital enough to undertake the sort of capitalist farming which was envisaged.<sup>174</sup> At least two parts of this argument appear to be ill-founded. In the first place, the landowners

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171. Devon Report, p. 11; the evidence is indexed in Pt. IV, 1845, (672), xxii, pp. 453-61

172. Poor Inquiry, 1830, (667), vii, p. 347

173. Rundale, commonest in Donegal and Mayo, was a form of strip cultivation. Cf., Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, pp. 9-11; Freeman, Pre-Famine Ireland, pp. 248, 299-300. On the struggle against joint tenancies, which many landlords viewed as prone to cause strife and feuding, see Maguire, Downshire Estates, p. 133; Greig, General Report, p. 145

174. Connell, Population of Ireland, pp. 174-75

were very seldom attacked by the agrarian terrorists.<sup>175</sup> Connell's third proposition is the weakest, for it would imply the altogether unreasonable conclusion that the very successful capitalist farmers, who formed the core of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie after the Famine, sprang up overnight between 1845 and 1851. While paternalism may have played a part, it is more useful to recall the extent of the financial difficulties which many landowners experienced during the decades down to the Famine. Even more fundamentally, the very structure of the tillage economy, the labour-intensive cultivation of grains, was founded upon subdivision. In short, the problems were more systematic than subjective.

It is, therefore, necessary to examine the exact extent of the subdivision which had taken place before the Famine, with a principal focus upon the need to identify the farmers. The pattern of land distribution on the eve of the Famine, and the startlingly rapid transformation of that pattern under the impact of potato-blight and mass starvation, may be seen in Table I (p. 104). The first thing which these figures demonstrate is the numerical preponderance in pre-Famine Ireland of the cottiers and small farmers. Almost 70 per cent of all holdings in 1845 were smaller than fifteen acres; as striking was the proportion (more than one in three) of holdings which were smaller than five acres. In other words, since smaller holders, the

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175. Lee, "Ribbonmen", in Williams, ed., Secret Societies, p. 29

cottier-proletarians, were generally more prolific than the farmers,<sup>176</sup> at least three million people were trying to survive on these tiny plots.

TABLE I: Irish Farms, 1845-51 (Number & %)<sup>177</sup>

	1845	1847	1851
Less than one acre	135,314 14.9	73,016 9.1	37,728 6.2
From one to 5 acres	181,950 20.1	139,041 17.4	88,083 14.4
From five to 15 acres	311,133 34.5	269,534 33.7	191,854 31.8
Above 15 acres	276,618 30.6	321,434 40.2	290,401 47.5
All holdings	905,015	803,025	608,066

Contemporary commentators set this crude statistical total in context by attempting to establish a distinction between the uneconomic small-holding and the minimum size for a viable farm.

The lowest estimate was the Devon Commission's "poverty line" of

176. Connell, Population of Ireland, pp. 21, 44-6, 81-4; the debate between Drake, "Marriage & Population Growth" and Lee, "Marriage and Population"; and further evidence offered by Carney, "Pre-Famine Irish Population".

177. The usual figures for pre-Famine holdings, from the data in the 1841 Census, have been omitted, in accordance with the findings and argument of P. M. Austin Bourke: "Uncertainties in the Statistics of Farm Size in Ireland, 1841-51", JSSISI, XX, (1959-60), pp. 20-26; "The Agricultural Statistics of the 1841 Census of Ireland: A Critical Review", ECHR, 2nd Series, XVIII, (1965), pp. 376-91.

The figures employed here derive from the following:

1845: Poor Law Returns, as published by the Devon Report, Pt. III, Appendix 94, pp. 280-89

1847, 1851: Agricultural Returns, 1847, (923, 1000), lvii and 1852-3, (1589), xciii

eight acres as the smallest amount of average land which would support a family.<sup>178</sup> Witnesses who appeared before the Commission tended to stress a higher limit, usually between twenty and thirty acres. They also pointed to marked regional differences: John Cahill, a land-agent in county Tipperary, defined the small farm as "from thirty acres downwards", while Ulster witnesses called twenty acres a large farm and reckoned on six acres as the average holding.<sup>179</sup> Twenty years earlier, Lord Downshire had told his tenants that "as no exact number of acres can be defined as the prescribed size of a Farm, it may be stated in general Terms that not less than 10 acres ought to be in possession of a good Tenant upon the Estate, and 20 acres would be preferred".<sup>180</sup>

It was normal that the parliamentary inquiries should have emphasised the distress of the rural proletariat: it was in the terms of reference of the Poor Inquiries and on the eve of the Famine it forced itself upon the attention of the Devon Commission. But that focus tended to conceal the strong points in the rural economy, which were primarily occupied by the farmers. The central task is to identify this farming class, and more specifically, the "strong farmers" among them.

The starting point is one of definition. The figures given in Table I, for 1845, are not the raw data provided by the Poor Law

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178. Devon Digest, i, p. 154

179. Ibid., discussion and evidence at pp. 351-91, esp. pp. 363, 384ff; cf., Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 13-16

180. Cited by Maguire, Downshire Estates, p. 131

Inspectors, but rather the accommodation of the original returns to the categories employed from 1847 onwards. The latter categories, moreover, employed an additional dividing line at 30 acres which could not be matched with the 1845 figures.<sup>181</sup> The immediate problem, therefore, rests on the fact that the essential definition of the "strong farmer", as a holder of at least thirty acres, will remain partially obscured in these figures. However, we do know that these thirty-acre farmers comprised about half of all the holdings of more than fifteen acres, in both 1847 and 1851.<sup>182</sup> More significant is the proportional advance of the thirty-acre holdings, from less than 20 per cent in 1847 to more than 24 per cent in 1851, of all holdings. Although the Poor Law Inspectors used different categories, the raw data for 1845 do still allow an approximate cross-check. On the eve of the Famine, there were 212,260 holdings of at least 20 acres, or rather more than 20 per cent of the total. As we shall see in greater detail, in Chapter Four, the key transformation which was inaugurated by the Famine was a steady increase in the proportion of holdings in the "strong farm" or thirty-acre category.

The question can also be approached from the other end of the scale. Thus, a check against the very steep decline in the number of small holdings suggests that the process of reinforcing the position

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181. Bourke, "Agricultural Statistics, 1841", p. 380

182. The numbers were: 1847 -- 157,097; 1851 -- 149,090 thirty-acre holdings. (1847-8, (1000), lvii, Pt. II, p. 15; 1852-3, (1589), xciii, p. iii)



of the farmers got underway immediately, during the Famine years. The land-distribution figures in Table I demonstrate that more than 300,000 small holdings (of less than fifteen acres) were suppressed between 1845 and 1851. Omitting, for the moment, the real distinctions between the cottier on less than an acre of potato-ground and the small farmer holding fourteen acres, it is essential to emphasise that each of these holdings represented home and livelihood for at least five persons.<sup>183</sup> Briefly, then, the potato-blight and the Famine clearances broke the last hold on the land of at least 1,500,000 people. Indeed, this estimate is too low, since there is a consistent body of evidence pointing to a lower age at marriage and larger families among the cottiers and labourers than among farmers.<sup>184</sup>

The proportionate increase in the thirty-acre holdings clearly reflects the huge declines in the smaller "farms". This is, in fact, the essential point about the Famine. The principal victims were the labourers, the cottiers and the small farmers; the main beneficiaries were the stronger farmers. The latter's most crucial and most immediate gains were made in the key location, at the point of production, on the land. Thirty years after the Famine, the strong farmers occupied three-quarters of the agricultural land;<sup>185</sup> it would

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183. Connell, Population of Ireland, p. 21, suggested that the average household size rose from 5.95 persons in 1821 to 6.2 in 1831, and then fell back to 5.9 in 1841

184. The main evidence was gathered by the Poor Inquiry of 1836; cf., the debate around this material in the sources cited above, p. 42, n. 29

185. T. W. Grimshaw, "Papers", No. 1, 1887, (c.4969), xxvi, p. 974

be unreasonable to estimate their total holdings, at the time of the Famine, at less than 40 per cent of the cultivated area.<sup>186</sup> The massive clearances, by "voluntary" desertion of the land or by eviction, by death or by emigration, reversed the process of subdivision at its most extreme level. Since, moreover, it has been estimated that about 100,000 more acres of land came into use between 1841 and 1851,<sup>187</sup> there can be no doubt that the average farm-size increased dramatically. In short, the land from which the rural cottier-proletariat had been swept away remained in production and was transferred to the farmers. The next two chapters will examine how the strong farmers and their class allies extended their economic and social powers after the Famine, how they came to dominate the social landscape of post-Famine Ireland.

### The End of the Old World

In August 1845, the blight began to appear in the potato-fields between Dublin and Cork. Within weeks, nearly half of the country's basic food-crop rotted in the ground. In 1846, the blight returned with greater virulence and destroyed virtually the entire crop. Although 1847 brought a temporary respite from the blight, a shortage

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186. In the absence of fuller information, this must be an educated guess, based on the assumption that the average thirty-acre farm was no bigger than forty acres.

187. Bourke, "Agricultural Statistics, 1841", pp. 382-91

of seed-potatoes and able-bodied men resulted in a "successful" harvest amounting to little more than one-tenth of the pre-Famine crop.<sup>188</sup> Finally, in 1848, the whole crop was lost again and, to make matters worse, the wet summer resulted in large-scale losses in the grain harvest.

Among the dozens of descriptions of what the Famine actually did to the Irish people, one will suffice. An English sailor, who landed at the aptly named village of Skull in west Cork in February 1847, wrote home describing what he had seen:<sup>189</sup>

The deaths here average 40 to 50 daily. Twenty bodies were buried this morning, and they were fortunate in getting buried at all . . . Fever, dysentery and starvation stare you in the face everywhere — children of 10 and 9 years old I have mistaken for decrepit old women, their faces wrinkled, their bodies bent and distorted with pain, the eyes looking like those of a corpse. Babies are found lifeless, lying on their mothers' bosoms. I will tell you one thing which struck me as peculiarly horrible; a dead woman was found lying on the road with a dead infant on her breast, the child having bitten the nipple of the mother's breast right through in trying to derive nourishment from the wretched body. Dogs feed on the half-buried dead, and rats are commonly known to tear people to pieces, who, though still alive, are too weak to cry out.

Horrors like this were repeated across the country for four years.

What was their significance?

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188. See the calculations of pre-Famine potato acreage and yields by P. M. A. Bourke, "The Extent of the Potato Crop in Ireland at the time of the Famine", JSSISI, XX, (1959-60), pp. 1-19; "The Use of the Potato Crop in Pre-Famine Ireland", JSSISI, XXI, (1965-8), pp. 72-96

189. This letter was first published in The Times, then reprinted in the Cork Examiner, March 11, 1847; cited by Woodham-Smith, Great Hunger, pp. 177-78 and by Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 86

The answer has taken two basic, and mutually exclusive, forms. On the one hand, Irish nationalist historians, from John Mitchel to P. S. O'Hegarty, have advanced one simple charge. The Famine, they argue, was an act of English genocide. The circumstantial evidence certainly lends some prima facie weight to this accusation. The blight accommodated both aspects of English policy for Ireland. The long-standing positive prescription of emigration, depopulation and consolidation as the essential basis for capital investment was finally realised, while the Whigs' more negative infatuation with the dogmas of laissez faire bore a predictable fruit. The fact that food, primarily grain, was exported while the Irish rural proletariat sought nourishment in boiled nettles served to prove John Mitchel's contention that "it is the duty of English statesmen to take such measures as shall ensure periodical famines in Ireland" and "when those famines come -- to increase and cherish them, and protract their operation to the utmost possible extent".<sup>190</sup>

The alternative point of view is more complicated and ostensibly more objective. Its most callous form was Sir Charles Trevelyan's discovery of the proper rules for the relief of distress.<sup>191</sup>

A recent, and no less hard-hearted, summation is Louis Cullen's

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190. John Mitchel, An Apology for the British Government in Ireland, (1860), (reprint: Dublin: O'Donoghue & Gill, 1905)

191. C. E. Trevelyan, The Irish Crisis, (London: Longmans, Brown, 1848); cf., the acerbic commentary by Kiely, Poor Scholar, pp. 132-35

statement that "what the Famine did, however, was greatly to lessen the natural reluctance to emigrate and to accelerate the painful process of adjusting Ireland's population to its narrowing economic prospects".<sup>192</sup> Lecky acknowledged defects in the Irish land system, and in the character of the landowners, but he suggested that they were "more faults of negligence than of oppression";<sup>193</sup> a recent paraphrase calls the Famine "more a failure of comprehension than a lack of compassion".<sup>194</sup> It remained for the editors of the most authoritative modern study of the Famine to place the emphasis where it rightly belongs -- "The really great evil lay in the totality of that social order which made such a famine possible and which could tolerate, to the extent that it did, the sufferings and hardships caused by the failure of the potato crop".<sup>195</sup>

The "totality of that social order" was the class structure of the tillage system, that combination of spade and plough, potato and corn, which dominated pre-Famine Ireland. While it sometimes seemed as if there was a radical discontinuity between the commercial production of grain by the farmers and the subsistence cultivation of potatoes by the cottier-proletariat, the two forms of agriculture were mutually dependent. Cereal farming, characterised by expanding output to meet a rising market in a period of falling prices, was conditioned by the

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192. Cullen, Economic History, pp. 132-33

193. Lecky, History of Ireland, p. 117

194. O Tuathaigh, Ireland before the Famine, p. 221

195. Edwards & Williams, "Introduction", The Great Famine, p. xv

farmers' ability to obtain labour at ever lower costs and to augment their own incomes by charging their labourers for the right to work. The subsistence economy of the labourers and cottiers, and of the small farmers who were forced down to the level of the cottiers, was founded on a simple calculation. Potatoes were nutritious, ideally suited to poor land, easily cultivated by hand, and increasingly prolific when the newer, but weaker, strains such as the notorious "lumper" were adopted. Land under potatoes fed more people per acre than land under any other crop.

The potato-nexus was the integrating link between these two forms of agriculture, the commercial and the subsistence. The four main classes in rural Ireland all stood to gain from expanding subdivision for the potato. The landowners sought to increase their rental income to compensate for higher levels of debt; the gentry-middlemen had no other economic raison d'etre than to subdivide and sublet their holdings; the farmers wanted more tillage land to meet the demands of the market and to counter falling prices with higher output; and the cottiers and labourers had to have their plots of land to grow the potatoes which allowed them to survive despite low wages and high unemployment. So long as the potato yields were high and the crop did not fail too extensively, life was hard but possible for the rural working classes. The farmers' supply of labour was assured and grain was grown and sold. The landlords were thus assured of at least some

rental income. But then, as 1845-48 demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt, the potato-nexus was a precarious foundation upon which to raise a whole social order.

When that foundation broke down, the society failed. This should not be exaggerated. There were, very clearly, plenty of people left after the bloodletting: the 1851 Census counted 6.6 millions. But radical changes in the social structure had been set in train. The principal discontinuity was the massive, traumatic and irrecuperable blow suffered by the cottier-proletariat. Across most of the country, that class was drastically reduced, in numbers and in social weight. With them an older society, pre-capitalist in many of its forms, also died. The Great Hunger, an Gorta Mór, was the coup de grâce to the Gaelic order, because it destroyed the social fabric which had harboured the remnants left after the military defeat of 1690. In this respect, the charge levelled by John Mitchel can be borne out: the Famine was an act of cultural genocide.<sup>196</sup>

In another, distinctly class-bound sense, the Famine was not indeed "a watershed", for the farmers who survived the Famine were an important source of continuity. Before the Famine they had been in a curiously contradictory position, subject to pressures from above and below. The landlord insisted on receiving his rent, which could only be  
 196. This thesis is developed with some subtlety by Sean O'Faolain in his brilliant biography of Daniel O'Connell: King of the Beggars.

paid by producing commodities for the market. For most pre-Famine farmers that meant intensive cultivation of grains. But the cottiers and landless labourers persistently demanded subdivision or conacre, thus tending constantly to encroach on the amount of land available for productive farming. Similarly, farmers could be both victims and beneficiaries of agrarian unrest. The strong farmer who attempted to convert tillage to pasture was liable to be attacked or to have his livestock "houghed" or maimed. But the farmer who was evicted for non-payment of rent could sometimes be reinstated on his holding through pressure from the rural terrorists. Finally, the strong farmer was not without friends among the landowners. Many of the latter clearly recognised the distinctions among their tenants, and a number of the greater magnates invested considerable sums of money and time in assisting their more solvent tenants.

The best indication of the problems "solved" by the Famine is the fact that these strong farmers, who were after all the backbone of the economy, had seemed invisible before 1845, obscured by the rising tide of population and immiseration below them. The single most important problem which the Famine disposed of was the pressure on the land from the bottom. From 1850 onwards, subdivision was no longer a significant characteristic of the Irish land system. Agrarian terrorism, which had been a major problem for pre-Famine farmers, declined steeply after the Famine. In a word, the farmers' main



immediate rival for the land and most active class enemy had been defeated.

The emancipation of the farmers from the social problems represented by the cottier-proletariat cleared the underbrush. The main contradiction was brought to the forefront, as the farmers and the landowners began to confront one another. The task of the following chapters will be to trace how the farmers pursued the victory which the Famine represented, and converted the gains from that disaster into the currency which enabled them to defeat their other class enemy, the landowners.

## CHAPTER THREE

### BUILDING THE BULLOCK ECONOMY: THE MATERIAL BASIS OF THE AGRARIAN PETTY-BOURGEOISIE

#### Introduction: Cattle Eat Men

A major concern of the recent "revisionist" historians has been to question the idées reçues of the nationalist orthodoxy. One strategy has been to stress the continuities within agricultural production and demographic patterns before and after the Famine.<sup>1</sup> If it can be shown, for instance, that population growth had begun to decelerate or had even halted altogether before 1845, or that the cattle-graziers had increased their share of the land and their output, then it may be argued that the Famine did not so much alter the pattern of development as accelerate the fruition of tendencies which were already present. Indeed, the rate of population growth probably had

1. The most determined "revisionists" are Louis Cullen and Raymond Crotty, who both argue, on the basis of the onset of the long-term recession around 1818, for 1815-20 as the crucial turning point. Thus Cullen insists that the Famine "has been given a more decisive role in changes in Irish social and economic life than it deserves", (Economic History, p. 134); and Crotty argues that the Famine did "hasten developments, but only along lines which were already being followed", (Irish Agricultural Production, p. 46). Some of Crotty's argument, especially his claim that tillage was already in retreat before the expanding grasslands well before the Famine, has been challenged by Lee, "Irish Agriculture", pp. 64-70. See also the demographic arguments in Drake, "Marriage & Population Growth" and Lee, "Marriage & Population".

begun to slow down, and cattle-rearing certainly was advancing, before the Famine. But the cataclysm cannot be lightly dismissed by arguing that the seeds had sprouted before 1845. The proposition is true, but slightly beside the point.

The Famine's significance can be likened to the effect of a forest fire. It cleared the underbrush, and facilitated new growth. In more systematic terms, the Famine altered the rapport des forces in the rural class structure in the most brutal, rapid and final form. The principal focus of this chapter is to trace the reconstruction of the basic elements of the agrarian economy after the Famine, that is, to analyse the material grounds upon which the changing class structure was founded.

The tillage economy, that pre-Famine system of mass unemployment, subdivision and potato-subsistence, was shattered. Rapid population growth gave way to systematic depopulation. Subdivision ceased, and consolidation ensued. Across much of the country, the potato ceased to be the sole staple in the rural diet. The central imperative of the agrarian economy remained unchanged, for "export or die" continued to be the rule. Constitutional politics and economic laws alike bound Ireland to England; the commodity market was in England, and the demands from that market constituted the principal determinants of the development of Irish agrarian capitalism.

The main elements in that development can be enumerated

briefly. Cattle supplanted people and corn. Industrialisation was restricted to the Belfast area. The shifting agricultural balance, from arable to pastoral production, marked a more profound, long-term movement towards capital-intensive and labour-extensive development. The major advances were recorded in the expansion of the national cattle-herd, in the construction of a sophisticated infrastructure, in sharp increases in rural living standards and levels of literacy, and in the eventual transfer of the means of production from the landowners to the occupying tenant-farmers.

This ensemble of pastoral farming, infrastructural growth and industrial retardation was the hallmark of an agrarian economy, whose focal point was the petty-bourgeois small commodity producer. Significantly, the most important industries in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century (with the exception of engineering and shipbuilding, whose location in Belfast was somewhat fortuitous, and the result of a separate, uneven train of development)<sup>2</sup> were based on the agrarian sector. Linen, whiskey and beer were reminders of the earlier tillage economy. Of the six major export commodities -- people, cattle, beer, whiskey, linen and engineering products -- only the last had absolutely no basis in agriculture. At the time of the

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2. Unfortunately, there is neither space nor opportunity to deal with the separate development which occurred in the north-east; reference will be made to this issue, particularly in the concluding remarks. The most important aspect of Belfast's separate development is the linkage between uneven development and imperialism, manifested in the political form of the Partition of Ireland in 1921.

Industrial Census of 1907, more than three-quarters of the value of Irish output was accounted for by this broad agrarian sector, namely, agriculture, fisheries, linen, food and drink.<sup>3</sup> The underlying patterns in the development of the reconstituted agrarian economy comprise the essential grounding for an analysis of the rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

"From a granary to a ranch"<sup>4</sup>

The Famine effected a significant and abrupt transformation in the nature of Irish agricultural production. The end of the tillage system can be depicted in several striking contrasts. Between the early 1840s and 1859, nearly two million acres of tilled land were laid down to grass; another 600,000 acres of waste were brought into the pastoral sector; the national cattle herd grew by 1,500,000 head, an increase of about 70 per cent; and the population was reduced by nearly 30 per cent, with the loss of 2,350,000 people.<sup>5</sup> The pattern of changes

3. Final Report of the First Census of Production of the United Kingdom, 1912-13, (Cd.6320), cix, pp. 19-21

4. C. Desmond Greaves, Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 13

5. The original source for these figures is the annual series of Returns of Agricultural Produce (1847-56) and Agricultural Statistics (1857-1920) and the decennial Census of Ireland (1841-1926). The agricultural and demographic statistics were collected, re-edited and published by the Irish government: John Hooper, ed., Agricultural Statistics, 1847-1926, (Dublin: Department of Industry & Commerce, 1930) and by the Commission on Emigration and other Population Problems, Reports, 1948-54, (Dublin: Stationery Office, n.d.; Pr.2451). See also, Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, Appendix Tables I-V, pp. 351-56; Mitchell & Deane, Abstract of Statistics.

inaugurated by the Famine was maintained throughout the rest of the century, but two distinctive periods may be identified. First of all, the decisive changes were mainly concentrated in the 1850s; and secondly, the third quarter of the nineteenth century stands out as the most prosperous enjoyed by Irish farmers and as the critical formative period for the growth of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

Before the Famine, commercial farming rested primarily on corn, the generic term for the three main grains: wheat, barley and oats. The ultimate destiny of these crops provides a vital distinction: wheat and barley were primarily grown for human consumption, while oats were and are mainly produced as winter feed for livestock.<sup>6</sup> The relative weight of these three items in the total tillage output will tend to indicate the balance of pastoral and arable content in agricultural production. The main aspect of the decline of tillage after the Famine was the progressive and very extensive abandonment of wheat. By 1914, wheat was grown on less than five per cent of the area it had occupied in 1847-49.<sup>7</sup> The rest of the tillage sector followed suit, though less radically. The acreages devoted to barley, oats and potatoes all fell

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6. It should be stressed, however, that oats continued to be part of the diet of the smallholders, especially in Ulster and on the Atlantic coast. Nevertheless, the main role of oats as winter feed is reflected in the fact that almost three-quarters of the crop (by value) in 1908 was used as seed or feed, as against only 8.4 per cent of the wheat and 29.2 per cent of the barley crop. Thomas Barrington, "A Review of Irish Agricultural Prices", JSSISI, XV, Pt. ci, (1927), p. 259

7. Mitchell & Deane, Abstract of Statistics, pp. 80-1

by between 40 and 50 per cent from the Famine to 1914. The decline in tillage was most glaringly illuminated in the import-export balance. Between 1839 and 1845, average net grain exports had amounted to 374,000 tons annually; in 1870, the last year for complete records of imports, Ireland imported almost 640,000 tons of corn, meal and flour.<sup>8</sup>

There were two essential characteristics in the swing away from tillage. First, the land which ceased to be ploughed was put down to grass for the expanding cattle herd. Secondly, the choices and decisions which the farmers made, individually and collectively, were anything but arbitrary. The overall patterns clearly justify Thomas Barrington's comment that "there is not a scintilla of evidence in the ample statistical material available to suggest that the Irish farmer has regulated his activities other than in accordance with the economic tendencies of his time".<sup>9</sup> The maintenance of a barley crop, for instance, was based upon the existence of a ready market in the brewing industry.<sup>10</sup> With the partial exception of the potato, Irish agriculture

8. Bourke, "Irish Grain Trade", Table 3, p. 168; Thom's Irish Almanac & Official Directory, (Dublin: annually from 1844), 1885, p. 676. In 1883, the six principal ports (Dublin, Belfast, Cork, Limerick, Derry and Waterford) imported more than 740,000 tons of grain products: ibid., p. 679

9. Barrington, "Review of Prices", p. 279; cf., "in spite of frictions, large irregularities, and apparent contradictions, it cannot be denied that the changes in Irish agriculture were essentially 'rational'"; Hans Staehle, "Statistical Notes on the Economic History of Irish Agriculture", JSSISI, XXI, (1951-2), p. 457; and Cormac O Grada, "Supply Responsiveness in Irish Agriculture during the Nineteenth Century", EcHR, 2nd series, XXVIII, (1975), pp. 312-17

10. In 1881, Guinness's bought more than half of the Irish barley crop; Patrick Lynch & John Vaizey, Guinness's Brewery in the Irish Economy, 1759-1876, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 216

was eminently commercial. The great bulk of the produce was destined directly for the commodity markets -- butter to Cork, flax to Belfast, cattle and grain to Dublin, and thence to the British and North American consumers.

For an understanding of the long-term transformation of the agrarian economy in the nineteenth century, there is a dual significance (practical and theoretical) to tracing price movements. In the first instance, all farmers, large and small alike, were practical, rational-economic men; their guiding line was the price realised by their crops and livestock in the fairs and markets across Ireland. A couple of examples may be noted. The price of Irish wheat collapsed twice in the latter half of the nineteenth century -- in the aftermath of the repeal of the Corn Laws, between 1847 and 1852, and again under the onslaught of Australian and American imports in the 1880s. Both periods saw sharp reductions in the Irish wheat acreage.<sup>11</sup> The other case is even more pointed, principally because it reflects the narrower profit margins of the smaller farmers. In 1925, the Irish Trade Journal recorded that "in no less than twenty-three out of the thirty-one years from 1881 to 1913 a rise or fall in pork prices in any twelve months was followed by a rise or fall, respectively, in the number of pigs in the following twelve months".<sup>12</sup>

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11. Contrast the price-series in Barrington, "Review of Prices", pp. 251-53 and the acreages in Mitchell & Deane, Abstract of Statistics, pp. 80-81

12. Cited by Barrington, "Review of Prices", p. 264; cf., Riordan, Modern Irish Trade & Industry, pp. 69-71



The second basis for a focus on price movements is a theoretical argument. The relationship between British industrial capital and the growth of the Irish agrarian economy was a specific form of uneven development. In brief, a regional division of labour was established. Industrial capital was concentrated in Britain (and, secondarily, in east Ulster), while Ireland was left largely in the grip of the earlier form of "merchant's capital".<sup>13</sup> This distinction was clearly underlined, as we shall see, not alone in the industrial decline and stagnation which accompanied agrarian development, but even in the relative retardation of the introduction and employment of the capital forces of production which directly enhanced agricultural output and profitability.

During the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century, before the widespread adoption of arable farming, the principal product of Irish agriculture had been dead cattle; the entire industry had been conducted in Ireland, the beasts were raised, fattened, slaughtered, butchered, salted and packed in barrels for export. The conversion to tillage, the continental blockades and the growth of population and production in North America had led to the virtual extinction of the provision trade by the end of the counter-revolutionary wars.<sup>14</sup> This

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13. Marx, Capital, iii, pp. 302-37

14. Young, Tour, i, pp. 333ff; Cullen, Anglo-Irish Trade, pp. 69-74; Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, pp. 14-15; Cullen, Economic History, pp. 54-9

decline entailed, however, not a complete abandonment of cattle-rearing, but rather a change of emphasis from dead fat-cattle to live stores. It must be stressed, in other words, that the swing back to pastoral production which followed the Famine was not an absolute event, starting from zero. By the time of the Famine, in fact, Irish graziers were already exporting some 200,000 head of cattle annually.<sup>15</sup> But this pre-Famine grazing industry was largely restricted to the richer areas in east Leinster (counties Meath, Westmeath, Laois, Offaly and Kildare), within easy reach of Dublin and the English market. In the rest of the country, cattle-rearing for meat was still relatively underdeveloped before the Famine.<sup>16</sup>

The critical issue is to determine how cattle came to dominate the farming landscape. How were the stocks increased? Where did the cattle go? How was the cattle trade organised and managed? The essential starting point is the obvious fact that cattle and arable farming cannot occupy the same land at the same time. The growing cattle herd was accommodated on land which had formerly

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15. "Grimshaw Papers", No. 4, 1887, (c.4969), xxvi, p. 982; O'Donovan, History of Live Stock, p. 212, quotes a figure of 202,000 head as the average annual export of live cattle in 1846-48; and cf., the sources cited at p. 39, n. 24, supra.

16. The underlined qualification is an essential distinction between beef-cattle and milch cows. The latter had long been established on the upland pastures of Cork, Kerry and Limerick, counties which supplied more than 90 per cent of the butter to the Cork Market; but a feature of pre-Famine cattle-rearing had been the propensity of the dairy-farmers to slaughter rather than rear the calves. Cf., the discussion of dairying, below, pp.

been tilled, as well as on significant areas of what had been waste. This movement necessarily entailed the expropriation and expulsion of people as well as crops.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the expansion of the cattle-rearing business in the quarter-century after the Famine involved a regional division of labour which still characterises Irish agriculture. The following description, of the situation in the 1970s, differs from conditions a hundred years ago only in the clarity of later development: "One farmer breeds the calf; another rears it to the weaning stage; another winters it; another grazes it as a store; and so on up to the final fattening stage. Each farmer concentrates on the stage of production for which his circumstances are best suited".<sup>18</sup> Broadly, this pattern involves an eastward movement: young cattle were bred in the west, wintered and grazed in the central midlands and rich eastern counties, and exported for final fattening in England. The dairy herds were generally concentrated in the south-west.<sup>19</sup>

The figures in Table II (p. 126) demonstrate both the extent of the swing from arable to pastoral farming and, more particularly, the rapidity with which the expansion of the cattle herds was undertaken. The central pattern is unequivocal -- tilled acreage and population fell sharply, while the number of cattle and the amount of land devoted to

17. The process by which the people, mostly cottiers and labourers, were replaced by cattle will be examined in more detail in the analysis of the post-Famine class structure in Chapter Four.

18. Raymond Crotty, The Cattle Crisis & the Small Farmer, (Kilkenny: National Land League, 1974), p. 33

19. O'Donovan, History of Live Stock, pp. 205-18, 301-46

them increased. Moreover, these complementary movements were both concentrated in the brief period between the Famine and the end of the 1850s.

TABLE II: Tillage, Pasture, Cattle & People (1841-1911)  
(millions of acres/head/persons)

	Tillage	% loss	Pasture	% gain	Cattle	% gain	People	% loss
1841-5	6.25		8.3		2.25		8.3	
1851	4.614	26.3	9.99	20.4	2.97	32.0	6.55	21.1
1859	4.425	4.1	10.93	9.5	3.82	28.6	5.95	9.2
1871	3.792	14.3	11.90	8.9	3.98	4.2	5.41	9.1
1881	3.194	15.8	12.08	1.5	3.96	-0.5	5.18	4.3
1891	2.758	13.7	12.36	2.3	4.45	12.8	4.71	9.1
1901	2.452	11.1	12.76	3.2	4.67	4.9	4.46	5.3
1911	2.335	4.8	12.36	-3.1	4.71	0.9	4.39	1.6
Overall change (1841-1911) %		-62.6		+48.9		+109.3		-47.1

NOTES: The figures for 1841-5 are estimates, based upon the calculations in Bourke, "Extent of the Potato Crop"; Bourke, "Agricultural Statistics, 1841"; Bourke, "Uncertainties of Farm Size"; Lee, "Irish Agriculture". In the latter, Lee's "generous estimate" puts the total cattle herd as 2.5 million head in 1845; Bourke ("Agricultural Statistics, 1841") suggests between 2.2 and 2.3 million head as the figure for 1841. Similarly, the population figure on the eve of the Famine is an estimate, based on Grimshaw's modest guess of an increase of about 200,000 people between 1841 and 1845. (Cf., Carney, "Pre-Famine Population", p. 36). The other "rogue" figure is the population estimate for 1859, which was calculated by assuming a mean population loss of 75,000 people per annum in the intercensal period, and thus adding 150,000 to the figure given in the 1861 Census. (Much the same result can be achieved by subtracting the number of emigrants who left in 1859-60).

The choice of 1859, rather than the Census year of 1861, for the second comparative date was predicated on two points. In the first place, the depression of 1859-64 resulted in grave losses in the cattle herd (a shortfall of 700,000 head between 1859 and 1863 alone), and though this was clearly a significant event in the development of the agrarian economy, its inclusion in this table would have, in fact, misrepresented the extent of the post-Famine transformation. (Cf., J. S. Donnelly, Jr., "The Irish Agricultural Depression of 1859-64", Irish Economic & Social History, III, (1976), pp. 33-54). Secondly, I have in this issue followed Lee: "if any date is crucial in the history of post-Famine agriculture, it is 1859" -- "Irish Agriculture", p. 70

For all other figures, see the sources cited at p. 119, n. 5.

The expansion of the cattle herd was the most significant development, for the addition of over 1, 500, 000 head to the national holdings, within the span of barely fifteen years (1845-59), evidently represented a major capital investment on the part of the Irish farming community. Nor was it simply a matter of numerical increase, for the cattle industry also became more intensive, as stocking-density rose. As Table II indicates, the grasslands increased by just under half over the period from 1841 to 1911, but they supported twice as many head of cattle. This feature of the development of the pastoral economy can be seen, in a different form, in the figures in Table III.<sup>20</sup>

TABLE III: Human & Animal Population (1851-1901)  
(per 1, 000 acres of total land surface)

	Cattle	Sheep	Swine	People
1851	143	102	52	315
1861	167	171	52	279
1871	191	203	78	260
1881	195	156	53	249
1891	214	227	66	226
1901	230	215	60	219

The most prominent sectoral, and thus, in practice, regional distinction within this expanding cattle herd was the decline in the proportion of milch cows to all cattle, from about 45 per cent in the 1850s to less than one-third in 1914.<sup>21</sup> This was, clearly, a symbol

20. Reproduced from the "Statistical Survey of Irish Agriculture", in W. P. Coyne, ed., Ireland, Industrial & Agricultural, (Dublin: Browne & Nolan, for the Department of Agriculture & Technical Instruction, 1902), p. 320

21. Derived from the annual Agricultural Returns & Statistics, as in Mitchell & Deane, Abstract of Statistics, pp. 84-5

of the increasing domination of the pastoral sector by beef-cattle. Milk and butter were relegated to a secondary position, and the number of milch cows in the total holdings was primarily determined by the breeding requirements and stocking capacities of the beef-cattle producers.<sup>22</sup> Although the number fluctuated from year to year, falling particularly steeply during the depression of 1859-64, the total holdings of milch cows remained fairly stable over the whole period of post-Famine development.<sup>23</sup> It must be emphasised, then, that the overall expansion of the national herd, by about 2.5 million head from 1845 to 1911 (Table II), was almost entirely concentrated in the stocks of young animals and fat bullocks. The best evidence of the whole-hearted devotion of the Irish graziers to the bullock can be found, once again, in the export figures (Table IV).<sup>24</sup> From an annual rate of

TABLE IV: Average Annual Cattle Exports to Britain, 1850-99, (000s of head)

Years	All	Years	Fat	Stores	All
1850-4	195	1875-9	255	343	656
1855-9	296	1880-4	258	353	670
1860-4	373	1885-9	278	363	688
1865-9	409	1890-4	292	346	681
1870-4	558	1895-9	279	418	760

22. Barrington, "Review of Prices", p. 269; Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, pp. 69ff.

23. Mitchell & Deane, Abstract of Statistics, pp. 84-5

24. This table is based on those in O'Donovan, History of Live Stock, pp. 214-15; O'Donovan also points to a sharp increase in the export of stores during the 1870s, from 293,000 in 1875 to 417,000 in 1878 (ibid., p. 216). Another estimate recorded an increase in the annual average exports of "oxen, bulls and cows" from 350,000 in the 1860s to 550,000 in the following decades: "Grimshaw Papers", No. 4, 1887, (c.4969), xxvi, p. 982

about 200,000 head on the eve of the Famine, Irish cattle exports doubled within twenty years and continued to rise throughout the rest of the century.

Thus, pastoral production expanded greatly after the Famine, and the principal product was the bullock for beef. It remains to determine why Irish farmers concentrated so rigorously upon cattle-rearing. The reason could hardly be more material. During the entire period from the Famine to Partition, the prices realised by store cattle in the markets in Ireland never fell below the level they had reached in 1851. During both of the quinquennial periods which saw marked advances in exports, (1870-74, 1895-99), the underlying factor was the upward movement of prices. This relationship was especially close during the first period, for between 1865-69 and 1870-74 the average price of store cattle increased by 30 per cent for one- to two-year olds and by 33 per cent for two- to three-year olds.<sup>25</sup>

The most significant feature of the price-series for agricultural products was neither the year-by-year changes nor even the quinquennial average movements in any one item in the farmer's possible repertoire. It was rather the fundamental and consistent contrast between arable and pastoral products. Price levels for

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25. Barrington, "Review of Prices", Table I, pp. 252-53. The price movement was less marked in the 1890s, but the key in that period was the recovery from the long recession of the preceding decade. Young store prices rose by about 8 per cent, while older animals realised much the same price.

animal products tended to be both consistently higher and more bouyant than those for arable crops.<sup>26</sup> The crucial period in the transformation which was primarily facilitated by the market was the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Despite the dampening effect of the depression of 1859-64, the years from the end of the Famine to the late 1870s were undoubtedly a period of growing prosperity for a large section of the farming community. The biggest gains were certainly made by the graziers, for by the mid-1870s store-cattle prices were two to three times higher than they had been in 1845.<sup>27</sup> Even the butter trade, which was characterised by small-scale production and narrow profit margins for the direct producers, revived after the downturn in the early 1860s.<sup>28</sup>

This pattern of concentrated change during the third quarter of the century can also be traced in the connection between prices, production and land-use. Fully two-thirds of the retrenchment in the tilled acreage had been accomplished by the mid-1870s.<sup>29</sup> Conversely, the size and value of the cattle herd increased most rapidly during this

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26. Barrington, "Review of Prices", Table I, pp. 252-53

27. Ibid.

28. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 148, has called the years 1865-76 a period of "unprecedented prosperity for most Cork farmers"; the remark could equally well describe the situation in most of the country. Cf., Cullen, Economic History, pp. 138-42

29. Corn-acreage alone fell by 1,300,000 acres between 1851 and 1876, but only 650,000 acres went out of production in the next forty years. Mitchell & Deane, Abstract of Statistics, pp. 80-81; Thom's Directory, 1870, p. 843; 1885, p. 682



period. In fact, the numerical increase, of about 35 per cent, was far outpaced by the rise in value. The national herd, worth about £23 millions in 1851, appreciated by some 120 per cent to more than £50 millions in 1878-84.<sup>30</sup> In mirror-image, the value of the corn crop fell faster than the acreage on which it was grown. From the mid-1870s onwards, both sides of the process slowed down. Corn acreage continued to fall and the cattle herd grew apace, but the basic discrepancy between volume and value remained, as values moved faster than output in both directions.<sup>31</sup>

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30. This result can be obtained in three ways. First, Barrington's index of prices records increases in the value of store cattle of 124 and 138 per cent between 1851-5 and 1871-5. ("Review of Prices", Table I, pp. 252-53). Second, the "Grimshaw Papers" (1887, (c.4969), xxvi, No. 5, p. 986), include estimates of total stock values in 1855 (£31.4 millions) and 1875 (£47.5 millions). In line with Barrington, the former figure is some 40 per cent above the value for 1851. On the basis of these figures, the value of the herd would have increased by about 150 per cent within 25 years.

The third and most reliable method is this -- to combine the assigned constant-value prices from the 1841 Census with the actual price movements recorded by Barrington. At 1841 prices, the herd was worth £19.3 millions in 1851. Clearly, this figure is too low, for 2-3 year old stores sold in 1851 for 35 per cent more than they had realised in 1845. Allowing for a static price for young animals, I have assumed an average increase in value, for all cattle, of 20 per cent over the 1841 figure. This, most probably conservative, estimate gives a total for the 1851 herd of £23 millions. The comparative figure for 1878-84 is derived from the series of estimates of current prices, published annually in Thom's Directory, as in 1885, p. 694

31. The cereal crop's peak value was realised in 1855, a year of high prices; from that year's £19 millions, it declined by at least one-half over the next 20 years. From the mid-1870s, the value of the cereal crop fluctuated between £8 and £10 millions per year. Cattle values rose by 20 per cent between the mid-1870s and 1914, over a numerical increase of 16 per cent. Thom's Directory, 1870, pp. 849, 851; 1874, pp. 846-49, 851; 1885, p. 686; 1894, p. 687; 1904, p. 744; 1914, pp. 786, 792-93

During the half-century after the Famine, the combined volume of the animal products of Irish agriculture rose three-fold, while cereal output fell by two-thirds.<sup>32</sup> The focal importance of the bullock was confirmed by the Industrial Census, which reported that cattle alone accounted for almost one-third of the annual value of all agricultural production.<sup>33</sup> While beef cattle were certainly the key, the extent of the Irish farmer's dedication to pastoral production will remain gravely understated without a consideration of the secondary products, particularly dairy goods, sheep and pigs, since the entire livestock ensemble produced an annual value of £33.7 millions, or just under three-quarters of all agricultural value, in 1907.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, there are two more fundamental reasons for considering this secondary pastoral sector. In the first place, the story of Irish dairying is particularly significant as an instructive case-study in industrial under-development. Secondly, the distribution of the balance between cattle-grazing, dairying and pig-rearing is a critical indicator of the of the process of class differentiation within the farming community.

The graziers who ran the extensive tracts of heavily-stocked pasture in east Leinster, in the counties closest to Dublin, were certainly atypical in that the great majority of Irish livestock was

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32. Staehle, "Statistical Notes", Chart I and discussion, pp. 445, 466-67

33. Census of Production, 1912-13, (Cd.6320), cix, pp. 19-20; O'Donovan, History of Live Stock, p. 10

34. Census of Production, 1912-13, (Cd.6320), cix, pp. 19-20

bred and reared on the much more common small mixed farm. While the "typical" farm is an elusive category,<sup>35</sup> it is safe to say that more than two-thirds of the post-Famine holdings were smaller than 30 acres and that the majority of these farmers never concentrated on a single product. They reared cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry;<sup>36</sup> they made some butter and fed the skim-milk to calves and pigs; they almost always retained some arable land, to grow potatoes, oats and, in Ulster, flax.<sup>37</sup> This ensemble comprised a system within which animal products became increasingly predominant; cattle was the main money-maker, the other products generally supplementary.

In 1907, the second most important product was butter, worth nearly £10 millions.<sup>38</sup> Yet as late as the 1880s, the manufacture

35. Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine, pp. 50-51, briefly discusses this issue, and opts for the definition of "type" on the basis of numerical frequency. In Chapter Four, I shall argue for a different emphasis, on the more important issue of the leading role of the apparently "atypical" thirty-acre men, who were, clearly, a minority of all farmers.

36. The most spectacular advances were made in poultry-keeping, with the numbers leaping upwards from c.6 millions in 1847 to 27,000,000 in 1914. Egg production was an important supplement to the income of many small farmers, and output was spurred on by price increases which matched the pattern established by store cattle. Barrington, "Review of Prices", Table I, pp. 252-53; Riordan, Modern Irish Trade & Industry, p. 72

37. The extreme example of the small mixed farm was the deplorable condition of the tenants in the west, in the official "congested districts" (that is, having an annual ratable value of less than 30s. per person). W. L. Micks, An Account of the Constitution, Administration & Dissolution of the Congested Districts Board for Ireland from 1891 to 1923, (Dublin: Eason & Son, 1925); Congested Districts Board, Base-Line Reports, (unpublished; held in TCD Library); T. W. Freeman, "The Congested Districts of Western Ireland", Geographical Review, XXXIII, (1943), pp. 1-14

38. Census of Production, 1912-13, (Cd.6320), cix, pp. 19-20

of butter remained pre-industrial, literally a cottage industry, requiring little capital and employing only the farmer and his family. The dairy, as a separate outhouse, was frequently unknown. In 1867, the Cork Farmers' Club noted that "numbers of tenant farmers have neither suitable cow-houses nor houses fit either to have milk or to make butter".<sup>39</sup> Nearly twenty years later, W. J. Lane, a leading Cork butter merchant, explained to the Select Committee on Irish industrial development that the main complaint against Irish butter, "its peaty or smoky flavour", was the result of having "the milk set and the butter made in the ordinary dwelling rooms of the small farmers". Worse, the problem was compounded by the fact that "impurities also attach to the milk owing to the filthy condition of the cow from bad stabling".<sup>40</sup>

Despite these drawbacks, and even though British imports of foreign butter increased four-fold between 1853 and 1876, Ireland remained the chief supplier of butter for England.<sup>41</sup> The reason lay partly in the tariff advantage enjoyed by Irish dairymen down to 1859, and partly in the monopolistic grading and marketing system applied by the Cork Butter Market, whose brokers insisted on bulk sales of all grades of butter, thus ensuring the sale of even the poorest, over-salted

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39. Cited by O'Donovan, History of Live Stock, p. 306

40. Select Committee on Industries (Ireland), 1884-5, (288), ix, p. 730

41. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 149; James S. Donnelly, Jr., "Cork Market: Its Role in the Nineteenth Century Irish Butter Trade", Studia Hibernica, XI, (1971), pp. 130-63

and often inedible product.<sup>42</sup> The quarter-century after the Famine was undoubtedly a boom-period for Irish butter producers. During the 1850s, the average price of first-class butter at the Cork Market rose by 45 per cent, from 75s. to 109s. per hundredweight; after recovering from the relatively minor shortfalls in the early 1860s, the price reached its pinnacle at 137s. in 1876.<sup>43</sup> The latter year was also, however, the start of a severe long-term decline in Irish butter prices. The downturn was initiated rapidly, with a 27 per cent drop in prices between 1876 and 1879; after twenty years of fluctuation, the price finally settled, around 1900, at a level 30 per cent below the peak reached in the mid-1870s.<sup>44</sup>

While several factors coincided to produce this decline in the value of Irish butter, it was in fact the manifestation of a single over-riding condition -- the uneven development of the Irish economy. Irish dairies failed to compete with other producers because of technical backwardness and problems in the allocation of capital. The immediate factors which exposed the weakness in Irish dairying included

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42. Donnelly, "Cork Market", p. 139. This was clearly not an unmixed blessing, since the large quantities of inferior butter, either sold in separate batches or mixed with better product, played a part in damaging the reputation of Irish butter in Britain.

43. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 145, 153; Donnelly, "Agricultural Depression", pp. 44-5; Barrington, "Review of Prices", Table I, pp. 252-53

44. By 1879, the price had fallen back to 100s./cwt. In 1867-76, the price-index number averaged 140; in the 1890s, it had fallen to 99. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 153; Barrington, "Review of Prices", Table I, pp. 252-53; O'Donovan, History of Live Stock, pp. 306-7

increased competition from a better product made in France, Holland and Scandinavia; the development and aggressive marketing of the cheap butter-substitutes (sold as butterine and oleomargarine); the loss of the captive market in Australia to domestic dairy producers; and the failure of Irish dairymen to adopt the new mechanical processes, such as centrifugal cream-separation.<sup>45</sup> Technical laggardness was the most symptomatic problem facing the Irish industry. Dairying was a small-scale business; the butter was made as the milk was collected, little by little, each new batch being packed on top of its predecessor in a 70lb. firkin. The result, obviously, was a parson's egg. Irish butter was notoriously uneven in quality. The commercial outcome was equally obvious -- Ireland eventually lost a major part of the British market to continental producers.<sup>46</sup>

Why did Irish dairymen take some twenty years to catch up with European developments? The classical explanation, laying the blame at the door of the landowners, was advanced by the Cork Farmers' Club when they argued that "the tenants who have no lease or security for the outlay of the necessary expenditure cannot be expected" to invest

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45. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 153-56; Donnelly, "Cork Market", passim; Donnelly, "Agricultural Depression", pp. 44-5; O'Donovan, History of Live Stock, pp. 319ff.

46. British imports of foreign butter doubled again between 1870 and 1890. As early as 1878, European producers had captured 76 per cent of the British market. Donnelly, "Cork Market", p. 154; O'Donovan, History of Live Stock, p. 308

in the byres, dairies and machinery which were required.<sup>47</sup> At first glance, the extensive capital investment in the expansion of the cattle herds and the existence of considerable savings in the rural community<sup>48</sup> would tend to undermine the Club's argument. In fact, however, it is clear that the wealth which existed was unevenly distributed. Graziers held large stocks on broad acres of fine pasture, but most dairymen in the primary producing area in Munster were still small farmers, owning no more than a handful of cows on small holdings of less than first-rate land.

The indispensable requirement, then, which would alone have guaranteed the modernisation of Irish dairying was a two-fold process. In order to employ the new capital-intensive industrial methods, production needed to be collectivised. Few individual dairymen had sufficient capital to invest in separators or creamers, but collectively they disposed of ample resources. One important obstacle in the way of this advance was the extant monopolistic role of the middlemen, brokers, merchants and exporters who controlled the Cork Market. For decades, this urban petty-bourgeoisie had reaped the bulk of the profits from the butter trade, and although some of them began investing in creameries and butter-blending

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47. This is the conclusion of the report quoted above, (p. 134), cited by O'Donovan, History of Live Stock, p. 306. On the crucial question of the tenants' security and investment, see the more detailed analysis in Chapter Four, below.

48. The savings accumulated in the countryside were very clearly revealed when banking facilities spread throughout Ireland from the 1860s; see the discussion in the following section of this chapter.

factories in the late 1880s,<sup>49</sup> the butter merchants at least had the best of reasons for opposing the development of the factory-system. Creameries and blending factories raised the returns to the direct producers by tending to eliminate altogether the profits of the brokers and middlemen!<sup>50</sup>

Despite real problems of capital-shortage among the small dairymen, the question hinged primarily upon organising production so that the capital could be mobilised and its employment guaranteed. A primitive model already existed in the co-operative production, by several small farmers, of a blended firkin. But the breakthrough was not made until the foundation, in 1894, of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society by Sir Horace Plunkett. The IAOS provided planners for co-operative creameries, in which the farmers held shares (one per cow), and received proportionate profits from the sale of butter, skim-milk and condensed milk. Even this solution was not an immediate success. Only one in four of the 328 Irish creameries in 1898 were co-operatives; but within thirty years, the co-operatives' share had risen to 70 per cent.<sup>51</sup>

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49. O'Donovan, History of Live Stock, p. 320

50. Donnelly, "Cork Market", pp. 160-63

51. O'Donovan, History of Live Stock, pp. 325, 339; Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine, pp. 210-15; Cormac Ó Gráda, "The Beginnings of the Irish Creamery System, 1880-1914", EcHR, 2nd series, XXX, (1977), pp. 284-305; L. Smith-Gordon & C. O'Brien, Co-operation in Ireland, (Manchester: Co-operative Union Ltd., 1921); Margaret Digby, Sir Horace Plunkett, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1949)



The experience of the dairying industry is illuminating in a couple of directions. It was, first, a regional specialty. In 1873, almost one-third of Ireland's milch cows were concentrated in four counties: Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Waterford.<sup>52</sup> Secondly, it was a small man's operation. In 1871, small farms, in the range between five and thirty acres, accounted for less than 40 per cent of all holdings in Munster,<sup>53</sup> but in the big heartland county of Cork the average number of milch cows on all holdings of more than five acres was less than six.<sup>54</sup> It is worth underlining, finally, the small size of most dairy farms, especially outside the Golden Vale in Limerick, because it was this structural problem and not ignorance or conservatism which was the most important constraint against the modernisation of Irish butter production.<sup>55</sup>

Regional specialisation and the links between the various livestock products can be seen most clearly in the concentration of pig-breeding in the principal dairying and cattle-breeding areas. The connection was nicely captured in the statement that "to the extent that pigs were being fed on butter-milk, they are also, to the second degree, so to speak, a by-product of the cattle breeding industry".<sup>56</sup> At first

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52. Agricultural Statistics, 1871, as reprinted in Thom's Directory, 1874, p. 850

53. Ibid., p. 839

54. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 171-72

55. Ó Gráda, "Irish Creamery System", pp. 287-95

56. Staehle, "Statistical Notes", p. 456n.

glance, pig-rearing seems to involve an exception to the rule that Irish farmers were guided by prices in their choice of activity, since pig stocks only rose by about 10 per cent between 1851-5 and 1871-5, lagging behind a price increase of about 45 per cent.<sup>57</sup> A closer look at the matter will suggest that the discrepancy is partly illusory and readily explained. Part of the issue is Staehle's comment that "the breeding of pigs was more or less perfunctory in Ireland, that it took place not so much for its own sake, but rather was conducted as a side-line".<sup>58</sup> But this can only have been true for the larger farmers. After the Famine, as before, the pig was a critical factor in the small farmer's output -- cheap to rear, easy to feed on potatoes, forage and skim-milk, and usually selling well on a rising market. It may be suggested, in fact, that the relatively slow expansion of pig numbers was an advance when placed in the context of the steep reductions which were underway in both the acreage devoted to potatoes and the numbers of smallholders. Moreover, the economic rationality of the small farming pig-breeders is very clearly stated in the fact that whenever the potato crop failed, as in 1860-62 and again in 1877-79, the pigs were slaughtered or sold off in large numbers.<sup>59</sup>

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57. Mitchell & Deane, Abstract of Statistics, pp. 84-5; Barrington, "Review of Prices", Table I, pp. 252-53; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 150

58. Staehle, "Statistical Notes", p. 452

59. Donnelly, "Agricultural Depression", pp. 37-8; Mitchell & Deane, Abstract of Statistics, pp. 84, 92

After butter and pigs, the third livestock product was sheep. In numerical terms, sheep appeared to be as important as cattle, and the expansion of the sheep-flocks certainly followed the pattern established by the cattle-herds. During the Famine and its immediate aftermath (1847-54), the numbers grew by about 70 per cent; through the critical third quarter of the century, the flock almost doubled, reaching an average of 4.3 million head in the early 1870s.<sup>60</sup> The main features of sheep-rearing were, once more, regional specialisation and relative under-stocking. In proportion to both the human and cattle populations, and to the total land-mass, Ireland was said to have "a very small number of sheep"; contrasts with Wales and Scotland supported this contention, for the former country supported almost twice as many sheep as Ireland on less than one quarter of the area, while Scotland housed twice as many sheep on almost the same area as Ireland.<sup>61</sup> Although sheep could be found grazing throughout Ireland, especially on the upland pastures in the mountainy regions which encircle the central plains, the heart of the sheep-rearing and breeding industry had become concentrated, by the mid-1870s, in Galway, Mayo, Roscommon, Donegal, Kerry and Cork (all in the west) and in Wexford and King's.<sup>62</sup> As in the cattle industry, there was a

60. Mitchell & Deane, Abstract of Statistics, p. 84

61. Agricultural Statistics, 1910, 1911, (Cd.5964), c, p. 583

62. Thom's Directory, 1874, pp. 852-54. Cf., the discussion of the similar modern organisation of sheep-rearing, in T. W. Freeman, Ireland: A General & Regional Geography, (London: Methuen, 1969) pp. 192, 199

considerable eastward movement of sheep, from the small and medium farms on which they were bred, through the great annual fair at Ballinasloe in east Galway, to the rich pastures in Leinster and county Tipperary. These pastures played the same role in the sheep trade as in the cattle industry: hoggets brought east were extensively grazed on the large ranches near Dublin before final export as fat mutton or stores.

This account of the transformation of the agrarian economy after the Famine would be obviously incomplete without at least a brief glance at the retreat of the crop which had underpinned the tillage system. Far more than the potato-plants was destroyed by the blight; the whole social organisation of the cottier-proletariat withered too. The nadir was reached in the blackest year of the Famine, in 1847, when the potato was planted on fewer than 300,000 acres (about one-eighth of the pre-Famine acreage). Even though, with blight-free seed-potatoes and dryer weather, the acreage did recover, the total area was permanently halved during the Famine. By the end of the century, the acreage stood at one quarter of the extent planted in 1845. More illuminating is the comparative picture -- the 2.5 million acres under the potato in 1845 exceeded the entire tillage area in the decade before 1914.<sup>63</sup>

The crucial aspect of the potato's retreat and partial recovery

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63. Mitchell & Deane, Abstract of Statistics, pp. 80-1; Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, Appendix Table II, p. 353; Bourke, "Extent of the Potato Crop"

after the Famine is, again, the regional distribution. The Devon Commission had quoted at length from the police reports of agrarian outrage in 1844, especially on the fine lands in Tipperary, where the struggles of the cottiers and conacre-lessees had pitted them against the graziers and strong farmers. After the Famine, that sort of rural struggle became increasingly unlikely, for one of the main results of the Famine was that the potato and the cottiers dependent upon it were driven off the best grazing lands in the midlands and eastern Ireland.<sup>64</sup>

The remaining pockets of resistance to the new domination by the bullock tended to be restricted to poorer, out of the way uplands. There remained, nevertheless, a considerable area, mainly along the western seaboard, where many small tenants still relied upon the potato for their food. This continued importance of the potato was amply demonstrated by the large-scale distress which preceded and occasioned the Land War of 1879-82,<sup>65</sup> by the proceedings of the Congested Districts Board during the 1890s and 1900s,<sup>66</sup> and by a

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64. See, in particular, the analysis of the two most serious post-Famine outbursts of agrarian outrage (in Monaghan, Armagh and Louth in 1852, and in Westmeath in 1870-71), involving a different class and different forms of struggle than had prevailed among the pre-Famine cottiers, in Paul Bew, Land & the National Question, 1858-82, (New York: Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 34-8

65. "The greatest failure of all Irish crops in these years [1876-79] was that of potatoes . . . this was and still is the chief food-crop of the peasantry of the counties along the western seaboard": Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 187

66. Congested Districts Board, Base-Line Reports; Micks, Account of the Congested Districts Board

number of important literary accounts.<sup>67</sup>

Even in its western redoubt, however, post-Famine potato cultivation was markedly different from the pre-1845 potato-nexus. At first glance, the coincidence of high population density, small holdings and potato cultivation would seem to argue for the opposite conclusion. As late as 1881, for instance, more than half of all the holdings in Connacht were smaller than 15 acres,<sup>68</sup> and more than one-third of that province's tilled land was under potatoes. Moreover, the proportion of ground planted in potatoes had increased between 1868 and 1881. But these figures mask the far more significant changes underway since the Famine. In the eight western counties considered in Table VI (p. 145), counties where the potato accounted for at least 35 per cent of the tilled land, the total tillage had declined precipitously, from more than two-thirds in 1841 to less than 14 per cent in 1881. And the cattle herds had been growing steadily; in all but two of these counties, they had more than doubled since the eve of the Famine.<sup>69</sup>

67. J. M. Synge, The Aran Islands & Other Writings, (New York: Vintage, 1962); Liam O'Flaherty, Land, (New York: Random House, 1946); Domnal Mac Amhlaigh, An Irish Navy: The Diary of an Exile, (translated from the Irish by Valentin Iremonger; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964); Patrick Gallagher, Paddy the Cope: My Story, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939)

68. "Grimshaw Papers", 1887, (c.4969), xxvi, No. 1, Col. 32, p. 974

69. The figures, in the text and in Table VI, derived originally from the Censuses of 1841 and 1881 and from the Agricultural Statistics, were taken from the tables in Thom's Directory, 1874, pp. 844-45; 1885, pp. 627, 684-85, 690-91 and in the "Grimshaw Papers", 1887, (c.4969), xxvi, No. 1, pp. 972-75

TABLE V : Livestock &amp; Tillage in the West, 1841-81

	Potatoes /tillage*: %		Cattle numbers & % gain		
	1868	1881	1841	1881	
Galway	35	38	73,891	173,445	135
Leitrim	50	53	45,421	84,914	87
Mayo	40	42	80,858	166,527	106
Roscommon	40	44	49,255	103,759	111
Sligo	39	41	45,615	89,238	96
Clare	43	45	70,474	156,732	122
Kerry	44	41	103,034	209,722	104
Limerick	36	49	76,035	201,456	165

(\* not including meadow & clover)

Although east Galway is a land of large grazing farms, this growth of the cattle herds cannot be explained as their work alone. Rather, what clearly happened was that all farmers, large and small alike, switched to the production of livestock for the market. In the process the role of the potato was significantly altered. In a word, it ceased to be the sine qua non of the majority of the rural population. Most of the people who had been utterly dependent upon the potato vanished during the Famine. The small-holding tenant in the second half of the nineteenth century was not the same figure as the pre-Famine cottier. The potato was still a mark of distinction between the large and small farmer, but the difference was primarily dietary rather than the global system entailed in the potato-nexus. The small farmer grew potatoes to feed himself and his pigs, whereas the strong farmer was increasingly likely to buy his food from one of the growing number of country stores. But even this distinction should not be over-played, for the potato was no longer the small man's sole source of food, nor was it

the indispensable income supplement which it had been for most cottiers. On the contrary, the small-holder's income derived from the sale of animal products (calves, sheep, pigs, eggs, and butter), buttressed by the traditional summer migration from Donegal, Mayo and Galway to the harvests in Britain,<sup>70</sup> and by fishing and kelp-burning along the coasts of Kerry, west Cork and Donegal.<sup>71</sup>

In summary, the characteristic forms of modern Irish agriculture were established in outline during the quarter-century after the Famine. During this period, Ireland's specialised role within the British Empire was determined -- she became the breeder of beef and churner of butter for the industrial metropolis.<sup>72</sup> The principal significance of this development was that it confirmed and reinforced tendencies which had marked Irish commercial agriculture since at least the 1780s. Irish production was integrated within the British system and ultimately dependent upon the demand structures

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70. Ó Gráda, "Seasonal Migration & Post-Famine Adjustment". The significance of the harvest migration was underlined by the distress which was occasioned by the decline in migratory earnings in the years on the eve of the Land War. Cf., Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 259; also the important autobiographical accounts, Gallagher, Paddy the Cope: My Story; and Patrick McGill, Children of the Dead End, (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1914)

71. Synge, "Kelp Makers", in The Aran Islands, pp. 294-98; Freeman, "Congested Districts", pp. 2-3

72. Recent developments, particularly since Ireland joined the EEC, in no way invalidate this proposition, and its underlying premise -- that Ireland is the victim of the law of uneven development. The difference is only that the "Empire" now is the more intricate structure of German-French-English capital, the dominant partners within the Common Market. Ireland's role remains primarily that of agricultural producer.



generated by English capital. To a certain extent, the connection with Britain had been obscured by the potato-nexus; the abolition of the latter cleared the way for the wholehearted pursuit by the farmers of the economic imperatives of Empire.

The marked regional patterns within Irish agriculture constituted the development of an elaborate division of labour, and was therefore also the foundation of class distinctions among the farmers. The small and medium farms in the western counties (Roscommon, Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo and west Galway), in the "border" counties in south Ulster (Monaghan, Fermanagh, Derry, Cavan and south Armagh), and in the dairying region south of a line from the mouth of the Shannon to the Suir-Barrow estuary (Kerry, Cork, Limerick and Waterford) bred and reared the calves to weanling stage, for sale through the cattle fairs to the graziers on the rich pastures in the central and eastern midlands (Meath, Kildare, Offaly, Laois, Westmeath, Kilkenny, north Tipperary and Louth). These large grazing farms (and their cousins in the very fertile eastern Riding of Galway) were the most profitable part of the cattle trade; not only were they extensive livestock ranches requiring relatively little labour, but two- to three-year old stores stocked on these lands were almost invariably more valuable than the younger animals. In only seven years from 1845 to 1900 did the price of the older stock fall to or below the level of the one- to two-year olds.<sup>73</sup>

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73. Barrington, "Review of Prices", Table I, pp. 252-53

Between 1873 and 1913, the graziers in the four counties closest to Dublin City, and thus to the British market, (Dublin, Meath, Kildare and Westmeath), maintained a firm grip on this end of the business -- their stocks rose from just under one-quarter to 27 per cent of all the two-year old bullocks in the country.<sup>74</sup> However, it must be stressed that the main movement had occurred before 1873, in the crucial transitional period immediately after the Famine.

The post-Famine re-organisation of the agrarian economy rested upon regionally specialised commercial farming, in the hands, mainly, of small commodity producers whose attentions were firmly focussed upon the state of the market for their goods. This describes only one half of the process, however, for the "unprecedented prosperity" enjoyed by the farmers down to 1876 had both rested upon and called into existence a parallel set of non-agricultural economic developments. It is essential to examine these latter, so as to get a clearer picture of the full scope of the material grounding of the whole class of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

### The Industrial Decline of an Agrarian Economy

It may seem paradoxical to discuss the rise of agrarian capitalism in Ireland by tracing industrial decline, but the very absence

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74. Thom's Directory, 1874, p. 850; 1914, p. 792

of an industrial bourgeoisie is a crucial element in the argument for understanding Irish economic history in terms of the links between imperialism and uneven development. Ireland was, in fact as well as in law, an integral part of the rise of industrial capitalism in Victorian England; the "Sister Kingdom" was, in fact, a poor step-sister, cast in the specific and subordinate role of food-producer. With one great exception -- the rise of Belfast as one of the half-dozen most important engineering centres in the Empire <sup>75</sup> -- the industrial history of nineteenth century Ireland is a dismal one, consisting mostly of decline, stagnation and underdevelopment.

The physical contrasts between the realms of industrial capital and the agrarian core of the Irish economy remain visible to this day. The long-disused warehouses on the Shannon at Athlone, a derelict seaweed factory at Clifden on Connemara's Atlantic coast, the Leaside warehouses in Cork City, and even the old working-class Liberties of Dublin -- they all share a roseate tone which is softer than the vermilion or orange hue which dominates the industrial landscapes of Belfast, Liverpool and Glasgow. The overlay of soot from hundreds of coal-

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75. The imperial connection was, and remains, most visible and most vital in Belfast. The Empire was the indispensable condition for that city's growth as a builder of ships for imperial trade and the imperial navy, of tea-drying machinery for imperial plantations in Ceylon and India, and of machine-tools for industrial growth throughout the Empire. And, of course, the imperial link is the political crux of Ulster "loyalism". Cf., Michael Farrell, Northern Ireland: The Orange State, (London: Pluto Press, 1976); Peter Gibbon, The Origins of Ulster Unionism, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975); Belinda Probert, Beyond Orange & Green, (Dublin: Academy Press, 1978); Frank Wright, "Protestant Ideology and Politics in Ulster", European Journal of Sociology, XIV, (1973), pp. 213-80

fired steam engines never happened in most of Ireland. The contrasts assume a more structural form in the nature, location and even the age of the buildings, for it is one of the paradoxes of Irish economic development that there are commercial buildings in southern Ireland which pre-date the growth of Belfast and Manchester by as much as fifty years. It is precisely that they are commercial rather than industrial, warehouses more often than factories, spread out along the canals rather than clustered in towns, which denotes the critical distinction. Even a disused brewery on one of the tributaries of the river Dodder in south Dublin manages to assume a rustic air. It is on a main road, in a built-up suburban area, and yet it could never be said to belong to the "normal" pattern of industrial landscape which was bequeathed by the Victorian age.

The examples could be multiplied. What they point to is a specific form of uneven development within the British Isles. Most of Ireland was passed by during the golden age of large-scale and rapid growth in industrial manufacturing. Outside the Belfast area, there was no urban industry which employed both large sums of capital and large numbers of workers. In this respect at least, the Famine did not mark much of a break, since the main pre-industrial manufactures of the eighteenth century were already in a state of decrepitude before 1845. Tanning, silk-weaving, wig and snuff-making, woollen manufacturing, carriage-building and glass-blowing -- the small commodity trades,

especially those which produced for the restricted luxury market, had faced a double disaster in the early years of the century. The Act of Union of 1801 robbed many of them of their principal customers, as the wealthy and fashionable followed the parliament to London and "society" to Bath.<sup>76</sup> The financial provisions of the Union rendered even more vulnerable those trades which were unable to capitalise and thus unable to compete with the larger units of production developing in England. The long slide into oblivion for these "industries" was accelerated by the depression of the mid-1820s.<sup>77</sup>

Among the industries which declined during the nineteenth century, textiles deserve pride of place, because of the special contrast between the Irish experience and the industrialisation of linen and cotton production in Ulster and Lancashire. The towns of Bandon in county Cork and Drogheda in county Louth (on the east coast, north of Dublin), were both important linen-making areas in the early 1800s. By 1840, there were hardly any weavers left in Bandon, and those who remained were half-starved;<sup>78</sup> three years earlier, the Drummond Commission

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76. See the fascinating and imaginative account of how this movement affected her Ascendancy ancestors, Bowen, Bowen's Court.

77. The most sweeping contemporary account can be found in the reports appended to the Drummond Report, 1837-8, (145), xxxv. Cf., the brief summary of decay in O'Brien's "Historical Introduction", to Riordan, Modern Irish Trade & Industry; and the very useful survey by Freeman, Pre-Famine Ireland, "Town & Country Life", pp. 155-307 passim. The nationalist position is more fully developed in O'Brien's three-volume Economic History and in Murray, Commercial & Financial Relations; the "revisionist" theses are advanced by Cullen, Economic History.

78. Otway, "Handloom Weavers", 1840, (43-II), xxiii, p. 658

was told that Drogheda's weavers were "to be found at Rouen in France, and in America, as well as in Manchester, Wigan, Barnsley and in the neighbourhood of Dublin".<sup>79</sup> Handloom weaving, of both linen and woollen cloth remained fairly widespread throughout Ireland, as a purely domestic industry, at least until the 1830s. In 1870, however, the government instructed the Poor Law Inspectors to determine the extent of "manufacturing industry" in their administrative areas. With only two real exceptions, the inspectors replied from all over the country in virtually the same words -- "generally speaking, very little manufacturing industry, either on a large or small scale, exists".<sup>80</sup> One apparent anomaly was the report from Connacht, which said that "some manufacturing industry prevails", but the Inspector's detailed account dispelled any illusions. He was speaking of "handloom weavers, two or three of whom are to be found in each electoral district"; they disposed of their cloth at the local markets, for purely local consumption. In short, Connacht still contained some vestiges of the domestic system which had prevailed in Ulster a century or more before.<sup>81</sup> The real exceptions to the unanimous gloom came from east Ulster, naturally enough, and south-east Leinster where "in the [Poor Law] Union of Carrick on Suir . . . the Messrs Malcolmson have a large factory at

79. Drummond Report, p. 761

80. Reports from Poor Law Inspectors . . . on Existing Relations between Landlord & Tenant, 1870, (c.31), xiv, pp. 37-192: the example cited is from east Leinster, p. 191

81. Ibid., pp. 89, 95 (emphasis added)

Portlaw and at Carrick". This Union also included the town of Clonmel, which was still at that date the principal grain milling centre for the southern cereal producers. It must be added, however, that the Malcolmson's cotton mill, "the largest industrial employer of labour outside Belfast", closed down in 1874.<sup>82</sup>

The Portlaw experience was, unfortunately, but one of many, though 1874 was a late closing date. Seven years earlier, Marx had concluded his summary of the industrial decline before the Famine with this savage quotation from Thomas Francis Meagher:<sup>83</sup>

The cotton manufacture of Dublin . . . has been destroyed; the 3,400 silk looms have been destroyed; the serge manufacture . . . has been destroyed; the flannel manufacture of Rathdrum, the blanket manufacture of Kilkenny, the camlet trade of Bandon, the worsted manufactures of Waterford, the ratteen and frieze manufactures of Carrick-on-Suir have been destroyed. One business alone survives! . . . That fortunate business--which the Union Act has not struck down--that favoured, and privileged and patronised business is the Irish coffin-maker's.

It was certainly true that, outside Belfast, Irish textile production ceased altogether; the challenge from the highly-mechanised cotton industry in Lancashire was simply overwhelming. However, it must be stressed that much of the lamented "industrial decline" should be identified as the result of the "normal" processes of capitalist

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82. Poor Law Reports, pp. 110-11; Cullen, Economic History, p. 146

83. Cited by Marx, "Outline of a Report on the Irish Question to the Communist Educational Association of German Workers in London", in Marx & Engels, Ireland & the Irish Question, p. 132

rationalisation, of the elimination of smaller and weaker units through merger and bankruptcy.

Clearly, since the contraction of tillage and the decline in cereal cultivation were central to the emerging structure of the post-Famine agrarian economy, they must be expected to have had significant effects on those industries which processed grains -- milling, brewing and distilling. Ostensibly, those effects were wholly destructive. In reality, they were more complicated. Indeed, it was precisely the combination of widespread decline of smaller units of production and growing concentration of outputs in the hands of a few giants -- in a word, monopoly -- which characterised the industries which had their origins in the pre-Famine tillage period.

In 1837, the Excise Inquiry Commissioners had counted 1,882 corn mills and 2,296 kilns for drying the soft Irish wheat;<sup>84</sup> by 1900, 500 fewer mills were still operating and the kilns had almost all disappeared along with Irish wheat. By far the majority of the mills which remained were "very small concerns"; more than 70 per cent of them had a weekly capacity of less than 10 tons; nine out of ten were driven by water-power alone; two-thirds of them ground only oats, into oatmeal, for human and animal feed.<sup>85</sup> In other words, these millers

84. Drummond Report, Appendix B., No. 14, p. 841

85. "The Irish Milling Industry", in Coyne, ed., Ireland, Industrial & Agricultural, Table C, p. 407. Significantly, nearly half of the small mills were in Ulster, where oats was still an important crop for many small farmers. Cf., H. D. Gribbon, The History of Water Power in Ulster, (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1969), pp. 44-49



served an exclusively local need, much as did the local blacksmith; the production was artisanal rather than industrial. The other side of the coin was far more impressive, involving the concentration of flour-milling in the hands of a few major concerns in the ports (Belfast, Dublin and Limerick).<sup>86</sup> Employment had never been very extensive in the milling industry -- from 1861 to 1881, the number of workers fell from nearly 4,500 to 3,834, but the concentration of production in the early 1900s brought a significant advance, when total employment leapt upwards from under 2,000 workers to nearly 5,000 between 1901 and 1908.<sup>87</sup>

Like dairying, the story of milling is instructive of the conditions which determined Irish economic development and of the ways in which Ireland responded. In a survey conducted in 1885, four flour-millers were questioned as to the extent of the industry, "the reasons for its decline", and "suggestions for an improvement in the trade". They all agreed that the industry had declined in the recent past, two of them specifying that as many as half the mills had closed. The main causes of the decline were said to be "competition with foreign manufactured flour imported from California and other American districts" and "the diminution of the cultivation of Irish

86. By 1920, Riordan could only find 49 mills in the whole country: Modern Irish Trade & Industry, pp. 88-92; Cullen, Economic History, p. 157

87. Cf., p. 41, n. 27, supra; Cullen, Economic History, p. 147; Census of Production, pp. 492-93; Riordan, Modern Irish Trade & Industry, p. 90

wheat".<sup>88</sup> These replies were not entirely candid, for they neglected to mention two critical issues. In the first place, while they all called for protective duties to be levied against imported flour, there is no reason to suppose that such a move would have had the slightest effect on the competition from the large and modern mills in England! The Irish capitalist faced a simple imperative, to enter or create export markets, "for he would make a mistake and lose his money if he was aiming at a market in Ireland".<sup>89</sup> The second problem was directly tied to the first. In order to export, Irish production had to become competitive. As in dairying, the main aspect of this problem was technical. The iron rolling-mill had been widely adopted in the world's main grain-growing areas since its invention in Budapest in 1840, first in southeast Europe and then in North America by 1875. In Ireland, however, the new mills were only beginning to appear in the late 1870s, and they were not widely adopted until 1883.<sup>90</sup> This apparently brief lag of less than a decade between the American and Irish adoption of the new machinery was, in practice, made more serious by initial installation problems and by more hesitant capital investment in the Irish industry. The outcome was predictable. The new machinery's

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88. The replies are presented in tabular form in Appendix 26 to the Report from the S. C. on Industries (Ireland), 1884-5, (288), ix, p. 818

89. This comment is by a leading nationalist economist, C. H. Oldham, "The Economics of Industrial Revival in Ireland", JSSISI, XII, (1908), p. 184

90. "Irish Milling", in Coyne, ed., Ireland, Industrial & Agricultural, pp. 402-3; Riordan, Modern Irish Trade & Industry, p. 88

"superiority was so great that those who, from want of the necessary capital, or from lack of enterprise did not adopt it, were year by year gradually driven out of the trade".<sup>91</sup> Moreover, Irish millers were trying to catch up during the period when domestic production and wheat prices had entered their final and definitive downward movement. To make matters worse, if that were possible, the English mills had already adopted the new machinery and "when their stocks became too heavy, as they frequently did, the cross-channel millers . . . dumped their surplus stocks into Ireland at below cost price".<sup>92</sup> This set of adverse circumstances in the 1870s and 1880s bankrupted two-thirds of the Irish mills within ten years.<sup>93</sup> The seeming anomaly of the recovery which was indicated in the increased employment in the early 1900s was the result of concentration and capitalisation of production. Since the bulk of the grain which was milled in Ireland was imported, the industry focussed on the ports.

If the milling trade was a mixed affair of decline and recovery, then the unqualified success stories in Irish industry were the other two tillage-based manufactures. At first glance, brewing and distilling seemed to decline along with and in the same way as milling. In reality, the pre-Famine drinks industry had already been marked by

91. "Irish Milling", in Coyne, ed., Ireland, Industrial & Agricultural, p. 403

92. Riordan, Modern Irish Trade & Industry, p. 90

93. E. R. R. Green, "Industrial Decline in the Nineteenth Century", in Cullen, ed., Formation, p. 98

progress-in-shrinkage. Between 1782 and 1835, the number of distilleries fell from 815 to 95, while total output rose eight-fold; in the same period, 700 breweries went out of business, but the remaining 236 increased total production by two-thirds.<sup>94</sup> This concentration tended naturally to gravitate towards the larger coastal ports (Belfast, Dublin and Cork) and to the areas immediately linked to Dublin by the canals (the Maryborough and Kilkenny excise districts). By 1835, 40 per cent of the liquor business was located in these five areas.<sup>95</sup> This early concentration of the industry can be readily explained by Irish dependence on at least some imported raw materials (in this case, hops and coal). In addition, brewing and distilling were already old enough to respond to new technical processes and to economies of scale. Let this not be over-stated: the vast majority of the brewers and distillers ran very small plants and supplied very restricted markets, often no bigger than their own small town.<sup>96</sup>

There are two striking features of the Irish brewing industry. The first is the coincidence of the Famine, the reduction of cereal production, the fall in the population and the closure of local breweries. Of the 223 breweries which went out of business between 1837 and 1920,

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94. Cullen, Economic History, p. 92; Lynch & Vaizey, Guinness's Brewery, pp. 78-80; Drummond Report, Appendix B, No. 14, p. 841

95. Drummond Report, p. 841

96. Trim, county Meath, with a population of 3,282, supported its own brewery in 1837: Drummond Report, p. 755

fully 150 had closed their doors by 1852.<sup>97</sup> The fact that it was mainly the small operations which closed down may be seen in that the 40 plants which remained in 1900 were producing four times as much beer as had 200 a century earlier.<sup>98</sup> Like the main sectors of agricultural output, brewing became export-oriented, and success was measured by the ability to reach the export market. In these terms, the figures in Table VI underline the magnitude of the brewers' successes.<sup>99</sup>

TABLE VI : Beer Output & Exports, 1861-1911  
(000 barrels)

	Output	Exports	E/O: %
1861	1,438	253	17.5
1871	1,667	417	25.0
1881	2,044	532	26.0
1891	2,555	683	26.9
1901	3,149	682	21.7
1911	3,215	1,083	33.7

The other feature of Irish brewing was the astonishing domination of Guinness's brewery in Dublin. On the eve of World War I, there were perhaps 30 or 40 active breweries in Ireland, but

97. In 1835, Drummond counted 247 breweries; for the closures, see "The Brewing Industry" in Coyne, ed., Ireland, Industrial & Agricultural, pp. 451-93; Joseph Lee, "Money & Beer in Ireland, 1790-1875", EcHR, 2nd series, XIX, (1966), pp. 184-88; Cullen, Economic History, pp. 147-48, 157

98. Lynch & Vaizey, Guinness's Brewery, p. 78; "The Brewing Industry", in Coyne, ed., Ireland, Industrial & Agricultural, pp. 469-70, 472-88; Cullen, Economic History, p. 157; Riordan, Modern Irish Trade & Industry, p. 157

99. This table derives from "The Brewing Industry", pp. 457-58 and Riordan, Modern Irish Trade & Industry, pp. 156-57. Two words of caution. The export figures, down to 1901, count only beer leaving Dublin, but since that accounted for c. 90% of the total, the pattern is valid. Secondly, Guinness's porter was exported in hogsheads, which I have converted (1.482 hogsheads/barrel), as in Lee, "Money & Beer", p. 186.

two-thirds of all Irish beer, and half of the total sales, came from Guinness's.<sup>100</sup> In fact, Guinness's domination had been established as early as the 1860s, when the firm controlled three-quarters of the market outside Dublin City.<sup>101</sup> As Table VII clearly indicates, Guinness's participated fully in the growth of the economy during the third quarter of the nineteenth century:<sup>102</sup>

TABLE VII : Guinness's Sales, 1845-75 (barrels)

	Great Britain	Dublin City & County	Rest of Ireland
1845	37,000	30,000	15,000
1875	264,000	150,000	240,000

The most striking feature of these figures, more important even than the essential penetration of the British market, was Guinness's capture of the Irish market outside the greater Dublin area. The significance of Guinness's domination of the domestic market lay in the way in which it was effected. Two factors prevailed. Firstly, the firm's growth was facilitated by the development of the two successive transport networks, the canals and the railways. The other factor was Guinness's own intervention, the firm's use of the transport facilities to establish a dense network of wholesale and retail traders throughout Ireland.<sup>103</sup> The manifest result of Guinness's policy of aggressive

100. "The Brewing Industry", pp. 470, 472-88, 492-93

101. Lynch & Vaizey, Guinness's Brewery, pp. 201, 215

102. This table derives from figures in ibid., pp. 199-200, 230; and Lee, "Money & Beer", p. 186

103. See the discussion of the post-Famine "agency system", in Lynch & Vaizey, Guinness's Brewery, pp. 201-17

and inventive marketing was the inevitable extinction of hundreds of small local breweries. More significantly, Guinness's directly participated in and encouraged the development of an important section of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, the publicans and innkeepers.

Though less marked, concentration of production also characterised the development of the distilling industry. During the course of the nineteenth century, output tripled while the number of distilleries fell by two-thirds, with production eventually located almost exclusively in Dublin, Cork, Dundalk and Belfast.<sup>104</sup> One anomaly in the liquor trade was a startling decline in production between the 1840s and early 1860s; the reason must be sought in the combination of sharp increases in excise duties with the remarkable Temperance Crusade conducted by Father Theobald Mathew from 1838 to 1847.<sup>105</sup> The other distinctive feature of the distilling business was Belfast's domination, from the 1860s, of the production of "silent" or rectified spirits, as opposed to the characteristically smoky pot-still whiskeys produced in the rest of the country. Belfast distilling was, in fact, a by-product of that city's predominant hold on the import trade in

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104. "The Distilling Industry in Ireland", in Coyne, ed., Ireland, Industrial & Agricultural, pp. 494-511; Riordan, Modern Irish Trade & Industry, pp. 160-64. From 1871 to 1900, Irish distillers' output rose by more than half, from less than 9 to 14.5 million gallons.

105. "Distilling Industry", pp. 496-97. On the career of Fr. Mathew, who was the living embodiment of the slogan "Ireland sober is Ireland free", there is one nineteenth-century biography, by J. F. Maguire; cf., the comments by Patrick O'Farrell, Ireland's English Question, (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 105-6

maize, the cheapest grain available, which was either distilled or ground into Indian meal, the "famine food" which played a large part in the post-Famine diet of the agricultural labourers.<sup>106</sup>

In summary, the three industries which originated in the tillage sector were the main source of value in the manufactures of the agrarian economy at the time of the Industrial Census. Food and drink accounted for a gross annual value of some £27 millions, more than half of which was realised in milling, brewing and distilling.<sup>107</sup> The essentially agrarian basis of the economy was reflected negatively in the restriction of key industrial production to the Belfast area, where textiles (£16 millions) and shipbuilding and engineering (£6 millions) were centred.<sup>108</sup> An alternative and sharper form of this contrast, of the structure of uneven development, can be afforded by examining the unequivocal decline which afflicted the majority of the trades surveyed by the Select Committee of 1885.

Broadly speaking, the "industries" examined fell under two heads. On the one hand, there were those trades ("industries" would

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106. By 1908, Belfast's domination of this end of the distilling industry was registered in a 60 per cent share of the export trade. "Distilling Industry", pp. 498-99; Census of Production, 1912-13, (Cd.6320), cix, pp. 527-28; Cullen, Economic History, p. 158

107. The next most important item was the large export-oriented output of biscuits (worth about £3 millions a year). The link with milling was most explicit in the case of the ownership of the country's largest flour-mill (the Clonliffe works in Dublin, with a weekly capacity of 13,000 sacks) by the industrial giant in the baking business, Johnson, Mooney & O'Brien. Census of Production, 1912-13, (Cd.6320), cix, pp. 492-536; Cullen, Economic History, p. 157

108. Census of Production, 1912-13, (Cd.6320), cix, pp. 171-229, 342-80



be altogether too pretentious a word) which relied on conspicuous consumption and aimed towards a small and shrinking market. Gold, silver and gun-smiths, stone and marble manufacturers, coach-builders all depended mainly upon and complained of "the absence and impoverishment of the landed proprietors", "the want of a landed gentry".<sup>109</sup> The most lucid explanation was offered by Lucius Hulton, the owner of a family coach-building firm, who said that "the classes who formerly were the best customers have had their means much crippled, and many have left the country . . . and there is no large manufacturing class in Ireland to replace the landed proprietors".<sup>110</sup> Indeed, the history of Hulton's trade may be taken as a representative case. In 1799, there had been some forty coach-builders in Dublin City alone, employing up to 2,000 workers; fifty years later, the numbers had been halved, with twenty employers and between 700 and 800 workers. By 1885, there remained "only about 10 coach factories manufacturing gentlemen's carriages, giving employment to about 200 hands" though there were also several factories making railway carriages and commercial vehicles which employed another 300 workers.<sup>111</sup> Apart from the undoubted decline in the domestic luxury

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109. Report on Industries (Ireland), 1884-5, (288), ix, pp. 819 (Rigby & Co., gunsmiths), 816 (Messrs Callow, coachmakers)

110. Ibid., p. 816

111. Ibid., Appendix No. 2, "Report on the Coach-Making Trade", pp. 723-24; cf., Lee, "Capital", and Green, "Industrial Decline", in Cullen, ed., Formation, pp. 56-7, 96

market, it may be suggested that an additional reason for the downfall of trades such as the coachmakers' lay in the imperialist relations between Britain and Ireland -- both free-trade and an inverted form of snobbery tended to encourage a strong import trade, even in the absence of intrinsic differences in either price or quality.<sup>112</sup>

The second category of trades included copper and brass foundries, agricultural implement manufacturers, glass, paper and woollen producers, tanners, boot and shoe makers, cabinet-makers, cutlers, potters and the millers already quoted above. In effect, this part of the survey was a study of small-scale production for local markets. The story was a depressing one. These industries were visibly losing ground in the face of competition, primarily from Britain but also from Dublin. Their initial disadvantage in competition against large units of production was compounded by the preferential rates offered by the railways to through-freight.<sup>113</sup> The irony of the impending collapse of this small-scale industrial base was that it took

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112. The coachmakers' report noted this problem; the point must remain hypothetical rather than proven, for psychologistic explanations of economic behaviour are shaky at the best of times.

113. Report on Industries (Ireland), 1884-5, (288), ix, Appendix No. 26, "Replies to Certain Questions", pp. 814-28 passim. In fact, of course, preferential through-freight rates was "standard international practice", even though "the decline of rural industries became inevitable once the railway exposed the interior to competition": Lee, "Railways", in Cullen, ed., Formation, p. 85; Lee, Modernisation, p. 35. It might be recalled that much the same complaint about freight-rates was one of the underlying grievances which coalesced in the Populist movement among mid-western American farmers towards the end of the nineteenth century: see Norman Pollack, The Populist Response to Industrial America, (New York: Norton Library, 1966), pp. 54-5

place during a period of significant growth in the economy as a whole. In fact, it was precisely the growing prosperity in the Irish countryside which helped to kill off many of these small producers. Fundamentally, what happened was that profits from the pastoral sector were converted into improved living conditions and greater domestic comfort, better housing, clothing and food, and higher levels of literacy; these gains necessarily entailed a growing market for consumer goods.<sup>114</sup> The major British manufacturers enjoyed some clear advantages: their products tended to be cheaper by virtue of economies of scale and more attractive to the growing number of rural retailers because of lower transportation costs, while Irish manufacturers continued to be impeded by their dependence upon imported raw materials, machine tools and even technical expertise.<sup>115</sup>

The result may be described as a landscape in chiaroscuro.

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114. See the summaries in Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 219-50; Lee, Modernisation, pp. 12-14. Needless to say, these advances were not evenly distributed; the class patterns will be discussed more fully in Chapter Four, below.

115. Without advancing any ad hominem notions of "entrepreneurial spirit", or the like, it must be remarked that Belfast's belated industrial revolution, which did not properly get underway until the 1850s, was strikingly marked by the contributions of imported capitalists, technical experts and foremen. Both the leading shipbuilders (Edward Harland and Gustav Wolff) and the more important engineers (Combe, Mackie and Scrimgeour) were non-Ulstermen by origin. See W. E. Coe, The Engineering Industry in the North of Ireland, (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1969), pp. 70-74, 190-97; C. H. Oldham, "The History of Belfast Shipbuilding", JSSISI, XII, (1909), pp. 417-44; E. R. R. Green, "Business Organisation and the Business Class", in T. W. Moody & J. C. Beckett, eds., Ulster Since 1800: A Social Survey, (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1957), pp. 110-18; Lee, Modernisation, p. 19

Some few industrial enterprises in Belfast and Dublin, clearly founded on specialisation, had grown through a process of consolidation. Meanwhile, the production of luxury goods had virtually ceased, and local production of consumer goods was in full retreat before the flood of cheaper imports. Nevertheless, the economy was visibly growing. The heart of the growth was firmly rooted in agrarian production, and it was clearly visible in the substantial improvements underway in rural living standards. The most important economic signs of the expansion of the agrarian economy included the main features of the development of a sophisticated infrastructure, namely, banking, trade and transport. The outstanding aspect of the creation of this infrastructure was nicely dialectical -- it was clearly bound within the constraints of the pastoral domination of the agrarian economy, while affording considerable augmentation to the values realised by pastoral production.

Structurally, as well as chronologically, the construction of the railway network was the key infrastructural development. Besides the expansion of the cattle herds, the largest aggregate capital investments (estimated at a total of £45 millions between 1830 and 1914) were poured into the railways.<sup>116</sup> From the very beginning, there was a sharp symptomatic contrast between the first English line, the Stockton and Darlington, which was built to move coal, and the first six miles of

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116. Lee, "Railways", in Cullen, ed., Formation, p. 80; also, Joseph Lee, "The Construction Costs of Irish Railways, 1830-53", Business History, IX, (1967), pp. 95-109 and Lee, "The Provision of Capital for early Irish Railways", IHS, XVI, (1969), pp. 33-63

Irish track, the suburban-pleasure line from Dublin to Kingstown. In their preliminary report, the Drummond Commissioners had expressed pessimism over the future of railways in Ireland, since they believed that there was not sufficient commercial traffic to "justify the expectation that Railways spread over the country from town to town, would prove remunerative undertakings". They therefore recommended that only two main lines be constructed, from Dublin to Cork and to Belfast, with allowances for spurs to Derry and Limerick.<sup>117</sup> Eight years later, in 1845, no more than 65 miles of track had been laid; but during the Famine itself, another 450 miles were added. By the early 1850s, all five major ports (Belfast, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford) had been linked to Dublin by rail. The pattern which prevailed in the agrarian economy was apparent in railway construction too -- the main advances were made during the quarter-century after the Famine. More than 2,000 miles of track were opened between 1845 and 1873, but only 1,000 more miles were added during the next forty years down to 1913.<sup>118</sup>

Three features distinguished Irish railway construction and marked their impact upon the economy. In the first place, they were relatively cheap. The backbone of the system was laid down during the Famine years -- seventeen lines, nearly 1,000 miles of track, under

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117. First Report . . . On Railway Communications in Ireland, 1837, (75), xxxiii, p. 290; the second and final report (Drummond) produced the social and economic surveys which have been quoted and which constituted the evidence behind the pessimism.

118. Thom's Directory, 1904, p. 769; 1914, p. 811

construction or already open by 1853. At weekly wages of between 9s. and 12s., more than non-existent agricultural jobs would pay, the contractors found plenty of manpower in the huge reservoir of surplus labour which was thrown onto the market by the potato-blight; and even though the total wage-bill between 1845 and 1850 came to £4,000,000, that figure was less than half of the contemporary cost of labour-power in England.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, the wages paid probably represented a net social loss to Ireland, since many of them went towards the cost of the passage to America. The work itself was both temporary and unskilled; railway construction was labour-intensive, but once the line was complete it no longer furnished large-scale employment; nor did navvying entail any significant enhancement of the workers' skills.

The second characteristic of Irish railways (which was also true of banking) was the initial predominance of British risk-capital. During the early railway "manias" in the 1830s and 1840s, most of the subscriptions to Irish railway stock-offerings came from England.<sup>120</sup> With the exception of Irish Quaker families like the Pims and the Malcolmsons, Irish investors tended to be "too timid about investing capital", preferring to wait until the probity of the venture had been assured by the payment of dividends to English investors.<sup>121</sup> But this

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119. Lee, "Construction Costs", pp. 95, 103; Lee, "Railways", in Cullen, ed., Formation, p. 80; Cullen, Economic History, pp. 142-44; T. P. O'Neill, "The Organisation & Administration of Relief, 1845-52", in Edwards & Williams, eds., The Great Famine, pp. 209-59

120. Lee, "Provision of Capital", pp. 40-50

121. Irish Railway Gazette, February 1, 1847, cited by Lee, "Provision of Capital", p. 50

apparent lack of Irish self-reliance was not a permanent condition, for between 1851 and 1861 Irish holdings in the railways increased from 35 to 76 per cent, to bring the total Irish capital investment to some £12 millions.<sup>122</sup>

Finally, the most important effect of the railways was the way in which they exposed the weaknesses and accelerated the decline in the local industrial base, while simultaneously enhancing the strong-points in the pastoral economy. One aspect of industrial weakness was essentially beyond the control of Irishmen, for one-third of the capital costs of the railways had to be spent on imported timber and iron for the permanent way, while a large proportion of the operating capital also left the country, to buy coal from England.<sup>123</sup> The very structure of the railway network affected relations between the industrial and agrarian sectors, for all the lines focussed either on Dublin or on Belfast and then on England, the market for animal products and the workshop producing the consumer goods. In this light, the detrimental impact of the railways upon local artisanal industries was a reiteration, at a higher level and more universally, of the basic contradiction which had first been revealed during the overproduction/dumping crisis in the 1820s.

There was another side to the coin, however, for the effect

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122. Lee, "Provision of Capital", pp. 41-2; Lee, "Capital", in Cullen, ed., Formation, p. 55

123. Lee, "Railways", in Cullen, ed., Formation, p. 80; also, R. R. Kane, The Industrial Resources of Ireland, (1845), (reissue: Shannon: Irish University Press, 1971), pp. 1-31

of the railways upon Ireland in her primary role as an agricultural producer was clearly positive. By lowering the hidden and direct costs of carriage, the railways "improved and strengthened the structure of agriculture".<sup>124</sup> Healthier beasts and fresher produce were delivered more cheaply and quickly to the ports and markets. One example from county Cork can stand for the host of benefits which accrued to farmers all over the country. Down to the mid-1850s, the return journey by road from Skibbereen to Cork City lasted eight days; the butter was thus on the road for four days. When the railway was opened, both time and cost were significantly reduced; the trip now took one day, and whereas "carriage from Skibbereen now [before the railway] costs 25s. the ton; the railway would only charge 8s. and thus give a saving of 17s. the ton".<sup>125</sup>

The principal contribution of the railways to the pastoral sector, then, was that reduced costs and faster carriage, in a context of rising prices, constituted a significant breakthrough for the farmer as an individual producer. But in Ireland, as elsewhere, the railways also conferred important social benefits, particularly as they brought hitherto isolated regions within a growing national and commercial orbit. Even though the network did not actually connect some of the smaller, western communities until the 1890s,<sup>126</sup> the large migratory rail-

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124. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 137

125. Daniel Conner, Jr., a west Cork landowner, to the Cork Constitution, cited in ibid., p. 138

126. Thom's Directory, 1904, pp. 769-72



traffic from the west was underway as early as the 1850s.<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, although the railways were by no means the first transport system,<sup>128</sup> their advent constituted a qualitative advance in both the amount and nature of the goods they carried. In one final paradox, the railways (or the hidden hand of capital) achieved that which the colonial administration had never really managed -- to re-establish Dublin's centripetal domination of the country, in much the same fashion as London and Paris rule over England and France.<sup>129</sup>

In the realm of production, then, the railways hastened the death of local industry and augmented the profitability of the agrarian sector. They also played a critical part at the other end of the economic cycle, in the sphere of consumption. The trains which carried cattle, butter, pigs and grain out of the country, also brought back into the interior a wide range of consumer goods which had not generally been available or even known of before the Famine. A simple catalogue of the goods which the railways spread throughout Ireland will indicate the

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127. Ó Gráda, "Seasonal Migration & Post-Famine Adjustment", passim; J. H. Johnson, "Harvest Migration from Nineteenth Century Ireland", Transactions of the British Institute of Geographers, XLI, (1967), pp. 97-112

128. See above, pp. 41, 58-9, on the canal system. The canals were succeeded and supplemented by the network of horse-drawn cars which was established by Charles Bianconi; by the early 1840s, this road transport system covered over 3,000 miles. See Ivor J. Herring, "The Bians", Ulster Journal of Archaeology, II, (1939), pp. 130-37; III, (1940), pp. 115-22; IV, (1941), pp. 1-11; and Figure 18 in Freeman, Pre-Famine Ireland, p. 115

129. "Dublin's growth was less spectacular [than Belfast's] but of even more pervasive influence, and it was the railway . . . that allowed Dublin achieve a dominance over the economy (outside the north-east) by 1914 undreamt of a century earlier": Lee, "Railways", in Cullen, ed., Formation, pp. 85-6

extent of the growing market and, by implication, the expansion of trade which generated and was generated by that demand. Tea, sugar, flour and Indian meal; clothing and footwear; beer and whiskey; iron, timber, slates, glass and a host of other building materials; fertilisers, agricultural machinery and tools; pots, pans and household utensils; books, pamphlets, newspapers, newsprint and mail-order catalogues -- all these and more flooded into the Irish countryside after the Famine.

Nor were the people simply spending money; they saved too, in prodigious quantities. The other key institutional expression of the growing prosperity of at least some of the rural population was the development of banking. During the post-Famine decades, the amounts on deposit in the banks rose steadily. Though the quinquennial averages in Table VIII tend to hide the sharper fluctuations in the yearly figures,<sup>130</sup>

TABLE VIII: Average Joint-Stock Bank Deposits, 1845-1913  
(£ millions)

1845-9	7.5	1870-4	27.1	1895-9	38.7
1850-4	10.0	1875-9	31.9	1900-4	42.4
1855-9	14.1	1880-4	30.9	1905-9	48.3
1860-4	14.7	1885-9	30.7	1910-3	56.6
1865-9	21.2	1890-4	34.3		

two features stand out. First, the amount of disposable money grew at least three-fold during the critical quarter-century from 1850. And secondly, although the averages conceal the fact that bank deposits actually fell, by about three per cent each year from 1877 to 1881, they

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130. Compiled from data in Thom's Directory, 1904, p. 776; 1914, p. 818

cannot conceal the impact of the long recession stretching through the 1880s. Savings appeared to stagnate, but what actually happened was that poor weather, reduced crops and falling prices diverted incomes from savings into current expenditures and then, once the worst period (1877-81) had passed, into renewed investment in livestock.<sup>131</sup>

In some part at least, the overall growth of savings was illusory, a function of the physical expansion of the banking system, for the number of bank branches nearly doubled from 1850 to 1870.<sup>132</sup> Savings were also being tapped by the post-office and trustee savings banks; from 1844, deposits in these institutions increased from £2.8 to more than £10 millions. The bulk of this increase, particularly in the post-office, which was traditionally the poor man's bank, was significantly concentrated in the last two decades of the century.<sup>133</sup> This contrast between the joint-stock banks and the post-office savings accounts is a good indication of the lags in the distribution of wealth in the rural economy, for, as we shall see in more detail below, the agricultural labourers main gains were not made until after the farmers' principal grievances had been resolved.

There is one further point about Irish banking -- that it was

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131. Returns of Deposits in Joint-Stock Banks (1843-1881), 1882, (249), xi, p. 472; Thom's Directory, 1904, p. 776; Cullen, Economic History, p. 150

132. Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine, p. 59

133. 'Irish Joint-Stock Banks, 1880-1901', in Coyne, ed., Ireland, Industrial & Agricultural, pp. 129-30

not noted for being adventurous. In part this was simply a result of that fact that Irish banking was modelled on the English system; the investment banker was largely unknown in either country. Savings in bank deposits therefore represented wither dead capital, money which was hoarded and excluded from the cycle of production or, more often, another net social loss to Ireland, since the great bulk of Irish funds was invested, cautiously, through the British market. Irish capital therefore flowed into Imperial government bonds or overseas railway and mining ventures. In practice, the situation was a self-perpetuating vicious circle: Irish investors might complain about the lack of investment opportunity, but it was the constant outflow of capital which precluded the industrial development which might have attracted their capital. However, it must be stressed, as Professor Lee has done, that the conservatism of Irish bankers "reflected rather than created the general tone of business life".<sup>134</sup>

The connection between this ensemble of economic development -- industrial concentration and specialisation, alongside decline, within a growing infrastructural framework -- and the rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie will remain opaque so long as the analysis omits the people who embodied these social relations. On the one hand, the basic unit of production was the farm; for the moment, however, the

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134. Lee, "Capital", in Cullen, ed., Formation, p. 60; cf., Greaves, Liam Mellows & the Irish Revolution, pp. 9-10; Strauss, Irish Nationalism & British Democracy, pp. 197-205

farmers must be left to one side, to be treated in more detail in the following chapter. The focal point of the other end of the economic cycle, the basic unit determining the structure of distribution and consumption, was the domain of the farmers' "urban cousins". The rise of the shopkeeper in the Irish country town, in absolute numbers and as a social force, was closely linked to the main systematic developments in the agrarian economy. Indeed, the ascendancy of these merchants was a crucial class expression of the peculiarly petty-bourgeois formation of agrarian capitalism in Catholic Ireland.

We have seen, for instance, how the railways distributed the cheaper, mass produced commodities which helped to drive many artisans out of business. In the place previously occupied by the craftsman-producer, whether tinker, tailor, cobbler or brewer, came the merchant-shopkeeper-publican, who ordered and distributed goods from the British manufacturers or from the Dublin wholesale houses. Similarly, the switch from arable to pastoral production led to some significant changes in the mechanism of circulation of agricultural output. In the post-Famine period, there was a steep decline in the number of agricultural markets, with those that remained tending to become specialised livestock fairs. The markets had been the haunt of a host of travelling hawkers and dealers, the main pre-Famine suppliers of consumer goods. Not only were many of these people simply replaced by the shopkeepers, but the latter also benefitted

directly from the reduced volume of arable output. Since farm production tended to become more specialised, the secondary products (grains, vegetables, eggs, even butter) entered the domestic market via the country store, to meet the expanding commodity demands which accompanied the progressive monetarisation of the rural economy.<sup>134</sup> The converse effect of the concentration on animal products was the enlarged role of the traders and brokers who bought and sold butter and livestock.

The growth of this distributive sector was clearly visible in the Census reports. Two examples may be cited. Between 1841 and 1881, the number of people listed as "grocers" more than doubled, rising from 7,050 to 15,405.<sup>136</sup> In 1850, there were 15,000 public houses in Ireland; by 1900, the figure had increased by one-third to 20,000.<sup>137</sup> An oddity of this situation was the analysis of the occupational data in the Irish Census, undertaken in 1886 by Charles Booth, the English economist and statistician. Having declared himself unable "to account satisfactorily for the increase which is to be found in the numbers as well as percentage of the dealers -- those who live by buying and

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134. K. Theodore Hoppen, "National politics and local realities in mid-nineteenth century Ireland", in Art Cosgrove & Donal McCartney, eds., Studies in Irish History presented to R. Dudley Edwards, (Naas: Kildare Leader, 1979), in typescript, pp. 2-5; T. W. Freeman, "The Irish country town", Irish Geography, III, (1954), pp. 1-12

135. Census of Ireland: 1841, p. 440; 1881, pp. 29, 36 (Summary Tables)

136. Lee, Modernisation, p. 14

selling", Booth compounded his difficulty by asserting that "this increase cannot be traced to any improved system of distribution, nor can we account for it . . . by the fact that increasing production or greater wealth increase the volume to be distributed".<sup>138</sup> The learned gentleman was obviously in error, for it was precisely the augmented output and enhanced profitability of the pastoral sector which had called forth the increases in both the quality and quantity of distribution of consumer goods. More people had more money to buy more goods -- so retail trade expanded.

It was as simple as that. But it was also a little more complicated, because it cannot be stressed too often that the increases (absolute and proportional) in the size and social weight of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie occurred within the context of the continual reduction of the total population. The issue also has a certain "social density", which may be traced, for instance, in the growing number of public houses. More publicans was not simply a sign of increased consumption of beer and whiskey, for it is a striking and well-known feature of Irish life that the pub, especially in country areas, and most particularly in the west, frequently doubles as post-office and general store, and that it is the most important centre of social intercourse, beside the church.<sup>139</sup>

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138. "The Economic Distribution of the Population in Ireland", in Coyne, ed., Ireland, Industrial & Agricultural, p. 68

139. See, for instance, the discussions by Conrad Arensberg in Family & Community in Ireland (1940), (with S. T. Kimball) and The Irish Countryman (1937), and by Hugh Brody, Inishkillane: Change & Decline in the West of Ireland, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974)

Furthermore, as we shall see, the commercial links among the agrarian petty-bourgeois, in their various roles as farmer, shopkeeper or publican, were often cemented by bonds of kinship as well as simple mutual self-interest.

### Summing Up -- Cattle and Capital

The picture of the Irish economy which came into focus after the Famine was a coherent but unbalanced one. Agricultural production, founded on livestock and centred on the bullock, and served by a sophisticated infrastructure, dominated the whole country, except for the narrowly circumscribed industrial region in the Lagan valley. The industries which had survived the storms and bloodlettings which afflicted the Irish economy -- from the depression of the late 1820s through the Famine to the depressions of 1859-64 and 1876 into the 1880s -- and which had subsequently grown to mature monopoly, were characterised by an essential feature. They were oriented towards the export market. The domination of the Irish domestic market by Irish brewers, distillers, millers and bakers, (and, it must be added, by Irish engineers and linen manufacturers), was founded upon their successes in the export trade. Banking, too, was largely unilateral, channeling the flow of capital from Ireland to the investment market in Britain. The railways seemed to have a more reciprocal effect, since the goods flowed both ways, but



in the context of the fundamentally uneven relationship between British industrial capital and Irish agrarian capital, the railways too served to accentuate the imbalance. In a word, Ireland's was not independent development.

A focus on these constraints was the hallmark, and the outstanding virtue, of the nationalist school of political and economic historians, particularly those who wrote and studied during the national-revolutionary period between, say, the 1880s and 1920. Unwittingly or not, however, that stance tended to mask the historical sources of the powers of the class which came to rule Ireland after Independence. Switching the focus back onto the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie can be done without mitigating the horrors of British imperialist rule in Ireland. It must be done, moreover, in order to grasp the internal dynamics of Irish class relations, for it was the latter which provided the principal determinants of the formal limits within which Irish freedom was won.

The rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, founded upon the cattle-farm and the country store, crystallised during the critical quarter-century after the Famine. That was the period when this class established its economic claim to social and political precedence. Farmers enlarged their holdings and their herds, shopkeepers augmented their modest establishments, the railways and banks which served the farmers and merchants grew apace. And for a couple of

decades, Mammon smiled -- prices rose and it was profitable to be part of the Empire. How the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie took advantage of these economic gains, and how they were able to do so because of the devastation wrought by the Famine in the ranks of the rural proletariat, these are the key issues of class struggle during the post-Famine period. The remaining chapters of this study will trace the social and political developments, the superstructure erected on the economic foundations outlined here, which comprised the rise to power of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### AFTER THE GREAT HUNGER - - THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE RURAL CLASS STRUCTURE

#### Introduction - - Tipping the Scales

The analysis of the class structure in rural Ireland after the Famine is primarily concerned with defining how the key force, the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, forged the necessary "manifold relations" which constituted their hegemony. It is to answer the question posed of the French peasantry by Marx, of the development of community, national bond and political organisation adequate to the task of enforcing class will and interests. The development of the preponderant social weight of the strong farmers and their allied commercial, clerical and intellectual "cousins" occurred, by stages, at the expense of the polar classes in the pre-Famine system, the landowners and the cottier-proletariat. While neither of these latter classes disappeared, the losses they suffered during the Hunger and afterwards can be measured in the progressive redistribution of social power into the hands of the leading strata of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

The potato-blight, typhus fever, starvation and emigration

were the levers of major changes in the social structure. Predictably, the people who had been most dependent upon the potato-nexus were disproportionately afflicted. The immediate result was a huge drop in the numbers of our broadly-defined cottier-proletariat -- cottiers, landless labourers and the smallest "farmers". The Famine also affected a number of the landowners, who found themselves without a rental income while still obliged to meet the charges against their property. Worse, when these normal costs were multiplied by the exceptionally high poor-rates which had to be levied in some parts of the country, some ten per cent of the landowning class was finally driven over the edge into bankruptcy. One effect of the Famine upon its principal beneficiaries, the farmers, may be suggested. It might be said that those farmers who had been wont to settle their sons on part of their holding were definitively cured of the habit of subdivision by the bad years. This is no more than tentative, however, for it is entirely more likely that the Famine confirmed them in a position which they had already adopted.

This chapter will commence with the classes which lost ground, so as to identify the space which the rising class occupied. The first step is to examine the massive reduction of the pre-Famine cottier proletariat under the impact of starvation, eviction and emigration, and the subsequent reconstitution of the rural working class, primarily as landless, wage-earning agricultural labourers. The

second section will trace the shifting fortunes of the landowning Ascendancy, with particular emphasis upon the continuing contrast between the evil reputation of the landlords and the evidence of their real activity. The main features of the landowning class's position during the critical third-quarter of the nineteenth century were, first, bankruptcy and forced sale for a minority and second, a growing reluctance on the part of most of the remainder to press their demands on behalf of the rights of property too far. It may be suggested, again most tentatively, that the discrepancy between the accusations of rack-renting and the actual movements of rents indicates, at least in part, a loss of nerve among the landowners.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the critical task will be to construct a composite portrait of the "coming men", of the farmers and rural businessmen who comprised the economic core of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

#### "Narrowing Prospects": Starvation or Emigration

When cattle supplanted corn and cottiers, the people were displaced first and fastest. Although the detailed data, in the Census

1. There are several illuminating passages on the progressive deterioration of the morale of the Ascendancy in Bowen, Bowen's Court, pp. 158-66, 219-20, 259-64, 352-62. It should be stated that precisely the opposite point of view is argued by K. T. Hoppen, who suggests that the 1850s and 1860s witnessed a "re-emerging sense of political power" in the ranks of the Ascendancy: "Landlords, Society & Electoral Politics in mid-nineteenth-century Ireland", Past & Present, 75, (1977), pp. 62-93

reports, on the occupational structure of the population and even on the distribution of land-holdings are frequently inconsistent, sometimes impenetrable and internally contradictory,<sup>2</sup> some features are so outstanding as to leave no room for doubt that the population losses from 1845 onwards were most heavily concentrated in the ranks of the proletarian strata. By 1851, the broad cottier-proletariat of cottiers, labourers and small farmers, who had numbered between four and five million people on the eve of the Famine, had shrunk by 40 per cent!<sup>3</sup> Within fifteen years of the Famine, at the time of the 1861 Census, the total population had fallen by nearly 30 per cent; statistical difficulties notwithstanding, the figures in Table IX readily underline the class bias in this enormous bloodletting. While there was a small decline in the number of "farmers", the aggregated categories employed by the Census Commissioners for the agricultural working class ("servants and labourers, ploughmen, graziers and herds") recorded losses of almost two-thirds within two decades. Major changes in the classification system, which occurred in 1871, prevent an accurate continuation of the

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2. The fundamental difficulty is one of classification/definition, of determining when a "landholder" is a "farmer", or when a "farmer" should actually be called a "cottier". Moreover, the categories used by the Census (and by the Poor Law Inspectors) were variable and not necessarily comparable. Given these qualifications, which undermine the validity of specific figures, the general patterns displayed in the material employed in this chapter may be taken as valid. Cf., the notes to the statistical appendix on land-holdings, and the sources cited therein.

3. This estimate rests on the figure of about one million cottiers and labourers, each of whom is presumed to have had a family of at least four members. If anything, this estimate tends to err on the low side, since the familial multiplier is most likely to be conservative. Cf., Lee, Modernisation, pp. 2-3; Emigration Reports, (Pr.2541), pp. 3-5

TABLE IX: Farmers and Labourers, 1841-61<sup>4</sup>

<u>Farmers</u>	Leinster	Munster	Ulster	Connacht	Ireland
1841	86,352	130,876	172,140	81,868	471,238
1851	79,266	91,362	163,798	69,212	403,638
1861	75,524	95,362	181,483	86,328	438,697
% change	-12.5	-27.1	+5.4	+5.4	-6.9
<u>Labourers</u>					
1841	332,651	439,183	302,828	288,240	1,362,902
1851	237,506	340,776	260,913	193,808	1,033,003
1861	125,775	164,865	128,687	97,085	516,412
% change	-62.2	-62.5	-57.5	-66.3	-62.1

series, but some comparative measures are still possible. The most striking outcome of the changes in the Census categories was a wholly anomalous increase in the number of "agricultural labourers, farm servants and shepherds", from 516,000 in 1861 to 620,000 in 1871. This increase was proved to be a statistical illusion once the new classification had stabilised, for the reality of a continuously shrinking rural working class was confirmed in the later figures. In 1881, there were 336,000 agricultural wage-earners; by 1891, fewer than 280,000.<sup>5</sup>

Much the same pattern is revealed in the figures for land-holdings. On the eve of the Famine, there had been more than 620,000 small "farms", ranging from the potato-gardens of the labourers and cottiers up to the far more substantial small mixed farms of just under

4. Census of Ireland, 1841, 1843, (504), xxiv, pp. 152, 262, 364, 430; 1851, 1856, (2134), xxxi, pp. 206, 374, 526, 616; 1861, 1863, (3204-IV), lxi, pp. 683, 603, 701, 709

5. Census of Ireland, 1871, 1876, (c.662, 873, 876, 964, 1000, 1106, 1377), lxxxii; 1881, 1882, (c.3379), lxxix; 1891, (c.6780), xc. These figures were reproduced by the Royal Commission on Labour, 1893-4, (C. 6894-XXV), xxxvii, Pt. II, pp. 39-40; cf., "Statistical Survey of Irish Agriculture", in Coyne, ed., Ireland, Industrial & Agricultural, pp. 316-18; Lee, Modernisation, p. 2; Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine, pp. 52-3

fifteen acres (which were in fact common and productive in Ulster, Cork and Wexford). During the immediate years of the Hunger (1845-50), more than 300,000 of these holdings simply vanished. The land which was abandoned by the cottiers was not allowed to revert to waste, nor was it left idle, for the same five years saw perhaps as many as 13,000 new fifteen-acre farms brought into production, and there is even some evidence that the amount of land in agricultural use actually increased during the Famine.<sup>6</sup> The rounded figures in Table X point to an indisputable aspect of the Famine's impact on land-holdings -- the decisive shift towards more viable farm-sizes.<sup>7</sup> The negative

TABLE X : Small, Medium, Large Farms (Rounded)

	below 15 acres	15 to 30 acres	above 30 acres
1845	628,000	277,000*	n.a.*
1847	482,000	164,000	148,000
1851	318,000	141,000	149,000
1861	311,000	141,000	158,000
1871	293,000	139,000	159,000
1881	282,000	136,000	160,000
1891	276,000	134,000	163,000

(\*) The figure in the second column, for 1845, represents all holdings of more than fifteen acres; cf., the notes to the statistical appendix on land-holdings.

corollary to this modest process of consolidation was the impact upon

6. I use the word "perhaps" advisedly, for the pre-1851 figures are a minefield of misinformation. It is highly unlikely that the number of 15-acre holdings fluctuated as widely as the figures in Table X suggest. It is more reasonable to assume the modest increase in the text than the sharp increase and decline which the figure for 1847 indicates. On the expansion of land in use, see Bourke, "Agricultural Statistics, 1841", pp. 387-91

7. "Viability" is, of course, an elastic concept; a recent study of modern farming in Northern Ireland defines fully half of the farms in the Six Counties as non-viable or part-time operations: L. Symons, "Rural Land Utilisation in Ireland", in Stephens & Glasscock, eds., Irish Geographical Studies, pp. 259-73



the cottier-proletariat -- they were driven off the land. In that process, their relationship to the means of production was drastically altered.

The abruptness of the blow can also be read in the Census figures for housing. The 1851 Census reported that 355,689 fourth-class houses, or nearly three-quarters of the pre-Famine total, had disappeared. During the same decade, fewer than 73,000 houses in all three other classes had been built. In other words, the former inhabitants of the mud-cabins had not been re-housed in Ireland.<sup>8</sup> Those cabins did not disappear of their own accord, nor did they all collapse from natural inanition. Their disappearance was one feature of the notorious "clearances", the mass evictions which proceeded on many estates across Ireland during the Famine: they were demolished, after the eviction of their occupants, by the infamous "crowbar brigades" employed by the landlords and their agents and bailiffs. The procedure was known as "tumbling". One of the many contemporary accounts will suffice; Sir William Butler witnessed this scene as a boy in county Tipperary. "The sheriff, a strong force of police, and above all the crowbar brigade, a body composed of the lowest and most debauched ruffians, were present. At a signal from the sheriff, the work began.

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8. Census of Ireland, 1851, 1852-3, (1550), xci, p. xxiii; cf., R. E. Matheson, "The Housing of the People of Ireland, 1841-1901", JSSISI, XI, (1904), pp. 196-212. The proportional decrease in fourth-class housing was especially marked: from 37% in 1841 to 13% in 1851 to a bare 1.15% in 1901.

The miserable inmates of the cabins were dragged out upon the road; the thatched roofs were torn down and the earthen walls battered in by crowbars (practice had made these scoundrels adepts in their trade); the screaming women, the half-naked children, the paralysed grandmother and the tottering grandfather were hauled out".<sup>9</sup> If the prose seems to have a purple tinge, it is worth bearing in mind that scenes like this were played out across Ireland during the Famine. In the poor law union of Kilrush in county Clare, for instance, more than 1,000 cabins were tumbled between November 1847 and August 1848 alone.<sup>10</sup>

It speaks volumes for the desperate determination of the cottiers to hold onto a patch of ground, however risible, that evictions had so often to be followed by the demolition of their cabins. But that was not the whole story, for there were more systematic incentives for removing the cabins. In the first place, the dispossession of the cottier and the liquidation of his holding and his home was an indispensable precondition for the re-organisation and consolidation of farms in many areas.<sup>11</sup> The provisions of the Poor Law, specifically in the Famine relief amendments adopted in 1847, contained another incentive, in the

9. Cited by Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, pp. 365-66. Irish writers, from the eyewitnesses such as Carleton and Banim to the moderns like Macken and O'Flaherty, have naturally written much on the horrors of the Famine; and one of the greatest modern long poems, Patrick Kavanagh's "Great Hunger" derives its metaphoric strength from the folk-memory of the 1840s.

10. The daily reports from the local relief officer are quoted at length by T. P. O'Connor, The Parnell Movement, with a sketch of Irish Parties since 1843, (New York: Benziger Bros., 1889), pp. 82-101

11. Ibid., pp. 171-76

requirement that the immediate lessor of any hereditament valued at less than £4 per annum was liable for all poor-rates due on that property. Vacant possessions were not excluded, so the cabin had to be levelled before the holding ceased to exist.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the provision in the Poor Law amendments for the outdoor relief of destitute cottiers who could not be accommodated in the workhouses, already overflowing in 1847 despite their evil reputation, added a notorious rider on the initiative of Sir William Gregory, MP for Dublin. This "Gregory clause" had a simple aim -- "to prevent any person holding more than a quarter-acre of land from receiving relief until he had parted with possession of the land".<sup>13</sup> This "quarter-acre clause" had a double significance. It was, firstly, a punitive instrument. Those who had been so foolhardy as to defy the laws of political-economy and the edicts of the economists by being obliged to attempt to survive by virtue of the potato were now to be stripped of their sole remaining possibility of securing a livelihood in the future. The clause also acted, therefore, as the green light for many landowners to proceed to large-scale clearances. The number of evictions all over the country, including

12. For a detailed discussion of the poor law provisions, see O'Neill, "Organisation & Administration of Relief", in Edwards & Williams, eds., The Great Famine; and Black, Economic Thought & the Irish Question, Chapter IV, pp. 86-133

13. Black, Economic Thought & the Irish Question, p. 126; cf., Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 98-100, 111-20; Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger, pp. 299ff; and the valuable biographical note by Joseph M. Hone, "Sir William Gregory", Studies, XLV, (1955), pp. 337-41.

Ulster,<sup>14</sup> leapt upwards. The clearances, mass evictions of hundreds of starving, poverty-stricken sub-tenants, were prosecuted most vigourously on estates across the wide belt of rich land in central and southern Ireland, in the areas where the population growth and subdivision had tended to encroach most obviously upon the productive capacity of the land.<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, we simply do not have accurate figures for the extent of evictions during the worst Famine days, since the official collection of the data, by the Irish Constabulary, did not begin until 1849. Even so, the first three years' figures recorded almost 50,000 families, or more than 260,000 persons, who had lost their land through eviction. Some of these people were re-admitted, but more often as caretakers than as tenants.<sup>16</sup> There is a striking discrepancy between the number of officially-recorded evictions and the actual decline in the number of holdings. Apart from gaps in the records, this can be easily accounted for by the frequency with which many thousands of

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14. Generally speaking, Ulster landowners tended to be less vindictive; and though holdings were, on average, smaller than elsewhere, the linen industry afforded a firmer basis than the bare potato-nexus. Cf., S.H. Cousens, "The Regional Pattern of Emigration during the Great Famine, 1846-51", Transactions & Papers of the Institute of British Geographers, No. 28, (1960), pp. 119-34; J. H. Johnson, "The Population of Derry during the Great Irish Famine", EcHR, 2nd series, X, (1958), pp. 273-85. The raw data indicate that only 10% of the total number of evictions during the peak years (1849-51) occurred in Ulster: Return of Evictions . . . 1849 to 1880, 1881, (185), lxxvii, pp. 727-47

15. Tipperary, where the conflict over conacre had been very intense in the mid-1840s, saw a very high rate of evictions between 1849 and 1853; Return of Evictions, 1881, (185), lxxvii, pp. 732-34

16. Less than 30% of the evictees were re-admitted: ibid., p. 727

cottiers "voluntarily" deserted their holdings. The devastation of the blight in 1845 (and again in 1848) left those holding only a scrap of potato-ground with neither food nor a seed-crop for the following year. They therefore had no immediate use for the land. The quarter-acre clause obliged many to leave their holding in search of food or work on one of the relief-projects. Not infrequently, their cabins were demolished in their absence.

Driven off the land, homeless and finally dependent upon the limited resources and punitive requirements of the poor law relief system, great numbers of cottiers faced the cruel choice posed by Cullen's "narrowing prospects" -- starvation by slow degrees or emigration in search of a fresh livelihood. Throughout the pre-Famine decades, English economists and administrators had repeatedly urged that the essential precondition for re-organising Irish agriculture was the clearance of the "surplus population" off the land, preferably by encouraging large-scale emigration to the other colonies. Though the Famine clearly presented the best possible opportunity for pursuing this policy, it is notable that the landowners generally did not play an active role in promoting emigration, except in the all-important negative sense of affording many of the people no alternative. The best estimate of the numbers of people who were assisted to emigrate by their landlords puts the figure at about 2,000 a year between 1846 and

1852: the total "can scarcely have exceeded 50,000".<sup>17</sup> Since at least 1.4 million people emigrated during these same seven years, landlord-assisted emigration can have been no more than a drop in the ocean.<sup>18</sup> Between 1846 and 1854, the emigrant stream, which had already been quite significant before the onset of the blight,<sup>19</sup> became a flood. In 1851 alone, a quarter of a million people fled. By 1861, the official count had recorded more than two million overseas emigrants since the start of the Famine, and this figure clearly understates the magnitude of the movement, since the Irish who went no further than the British mainland were not counted.<sup>20</sup>

Both the rational structure and the underlying class source of the emigration were evident in the annual patterns. Emigration rose and fell according to two basic criteria -- the state of the American economy and conditions in Ireland. The link between the two was most evident in the mid-1870s, when halcyon years in the Irish economy

17. Oliver MacDonagh, "Irish Emigration to the USA & British Colonies during the Famine", in Edwards & Williams, eds., The Great Famine, pp. 334-35; cf., Oliver MacDonagh, "The Irish Catholic Clergy and Emigration during the Famine", IHS, V, (1946-7), pp. 287-302. The most notorious instances of landlord-assisted emigration were the mass deportations from the Sligo estates of Lord Palmerston and Robert Gore-Booth; large numbers of these emigrants died of fever on board the fearsome "coffin ships" taking them to Quebec. Woodham-Smith, Great Hunger, pp. 223-26; Terry Coleman, Passage to America, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974).

18. This total is the aggregate of the figures from the 1851 Census; cited by MacDonagh, "Emigration during the Famine", in Edwards & Williams, Great Famine, Appendix I, p. 388

19. Adams, Ireland & Irish Emigration, Appendix, pp. 410-28

20. Overseas emigrants were all those leaving Irish or British ports; cf., Emigration Statistics of Ireland, 1909, 1910, (Cd.5088), cix, pp. 481-87

coincided with depression, wage-cutting and mass unemployment in the United States.<sup>21</sup> The result was a sharp decline in emigration to the United States, down to an annual average of 16,300 in 1876-78, or just over one quarter of the average which had been sustained in the previous ten years.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the two main periods of depression in the Irish rural economy (1859-64 and 1879-82) were marked by increased levels of emigration, when the annual flow rose to two or three times the rate in the immediately preceding years.<sup>23</sup>

Although rural depopulation through emigration was a generalised feature of the post-Famine period, the annual figures tend to mask the extent to which the emigrant stream was class-based. There are clear indications in fact that, apart from one brief, exceptional period at the nadir of the Famine, the rural working classes rather than the farming community provided the great bulk of those who left. What made 1845-51 exceptional was the widespread and virtually absolute destitution of the cottier masses. This situation entailed high poor-rates and encouraged aggressive prosecution of evictions by the

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21. For an account of the conditions facing American workers in the 1870s see the opening chapters of R. V. Bruce, 1877: Year of Violence, (Chicago: Quadrangle Press, 1970).

22. Emigration Reports, (Pr.2541), Statistical Appendix, Table 26, pp. 314-15

23. Ibid. On Irish emigration, the most systematic study is A. Schrier, Ireland & the American Emigration, 1850-1900, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958); Terry Coleman, Passage to America is more anecdotal, but very informative on the conditions facing emigrants; the broader demographic issues are examined by R. E. Kennedy, The Irish: Emigration, Marriage & Fertility, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

landowners. On the one hand, the destruction of the potato-crop in three successive years (1846-48), particularly in the most densely populated areas, pauperised hundreds of thousands of the rural poor; in some western poor law unions up to 70 per cent of the population was in need of relief for at least some of the time between 1847 and 1851.<sup>24</sup> Without a cash crop or alternative employment, many of the cottiers were simply unable to leave because they could not afford the passage-money. On the other hand, in the key heartland counties stretching south from Cavan to Waterford, high poor-rates and evictions engouraged emigration from the ranks of the small farmers. The cut-off point for poor-rate assessment was property to the value of £4 per annum -- in the event that the small farmer's holding was worth less than £4, the landowner's responsibility for the poor-rates constituted an incentive to evict; if, on the other hand, the small farmer was liable to pay the poor-rates, widespread destitution and consequently high levies might well represent the difference between profit and inability to pay rent. In the face of these circumstances, Cousens suggests, "many of these small holders sold their grain before it was seized for rent, and then fled".<sup>25</sup> The outcome was a brief spell during which it was lamented, in various parts of the country, that the stable, productive and formerly prosperous small farmers were leaving, taking

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24. Cousens, "Emigration during the Famine", p. 128

25. Ibid., p. 131



families and savings with them. In 1846, for instance, the Cork Constitution wrote that "the large mass of emigrants are parties having the appearance of respectable farmers"; two years later, the Cork Examiner described the emigrants as "more substantial class of peasantry".<sup>26</sup>

This prominence of farmers, perhaps because they were more noticeable than numerically predominant, tended to recur briefly during the depression in the early 1860s. But once the main impact of the Famine had receded, the essential class bias in the emigration came into clearer focus. It must be argued, from direct evidence and inference, that emigration was the principal form taken by the gradual elimination of the cottier-proletariat. The great majority of emigrants were drawn from the ranks of the "old" (pre-Famine) and "new" (post-Famine) rural working classes -- that is, landless labourers, cottiers, small farmers, and the children of farmers. Analytically, the process can be described as two overlapping movements. First, the bulk of the remaining cottiers was removed, under a variety of economic and social pressures, until by the end of the century, the tiny marginal cottier "farms" were largely restricted to the densely populated, desperately poor Congested Districts in the west. The other part of the process was the departure of the sons and daughters of the farmers, who left rather

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26. Cited by Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 127; cf., Cousens, "Emigration during the Famine", p. 131; MacDonagh, "Emigration during the Famine", in Edwards & Williams, eds., Great Famine, pp. 321-26; Woodham Smith, Great Hunger, pp. 209, 368-69

than remain as unpaid (or grossly underpaid) labourers and servants on farms which might never be theirs.<sup>27</sup>

The landless and the cottiers, whose prospects had truly diminished as the swing towards pastoral production lowered the demand for rural labour, faced an increasingly uncertain future. Not only was work scarce and seasonal, but access to the supplementary patch of potato-ground was sharply curtailed. By the mid-1850s, at the latest, the rural working class began to emigrate in large numbers. The transition from the exceptional pattern of emigration by small farming families to the mass departure of the unmarried labour force can be identified in the age-sex distribution of emigrants. In the mid-1850s, almost a quarter of the emigrants were children under the age of 14; during the next twenty years, the proportion fell below 15 per cent. In the 1850s, the balance between the sexes was virtually equal, but during the following two decades the scales tilted decisively. From 1856 on, down to the 1890s, men normally comprised 55 per cent of the total; and in the most productive age-group, between 25 and 29 years, the imbalance was particularly striking, with men outnumbering women on the emigrant ships by almost two to one.<sup>28</sup>

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27. On the whole question of the class-basis of Irish emigration, see first, the basic source: Emigration Reports, (Pr.2541) for most of the available data; T. W. Freeman, "Emigration & Rural Ireland", JSSISI, XVII, (1945), pp. 404-22; Cormac Ó Gráda, "Some Aspects of nineteenth-century Irish Emigration", in L. M. Cullen & T. C. Smout, eds., Comparative Aspects of Scottish & Irish Economic History, (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1978), pp. 65-73

28. Emigration Reports, (Pr.2541), pp. 118-22; Statistical Appendix, Tables 28, 29, pp. 318-20

Why did all these people leave? Briefly, because theirs was a small share of the growing prosperity of the rural economy. If the living conditions of the rural working classes were measured solely by wage-rates, then they had certainly gained. Despite some contradictions in the evidence, this point can be made with some assurance. The central tendency seems to have been for agricultural wages to have doubled between the Famine and the Land War.<sup>29</sup> By 1855, rural workers were said to be "in greater request and receive higher wages" than ever before: "labourers for reaping, mowing and other harvest operations were engaged in Limerick on Saturday last at 12s. 6d. per week (wet or dry) and diet; and on Monday morning, when fine weather appeared to have set in, they were eagerly picked up at 2s. 6d. per day and board".<sup>30</sup> These wages were two to three times higher than the average paid ten years earlier, but it must be noted that they were harvest wages, which always stood above the year-round rates. Evidence from Cork also suggests that wages had generally doubled between 1845 and the end of the 1850s;<sup>31</sup> part of the reason evidently was that the agricultural labour force had fallen by about 25 per cent.<sup>32</sup> The first

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29. Solow, The Land Question, p. 94; Lee, Modernisation, p. 8; Cormac Ó Gráda, "Aspects of Emigration", in Cullen & Smout, eds., Scottish & Irish Economic History, p. 73 n.25

30. Illustrated London News, 22 August 1855, p. 230

31. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 235-36

32. Cormac Ó Gráda, "On Some Aspects of Productivity Change in Irish Agriculture, 1845-1926", (unpublished paper, presented to International Economic History Congress, 1978), p. 4

systematic examination of post-Famine agricultural wages was carried out by the Poor Law Inspectors in 1870; they reported that wages had risen steeply since 1849, by as much as 200 per cent in the areas close to Belfast and Dublin, and by between 50 and 100 per cent in the rest of the country. Live-in farm servants still had the best situation, earning between £8 and £18 a year, while most casual labourers, working a full six-day week, could earn 6s. most of the time and 12s. or more during the busy spring and harvest periods.<sup>33</sup> Ten years later, in 1880, Professor Baldwin told the Bessborough Commission that the average wage for an agricultural labourer was about 7s. a week.<sup>34</sup> The Royal Commission on Labour was informed by Thomas Grimshaw that the prevailing day-rate in the mid-1880s was about 1s. 6d., or a weekly rate of 9s.<sup>35</sup> The same body's final report, in 1894, having noted wide regional variations and different forms of employment, concluded that "taking all these circumstances into consideration, it may be estimated that the wages of ordinary agricultural labourers who have constant work do not, on the average throughout the country, exceed 9s. 9d. a week".<sup>36</sup> In short, the monetary advance over the average weekly wage, of no more

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33. Reports from the Poor Law Inspectors on the wages of agricultural labourers in Ireland, 1870, (35), xiv, pp. 1- 4

34. Reprinted in Reports of the Royal Commission on Labour, 1893-4, (C.6894-XXIV), Pt. II, Appendix B, "The Agricultural Labourer, Ireland", p. 545

35. Abstract of Cowper Commission evidence, in ibid., p. 590

36. Fifth & Final Report of the Royal Commission on Labour, 1894, (C.7421), xxxv, p. 247

than 5s., had been not inconsiderable.

The situation of the agricultural labour was not entirely rosy however; a number of debits should also be entered into this account. The over-riding problem was the simple fact that most agricultural labourers were casual workers, hired by the day, and generally very fortunate to enjoy more than a few weeks' full employment in the year. Moreover, although prices may not have advanced as fast as wages, particularly in the early post-Famine period, the range and amount of necessities which the agricultural worker now had to buy had greatly expanded. The labourer who might formerly have grown his own food (potatoes) and woven his own cloth became increasingly dependent from the 1850s onwards upon imported Indian meal and manufactured clothing. The transition involved in this process -- essentially the decline of cottage industry -- had certainly begun before the Famine, but that disaster brought on a qualitative acceleration. Many of the cottiers and small farmers who left the land in search of relief found themselves crowded into the slums in the country towns, and only very rarely were they able to recover their "landed" status, because the determination of the farmers and landowners alike to maintain consolidated, viable farms coincided to prevent subdivision.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the economic basis for the conacre system had been sharply reduced: many farmers simply

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37. Exceptional conditions (the generally very poor quality and value of the land) permitted the proliferation of small subdivided holdings in the west, especially in the mountainous areas of Mayo, Galway and Kerry; cf., S. H. Cousens, "Regional Variations in Population Changes in Ireland, 1861-81", ECHR, 2nd series, XVII, (1965), pp. 301-21

had no further need for it, they required fewer workers and usually supplied the need from their own families; and the land was more profitably put down to grass for livestock.<sup>38</sup> Finally, the drastic numerical losses suffered by the rural working classes tended to depreciate at least one aspect of their bargaining position -- a change which was reflected in the decline in agrarian terrorism, the primitive form of rural syndicalism which had, in the pre-Famine decades, often been the cottier's ultimate guarantee of access to potato-ground.<sup>39</sup>

The most basic, and longest-lasting, grievance of the agricultural workers was their atrocious housing conditions. Although many of the witnesses who testified before the various commissions of inquiry recalled having seen literally hundreds of cabins tumbled during the Famine,<sup>40</sup> and despite the constant decline in fourth-class housing recorded in the Censuses, the rural working classes continued to live in "houses" which one Poor Law Inspector condemned as "a disgrace to the Christianity and the civilisation of the country".<sup>41</sup> Thirteen years later, in 1883, the situation seemed not to have improved, since a Dublin lawyer felt the need to repeat the remark of the dispensary doctor

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38. Conacre did (and in fact still does) continue to be an aspect of Irish land-tenure: the practice of renting land by the season, either pasture for a given herd of cattle or as arable, remained. The difference, of course, lay in the resistance to subdivision and the reluctance to allow cottiers back onto the land.

39. See the analysis in Chapter Six, below.

40. E. g., William Bolster and A. J. Kettle, whose comments are abstracted in the Reports of the Royal Commission on Labour, 1893-4, (C. 6894-XXIV), xxxvii, Pt. II, pp. 546, 548

41. Poor Law Inspectors on Wages, 1870, (35), xiv, p. 12 (Mr. O'Brien, South Ulster)

for Castle Pollard, county Westmeath, a rich grazing county, that most labourers' houses "were not only unfit for human habitation, but such as he would not put a decent dog into".<sup>42</sup> It is hardly any wonder that the Poor Law Inspectors, who were specifically instructed to inquire into the morale of the rural labour force, were unanimously gloomy. The agricultural labourers "constantly complain, and grumble, and each successive year demand a higher rate of wages" and "There is little community of interest between the labourers and the farmers".<sup>43</sup> Samuel Horsley, whose inspectorate covered a large area in Cork, Limerick and Waterford, described "the distrust which they almost universally entertain as to their employers having no inclination to advance, at their own cost, their interests in any way that they can possibly avoid".<sup>44</sup>

The reasons for this antipathy between employing farmers and their labourers are not hard to find. The lingering desire for access to land, poor or uncertain wages, and intolerable housing were the main bones of contention. From the 1870s down through the 1930s, these grievances were the source of a sporadic series of class struggles which came increasingly to assume the forms normally appropriate to modern capitalism, in which employers' groups were pitted against

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42. Abstracted in Reports of the Royal Commission on Labour, 1893-4, (C.6894-XXIV), xxxvii, Pt. II, p. 601

43. Poor Law Inspectors on Wages, 1870, (35), xiv, pp. 2 (Dr. Charles Croker King, South Munster), 21 (Richard Bourke, North Munster)

44. Ibid., p. 23

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44. Ibid., p. 23



more or less formalised trades unions.<sup>45</sup> The labourers' victories were rare; the farmers' strengths increasingly evident. It is significant, for instance, that the housing question was not resolved until the 1890s, a decade after the major demand of the farmers had been won during the Land War.<sup>46</sup> It is no less significant that the Land League was mainly, if not exclusively, a farmers' body, which virtually ignored the demands and interests of the labourers. A recent survey of newspaper reports of League meetings underlines this point, noting that only six per cent of the resolutions passed at more than 150 League meetings even broached the labourers' demands.<sup>47</sup>

The main aspects of the transformation of the Irish rural working class after the Famine were first, the drastic reduction in its numbers; second, the conversion of the "landed" cottier-proletariat or "poor peasantry" into a more normal class of landless wage-labourers; and finally, a significant change in its internal composition. This last appears, at first sight, to be a question of the farmers rather than the

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45. P. L. R. Horn, "The National Agricultural Labourers' Union in Ireland, 1873-79", IHS, XVII, (1970-71), pp. 340-52; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 236-42; Andrew Boyd, The Rise of the Irish Trade Unions, 1729-1970, (Tralee: Anvil Books, 1972), pp. 61-2; Greaves, Liam Mellows & the Irish Revolution, pp. 113-14, 179-80, 188-91; O'Neill, War for the Land, pp. 150ff. Cf., the account of the strike by the League of Associated Herdsmen in county Roscommon in 1881, at the height of the Land War, in the Final Report of the Royal Commission on Labour, 1894, (C.7421), xxxv, pp. 247, 259

46. Matheson, "Housing, 1841-1901", pp. 203-4; N. J. Synott, "Housing of the Rural Population in Ireland", JSSISI, IX, (1904), pp. 215-301

47. Clark, "Importance of agrarian classes", p. 32

agricultural proletariat since we are talking about the sons and daughters of the farmers. It is the case that labour-power of the landless labourers was substantially augmented by the farmers' access to and disposal of the free or very cheap manpower of their children. This was not entirely novel, for family labour had long played a part in farming, but from the 1850s onwards it became a more significant proportion of the whole labour-force and a key source of surplus-value. Although the Census began to count farmers' children from 1871, finding fewer than 90,000 in that year, this large stratum of the farm workers tended not to appear in the official statistical ranks of the rural working class. The anomaly was neatly captured by Thomas Grimshaw, who explained that the 1881 Census had counted only 215,000 agricultural labourers, but that "there are a great number of farmers, farmers' sons, and members of the family who work as labourers, and have no other means of support, who would not return themselves as labourers, but as landholders. They will not demean themselves by calling themselves labourers, and they are not dignified enough to call themselves farmers".<sup>48</sup> The employment and exploitation of family labour was a critical aspect of the growing wealth and strength of the farmers. On the one hand, it had a direct economic effect -- on many smaller farms, it probably made the difference between profit and the loss of the land,

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48. Reports of the Royal Commission on Labour, 1893-4, (C. 6894-XXIV), xxxvii, Pt. II, p. 579

while the larger farmer employed his sons so as to reduce his need for hired labour and thus to restrain the tendency of wages to rise.<sup>49</sup> The other aspect is more opaque, but no less significant. The presence of these "boys" and "girls" (as Irish usage has it) of 40 or 50 years of age, frequently paid no more than promises of the future possibility of inheritance, engendered conditions of dependency, prolonged adolescence and sexual deferment which, it may be suggested, were the moral equivalents of the conservative economic rationality of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie and the source of a long-term retrogressive effect upon the socio-psychological structure of the Irish rural population.<sup>50</sup>

The most obscure aspect of the changes underway in the ranks of the rural working classes was the issue of consciousness. It is clear that the combination of starvation, disease and emigration during the Famine years was a literal bloodletting, but the matter did not stop there, for mass emigration became a central feature of Irish life. In the nationalist tradition, correctly, emigration was seen as a continuation

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49. Cf., the Reports of the Richmond, Bessborough and Cowper Commissions and the Royal Commission on Labour -- each contains evidence from numbers of strong farmers, testifying that on as many as 300 acres they employed only half a dozen labourers, coupled with complaints that wages had risen extravagantly because of the population loss since the Famine.

50. This is, of course, a complicated and problematic area. Some of the best evidence is in the imaginative reconstructions by writers such as Liam O'Flaherty and Frank O'Connor. The question is important because it constitutes the potential limitations upon the vision, and thus the revolutionary drive, of the class which will make the bourgeois revolution in Ireland. Cf. Chapter Five, Section III, below.

of the slaughter, a process by which the best life's blood of the country was perpetually drained away. There is, in part at least, a harshly material explanation -- even if the material conditions of the working classes had improved, they did not keep pace with expectations. Growing wealth in the rural community was not equally shared. After the Famine, the Irish rural proletariat had two comparative points of reference. In contrast with the visible improvements in the farmers' standard of living and with the generally favourable reports of the good (or at least better) life across the Atlantic, the squalid cottage, the diet of Indian meal, the long stretches of seasonal idleness and the ever-receding plot of land must have appeared unenviable. The drudgery was summed up by the labourer who declared, "I don't like the work on the land. It is very laborious and does not lead to anything. I have seen men who have worked all their lives as badly off as at the beginning".<sup>51</sup> For men and women who shared his point of view, the avenue of escape was to America, whence also came the means, in the form of "the remarkable development of the self-perpetuating system of emigrant remittances".<sup>52</sup> The Famine emigration created the "nation beyond", a potent force in late-nineteenth-century Ireland: the source of political and military leadership for revolutionary nationalism, bearing eloquent

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51. Cited by Lee, Modernisation, p. 8

52. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 228

testimony to the resentment springing from the very need to emigrate. The constant flow of dollars from previous emigrants frequently provided the margin of survival for many small holders in the west;<sup>53</sup> and most important of all, emigrant remittances fuelled the emigration. As early as 1848, £460,000 was sent back to allow the first set of emigrants' relatives to escape; four years later, the total had reached £1.4 millions.<sup>54</sup> By 1864, more than £13 millions had been remitted in pre-paid passages alone.<sup>55</sup> The main study suggests that fully three-quarters of the four million emigrants who went to America between 1850 and 1900 were enabled to leave Ireland by pre-paid passages.<sup>56</sup>

The harshest, deepest and most irremediable blow, but unfortunately the hardest to gauge, was the shock to the inner-life of the people. In his polemic against Daniel Corkery's romanticised version of the Gaelic tradition, Sean O'Faolain rejects sentimentality and cant in favour of hard words about the "helotry" and sycophantic whining tone adopted by many of the Gaelic poets in the late eighteenth century; O'Faolain's is a useful corrective, capturing the less than

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53. Freeman, "Congested Districts", p. 7; Micks, Accounts of the Congested Districts Board, pp. 9-12; Brody, Inishkillane, pp. 66-8; cf., the first-hand accounts in Gallagher, Paddy the Cope: My Story, and by Maurice O'Sullivan, Twenty Years A-Growing, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1933)

54. S. H. Cousens, "Emigration & Demographic Change in Ireland, 1851-61", ECHR, 2nd series, XIV, (1962), p. 276

55. J. E. Pomfret, The Struggle for the Land in Ireland, 1800-1923, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1930), pp. 40-41; R. Barry O'Brien, The Parliamentary History of the Irish Land Question, 1829-69, (London: Sampson Low, 1880), p. 113n.

56. Schrier, Ireland & the American Emigration, p. 111

admirable side of the traditional life of the countryside. But there were also some positive values in that tradition. Their elegy was written by Sir William Wilde, Oscar's father, in a few phrases of introduction to the Census report on Famine mortality -- ". . . the closest ties of kindred were dissolved, the most ancient and long-cherished usages of the people were disregarded; . . . the once proverbial gaiety and light-heartedness of the peasant people seemed to have vanished completely; and village merriment or marriage festival was no longer seen or heard throughout the regions desolated by the intensity and extent of the Famine".<sup>57</sup> The heart of a virtually self-contained communal life, founded on the subsistence economy of the densely populated settlements of the rural poor, was cut out within the span of a few years. An account documented by the Irish Folklore Commission is especially striking for its bleak, understated tone -- "Sports and pastimes disappeared. Poetry, music and dancing stopped. They lost and forgot them all and when the times improved in other respects, these things never returned as they had been. The famine killed everything".<sup>58</sup>

This is not intended as an exercise in nostalgia. The life of the pre-Famine cottier-proletariat had been nasty, hard and short. But its dark aspects had been relieved by a dense network of traditional

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57. Census of Ireland, 1851, 1856, (2087), xxix, p. 242

58. Translated and cited by Roger McHugh, "The Famine in Irish Oral Tradition", in Edwards & Williams, eds., The Great Famine, pp. 434-35

social life which, in form at least, retained pre-capitalist characteristics.<sup>59</sup> The pattern-days and frequently riotous seasonal festivals came to an end, by and large,<sup>60</sup> during the Famine years. Their passage was a crucial psychological element of the clearances, for the way had been opened by their removal for the development of the more rational capitalist society upon which the farmers would stamp their hallmark.

### Disarming the Garrison

If the Great Hunger disposed of one problem for the farmers, the main obstacle in their path still lay ahead, in the shape of the landowners. The Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy's heyday, towards the end of the eighteenth century, had been characterised by two key aspects. It was, on the one hand, founded upon the landowners' absolutist monopoly of property, of the fundamental means of production, from which flowed their control over all the effective levers of government. The other feature was expressed most fully in the short life of Grattan's parliament,

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59. There is an extensive literature on Irish folk-traditions, which rests on the invaluable work of the Irish Folklore Commission. See, in particular, Seán Ó Súilleabháin, Irish Folk Custom & Belief, (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967); Kevin Danaher, The Year in Ireland, (Cork: Mercier Press, 1972); E. Estyn Evans, Irish Folk Ways, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957)

60. The qualification is essential because neither the customs nor, more significantly, their Gaelic linguistic matrix were entirely extinguished by the Famine. The céilidhe, for instance, the impromptu party of singing, dancing, story-telling and courting, can still be found, especially in the Gaeltacht, the Gaelic-speaking regions.

from 1782 to 1800, in the Ascendancy's self-assured claim to lead and represent the "Irish nation". Within a century, the social landscape had so altered that the descendants of Grattan's patriots were reduced to an embattled rearguard, a garrison surrounded by the hostile natives of an entirely different Irish nation.<sup>61</sup> This transformation was the result of an extensive class war, in which the key victories were won by the farmers and their allies, their spokesmen and leaders, primarily in the ideological and economic arenas. It was only later, from the mid-1880s, that the political powers of the Ascendancy, at the imperial, national and local levels, were successfully challenged by the rising Irish agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

The first blow, a minor one, was struck by the Imperial parliament in the process of the search for ways in which capitalist farming might be encouraged in Ireland. This was the avowed goal of government policy during the Famine. Towards this end, the clearance of the unproductive and virtually unemployable cottiers was an obvious and logical first step. But the cottiers were not alone in facing ruin on the heels of the blight, nor in falling victim to the government's policy.

In 1848 and 1849, the Encumbered Estates Acts were passed.<sup>62</sup> Their intention was to infuse new capital into Irish

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61. The Ascendancy gets a sympathetic hearing in J. C. Beckett, The Anglo-Irish Tradition, (London: Faber & Faber, 1976); while the relentlessly hostile view may be found in O'Hegarty, Ireland under the Union.

62. The genesis and aims of the legislation are closely analysed by Padraig G. Lane, "The Encumbered Estates Court, Ireland, 1848-49", Economic & Social Review, III, (1971-2), pp. 413-53



agriculture by facilitating a free market in land and by removing the weakest, most debt-laden members of the landowning class. When the definitive act was passed, in 1849, land to the value of £2 millions' annual rental, or between one-sixth and one-seventh of the total worth of the country, was embroiled in Chancery suits brought by creditors seeking to recoup their investments in Irish landlordism.<sup>63</sup> Since it had been possible for Irish landowners to take out fresh loans against land which was already heavily mortgaged, and since it was generally uncommon for estates to become so hopelessly entangled in debts that they were taken in charge by the courts, it is likely that the extent of landlord indebtedness was considerably greater than the Chancery total would indicate.<sup>64</sup> The Famine was, moreover, a bad time for many landowners, for the government's insistence that they should bear the brunt of the financial as well as moral responsibility for poor relief added a massive new charge to their accounts, at the precise moment when real rental income was falling steeply.

The situation, briefly put, was that about one in ten landlords was bankrupt. The solution proposed by the government, and effected through the Encumbered Estates Court, was to clear those debts through sales in a judicial framework. In the first decade of its existence, the

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63. Lane, "Encumbered Estates Court", p. 432; Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, p. 18; cf., pp. 54-5 supra.

64. Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, pp. 18-19; Maguire, Downshire Estates, pp. 83-4; L. Perry Curtis, "The Indebtedness of Irish Landlords", (unpublished paper, presented to American Committee for Irish Studies, annual meeting, 1978)

new court handled the transfer of about one-seventh of the country (by area); some 8,000 purchasers bought about 3,000 estates for close to £25 millions. By 1879, the value of the land which had passed through the court had more than doubled, reaching a total of £52,000,000 -- more than 12,000 parcels of land, amounting to nearly five million acres, or between one-third and one-quarter of the agricultural land, had changed hands.<sup>65</sup> In principle, the intention had been to introduce new and mainly English capital,<sup>66</sup> which would serve as an example and spur towards the renovation of Irish farming. In practice, however, English capital largely eschewed the opportunity offered, partly for sound economic reasons, since returns on investment in Irish land were modest and lagged behind the dividends which could be made elsewhere. In addition, as Clarendon told Peel, "it would require more courage than capitalists ordinarily possess to buy land in a country where life and property are so insecure".<sup>67</sup> In reality, then, the overwhelming majority of the buyers of encumbered estates, all but 300 of the 7,489 purchasers between 1849 and 1857, were Irishmen. They included creditors drawn

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65. Summaries of the land-sales may be found in Strauss, Irish Nationalism & British Democracy, pp. 136-40; Lee, Modernisation, pp. 36-9; Pomfret, Struggle for the Land, pp. 44-5; W. L. Burns, "Free Trade in Land: An Aspect of the Irish Question", Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 4th series, XXXI, (1949), pp. 61-74

66. Lane, "Encumbered Estates Court", pp. 449-51, underlines the distinction between Peel's hopes for English investment and the more sanguine views of those, like Clarendon and Charles Wood, who were more familiar with Ireland.

67. Cited in ibid., p. 452

from the rising Irish bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie -- farmers, lawyers, shopkeepers and outstanding businessmen such as Mulholland in Belfast and the Guinnesses in Dublin.<sup>68</sup> But it seems clear that the great majority of the purchasers were men who already owned land or who had strong landed connections: solvent landlords and their sons, land agents and former middlemen.<sup>69</sup> It should finally be stressed, once more, that the Famine foreclosures affected only about ten per cent of the landowning class, and that when the dust had settled the great majority of the pre-Famine landowners were still in possession of their estates.<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, most landowners, even the most solvent among them, were not unaffected by the Famine. They suffered fatalities from the epidemics of fever and cholera which swept the country; the value of their property plummeted during the peak years of the activity of the Encumbered Estates Court;<sup>71</sup> and their rental income fell steeply since

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68. Lane, "Encumbered Estates Court", pp. 448-53; Lee, Modernisation, p. 37; Cullen, Economic History, pp. 138-39; Lynch & Vaizey, Guinness's Brewery, pp. 178, 196; W. A. Maguire, "Lord Donegall and the Sale of Belfast: A Case History from the Encumbered Estates Court", EcHR, 2nd series, XXIX, (1976), pp. 570-84; Emrys Jones, The Social Geography of Belfast, (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 50-51

69. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 131, n.302; Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, pp. 51-2; Cullen, Economic History, p. 139

70. Lee, Modernisation, p. 36

71. Land which had sold for 20-25 years' purchase (i.e., 20-25 times the annual rental) in the late 1830s, fetched only 10-15 years' purchase under the Encumbered Estates Court: Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, p. 49

many tenants either demanded and were granted temporary abatements or simply defaulted and decamped.<sup>72</sup> In the immediate term, many landowners attempted to relieve the suffering around them, by providing direct charitable relief through private soup-kitchens and by organising and administering the public provisions of the Poor Law.<sup>73</sup> But the long-term trajectory of landlord-tenant relations, how the two sides re-adjusted themselves to the post-Famine situation, and how that new situation affected the balance of power between them, is the most important issue.

Clearly, since the landowners, fewer than 8,000 proprietors, owned nine-tenths of the agricultural land,<sup>74</sup> they inevitably stood charged with responsibility for any and all problems in Irish society. The central accusation, as it was progressively elaborated by the spokesmen for the Irish nation and its leading class, the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, was the commonplace assertion that the Irish tenant-farmer was constantly rack-rented out of hearth and home by rapacious landlords.

The fundamental propositions of this "rack-renting theory" were that the

72. The average abatement on large estates in county Cork was about 15%; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 100-11

73. O'Neill, "Administration of Relief", in Edwards & Williams, eds., The Great Famine; cf., the personal account in Bowen, Bowen's Court.

74. The details of Irish landownership were released in parliamentary papers -- Landed Proprietors, 1872, (167), xlvii, pp. 775-82; Names of Proprietors and the Area & Valuation of all properties, 1876, (412), lxxx, p. 395; Owners of Land, 1876, (422), lxxx, pp. 35-59. The material was usefully summarised by Finlay Dun, Landlords & Tenants in Ireland, (London: Longmans, Green, 1881)

tenant was discouraged from improving his holding and his own technical ability and prevented from accumulating capital by the never-ending spiral of incremental demands for rent, and that the landowners never ceased to evict tenants for a variety of whimsical, political or financial reasons.<sup>75</sup> The persistence of this theory is best exemplified by the imprimatur it received from the most substantial Marxist study of the period, where it is baldly stated that "throughout the country, the accumulation of capital was delayed, if not completely prevented, by the payment of excessive rents, and the investment of capital in agriculture, the main remaining industry, was made practically impossible by the land system which involved the periodic confiscation in the interests of the landlords of all improvements made by the tenants".<sup>76</sup> Before we pass to an examination of the evidence, which generally contradicts this theory, its true significance must be underlined. Both the brutal finesse with which it was wielded by the farmers and their political leaders, and its remarkable tenacity in the historical literature,<sup>77</sup> are sure signs of the transformation of the rapport des forces in the rural class structure. It was, verily, "an arm of criticism"

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75. The most important and coherent statements of the theory are in Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, and in George O'Brien's Economic History, especially in the codified form in his "Historical Introduction" to Riordan, Modern Irish Trade & Industry.

76. Strauss, Irish Nationalism & British Democracy, p. 140

77. K. H. Connell, "The Land Legislation & Irish Social Life", ECHR, 2nd series, XI, (1958), pp. 1-7, subscribes to the view that rents were exorbitant after the Famine. More surprisingly, Crotty, who is usually sceptical, also proposes the rack-renting theory: Irish Agricultural Production, pp. 61-3

and a critical symbol that the rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie was marked by early triumphs in the ideological arena.

The key to an adequate judgement of the theory and practice of landlord-tenant relations is the central economic issue -- rents. Did they constantly increase, and if so, by how much? Were rents an intolerable burden which kept the tenants in a condition of permanent penury? The lowest estimate for the movement of rents between the Famine and the Land War is Joseph Lee's assertion that "rents per acre . . . rose only marginally between 1848 and 1878".<sup>78</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda's recent analysis of the figures for aggregate head-rents tends to substantiate Lee's point, suggesting that the total rental of Ireland was much the same before the Famine and in 1869-71, at about £12 millions.<sup>79</sup> There were, however, at least two factors which made for apparently steep rent increases immediately after the Famine. The first was the alleged speculative and mercenary conduct of the buyers of encumbered estates. Undoubtedly, there must have been some exceptionally rash and greedy men whose activity earned them (and, by extension of guilt by association, all landlords) an evil reputation, men who sprang to the mind of the leader writer for The Times when he thundered that "the name of Irish landlord stinks in the nostrils of

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78. Lee, Modernisation, p. 38

79. Cormac Ó Gráda, "Agricultural Head-Rents, Pre-Famine & Post-Famine", Economic & Social Review, V, (1973-4), pp. 385-92

Christendom".<sup>80</sup> The iniquity of the grasping landlord seems to have been exceptional rather than normal.

The more significant reason for rent increases after the Famine was that once the need for them had receded with the recovery of prices and production by the mid-1850s, the abatements which had been granted during the disastrous years, 1848 to 1851, were rescinded. Even so, the losses which the landowners sustained during these bad years, through abatements and default, were considerable and largely irretrievable. Ó Gráda, for instance, reckons that the total rental of Ireland had fallen by nearly one-third between 1845 and 1852, to some £8.5 millions.<sup>81</sup> That left plenty of ground to recover.

The most painstaking analysis of post-Famine rents is Barbara Solow's proposition that "Irish agricultural rents rose about 12.5 per cent between 1865 and 1880, much in line with rents elsewhere

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80. The two most notorious examples of the new breed of rack-renting landlord were John Sadleir and William Scully. The former bought £230,000 worth of encumbered lands during his meteoric speculative rise in the world, which ended in exposure and suicide in 1856; cf., J. H. Whyte, The Independent Irish Party, 1850-59, (London: Oxford University Press, 1958). Scully was a scion of a landed Catholic family which had owned estates in Tipperary since 1660; his infamy came to a head in 1868 when he attempted to impose new leasing conditions on some tenants at Ballycohey, county Tipperary. One tenant, barricaded in his house, fired on the landlord's raiding party, killing a constable and a bailiff. But since even The Times called Scully "vexatious, oppressive and tyrannical", no charges were ever laid against the tenant. See Homer E. Socolofsky, "William Scully: Ireland & America, 1840-1900", Agricultural History, XLVIII, (1974), pp. 156-66; Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 77

81. Ó Gráda, "Head Rents", p. 389

in the United Kingdom, and in accordance with the rises in agricultural incomes during the same period".<sup>82</sup> Another study, examining more than fifty estates, found two instances of high rent increases within a general pattern of moderate advances, an average increase of 20 per cent during this third quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>83</sup> Similar evidence can be found in Donnelly's data from the estate papers of a number of properties in county Cork. At one extreme, the revenues of the huge estates of Lord Bantry rose by a tiny margin, "from £11,500 to only £12,000 between 1865 and 1882";<sup>84</sup> on the other hand, the agent for an estate which changed hands in 1853 re-arranged the holdings into larger farms, all of which managed to pay both the arrears and a rental increase of 50 per cent.<sup>85</sup> Both cases appear to have been exceptional, for Donnelly's overall estimate is that rents advanced by between 20 and 30 per cent during this period and, more significantly, that most of the increases had been accomplished by the mid-1860s.<sup>86</sup> This final point was also suggested by the frankly partisan evidence assembled by the Irish Land Committee, a landowners' "defence league" created to counter the Land

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82. Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, p. 76

83. W. E. Vaughan, "Landlord & Tenant Relations in Ireland between the Famine & the Land War, 1850-78", in Cullen, & Smout, eds., Scottish and Irish Economic History, p. 217. It was not, perhaps, entirely coincidental that the highest increases (of 53 and 60 per cent) occurred on the estates of Lord Leitrim, who was assassinated in 1878; cf., O'Connor, The Parnell Movement, pp. 116-17; Bew, Land & the National Question, p. 200

84. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 192

85. Ibid., p. 193

86. Ibid., pp. 187-200; Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, pp. 57-9



League. In 1880, the Land Committee published the results of a survey of nearly 1,300 major estates which accounted for about one-quarter of the land and nearly 40 per cent of all holdings. On 70 per cent of the land in question, the rents had been set before 1860, and almost 40 per cent of the area was still held under rents which had not changed since before the end of the Famine.<sup>87</sup>

Whether the rate of increase in rents for farm-land was only "marginal" or as high as 30 per cent seems to depend on the dates used for comparison as much as upon variations between regions and landowners, but the crucial fact was that the rate of increase recorded in the market-prices for all the main items in the pastoral sector easily outstripped the landowners' demands. Between 1850 and the mid-1870s, it will be recalled, cattle prices more than doubled, and those for pork, mutton and butter rose by between 44 and 74 per cent.<sup>88</sup> On the face of it, the higher profits being realised in agriculture were falling into the hands of the tenants rather than the landlords, but it must be emphasised, once again, that the distribution of the average gains was not even.<sup>89</sup>

If the landowners were, generally, timid in pursuit of the fabled rack-rent, what of their employment of the fearsome ejectment

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87. The survey was reprinted by the Bessborough Commission: 1881, (C.2779-II), xix, p. 1292; cf., N. D. Palmer, The Irish Land League Crisis, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), pp. 219-21; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 189

88. Barrington, "Review of Prices", pp. 252-53; cf., pp. 129-30, 135 supra.

89. The big winners were the agrarian petty-bourgeois, including cattle-dealers and butter-brokers as well as strong livestock farmers.

notice? It was the latter, after all, which was alleged to be the main instrument of confiscation. It will be recalled that the major element in the bill of complaint against the landlords was that any capital accumulated by the tenant and invested by him in the land would be automatically expropriated by the landowner. In the absence of stiff periodic rent increases for sitting tenants, it would appear that the landowner's alleged purpose required a regular policy of eviction and re-letting. But once more there is a striking discrepancy between the myth and the real behaviour of the landlords.<sup>90</sup>

In theory, the landowners enjoyed a wide range of legislative and judicial powers, reinforcing their property rights, and by the same theoretical token they were free to evict their tenants "at will". There were three basic ways in which the landlord could impose his legal will upon the tenant -- a civil suit for breach of contract, a bill of distraint upon goods and chattels, or a civil bill of ejectment. The first was expensive, cumbersome and only applicable in the case of a lease-holding tenant. Since the great majority of tenants, down to 1870, held their land "at will",<sup>91</sup> breach of contract proceedings were rare. The landowners

90. One striking aspect of the "revisionist" interpretations is the agreement between Solow and Crotty, from different angles, that a rigorous pursuit of "confiscation" by the landowners might have made Irish farming more efficient and more profitable: Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, pp. 83-4; Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, Chapter IV

91. In 1870, only 20 per cent of all holdings were under leases: Returns . . . of Agricultural Holdings in Ireland and the Tenure by which they are held, 1870, (32), lvi, pp. 737-56. Gladstone, among many others, erred in assuming that the absence of a lease implied insecurity of tenure, a problem which his Land Act of 1870 sought to remedy.

principally employed bills of distraint or ejection -- but to what end?

The evidence gathered by the Devon Commission in 1845 was reiterated and confirmed by the Poor Law Inspectors in 1870 and by the Richmond and Bessborough Commissions in 1880-81.<sup>92</sup> Whether the action taken was distraint (the confiscation, for sale, of crops or livestock) or ejection, the goal was almost invariably to facilitate, encourage, hasten and ensure the payment of rent, but not to remove the tenant. One tenant's explanation of the whole process was deliciously light-hearted -- "I perfectly remember when no tenant paid his rent without being distrained, no matter how rich he was, otherwise it would not have been handsome conduct towards his neighbours".<sup>93</sup> Landlords employed, and tenants understood, both procedures as effective notices to pay; so well in fact did tenants understand the rules of the game that distraint had already begun to decline by the 1840s, through growing ineffectiveness. It was of little use to a landlord to confiscate a tenant's produce if he would then be unable to sell it. Moreover, landowners were reluctant to employ a method which was bound to cause resentment and lead to outrages, for it can be assumed that at least some of the threatening notices which the police included in their count of "agrarian outrages" warned ambitious farmers and merchants of the dangers

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92. Devon Digest, ii, pp. 803-50; Reports from Poor Law Inspectors on existing relations between Landlord & Tenant; 1870, (C.31), xiv, pp. 37-192; Richmond: 1881, (C.2778, 2778-I, 3096), xv, xvii; Bessborough: 1881, (C.2779, 2779-I-II), xviii-xix.

93. Devon Digest, ii, p. 807; cited also by Maguire, Downshire Estates, p. 59

involved in purchasing distrained goods. Resistance sometimes went further, when crowds of tenants carried off distrained goods under the noses of guards posted by the landowner.<sup>94</sup> The fact that ejectment notices continued to be employed after the Famine as a mean to facilitate the payment of rent may be seen in the fact that Gladstone's first Land Act (in 1870) specifically outlawed the practice of "issuing notices to quit with, or even printed on the reverse of, the regular demands for rent".<sup>95</sup> Indeed, after that act came into effect the ejectment notice acquired a new function, as a stimulus to those tenants who were reluctant to sign the leases which landowners now wished to issue.<sup>96</sup>

The translation of the ejectment notice into a permanent eviction, whether for non-payment of rent, slovenly husbandry, subdivision or sheer caprice, became increasingly scarce once the main Famine clearances had been accomplished. Between 1850 and 1880, there were some 600,000 tenants in Ireland: the total number of final evictions, without re-admission, came to 20,000 families between 1855 and 1880. The annual average, in other words, was very small, fewer than two per thousand tenants! This explains Solow's exasperated tone when she writes that "it is hardly necessary to labour the point that the

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94. There is a famous, if highly coloured, account of resistance to distraint in county Monaghan in 1843, told by the land-agent who was the butt of the story, in W. Steuart Trench, Realities of Irish Life (1868), (reissue, Patrick Kavanagh, ed.; London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1966), pp. 31-3

95. E. D. Steele, Irish Land & British Politics: Tenant Right & Nationality, 1865-70, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 10; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 198-99, 204

96. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 209-10

significance of evictions in this period was extremely small".<sup>97</sup>

Generally modest rent increases and infrequent evictions constitute a massive loophole in the rack-renting theory, but there was another issue in the overall complaint against landlordism which centred on the various activities known as "improvement". It will be recalled that, with the best will in the world, pre-Famine improving landowners had been hamstrung by the sheer press of population and extent of subdivision on their estates.<sup>98</sup> It was, indeed, commonly asserted that the landowner contributed nothing and the tenant everything towards the betterment of the land and agricultural techniques. Even had this very dubious proposition been true before the Famine, those terrible years changed the situation quite drastically. From the 1850s on, landowners generally let their land to fewer, more solvent tenants; and the latter, with or without leases, were normally confident that they would be left undisturbed in possession of their holdings.<sup>99</sup> The growing profitability of consolidated holdings, producing pastoral goods which were rising in value, clearly facilitated the payment of rents -- this was the key factor.

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97. Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, p. 57. In her analysis of the eviction-rate, Solow proposes that there were too few evictions, and that the limitations on the landowners' powers acted as a bar against efficient use of the land and rational development of capitalist farming; *ibid.*, pp. 51-8. For evictions, see Return . . . of Evictions . . . 1849-80, 1881, (185), lxxvii, pp. 726-47

98. The pre-Famine evidence is usefully collated in Devon Digest, i, pp. 74-120; cf., pp. 55-8 supra.

99. The operative word is the qualifier -- there remained pockets of very poor, densely settled, insecure tenants on uneconomic holdings, just as there were still some tyrannical landlords. But the overall situation on most of the productive land is captured in this sentence.

And the result was widespread improvements in farming conditions across most of Ireland.

Broadly speaking, the pattern of post-Famine improvement involved co-operative ventures, with contributions from both landlords and tenants. On the one hand, the tenants were not at all averse to enhancing their domestic comfort or the profitability of their farms, but they did tend to be reluctant to pay for all the improvements out of their own pockets. Part of the tenants' reluctance to pay for fixed-capital investments in the land which they did not own stemmed from a genuine fear, for there were indeed some "confiscating" landowners who took advantage of improvements to raise the rent. There was also a more systematic process at work: many tenants chose to invest their disposable profits in movable assets, primarily livestock. The landowner, for his part, was usually willing to see more comfortable tenants become more solvent. Despite the claims of the Irish Land Committee, that the landowners had a large amount, if not the lion's share, of the funds which had gone into post-Famine improvements,<sup>100</sup> it has recently been shown that the aggregate amount of expenditure by the landowners on

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100. Irish Land Committee, The land question, Ireland, No. 3: Facts & Figures, (Dublin, 1880), Table VI, indicates that on just over half of the estates surveyed (accounting for nearly two-thirds of the acreage) improvements had been the joint work of landlords and tenants. This table was reproduced, with a detailed examination of improvements on a number of estates, by Dun, Landlords & Tenants, pp. 201-2; cf., Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, pp. 52-6; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 163-69; Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, pp. 81-4; but see also the critique of this material by Ó Gráda, cited in n. 101, overleaf.

improvements, between 1850 and 1875, represented no more than 3 to 5 per cent of their rental income.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, at least half of the total came in the form of loans from the government, under the provisions of legislation for Public Works and Land Improvement; and at least some of the landowners who obtained loans from the government transferred the charges on those moneys to their tenants.<sup>102</sup>

In summary, the number and quality of the discrepancies between the rack-renting theory and the actual behaviour of the landowners should lead to a Scottish verdict of "not proven". The landlords do not seem to have imposed rack-rents to extract every last penny of the tenant's share of the agricultural profits. After the clearances of the Famine years, they do not seem to have ruthlessly driven great numbers of tenants off the land. It is, furthermore, doubtful that they were solely responsible for the retardation and/or prevention of capital-accumulation and investment in the fixed appurtenances in agriculture, for it must be recognised that the farmers' decision to invest in cattle was largely beyond the scope of the landowners' authority. Why, then, did the landowners fail to live up to the evil reputation ascribed to them? How, in other words, can the gap between image and reality be explained?

The answer to these questions lies at the heart of the central

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101. Cormac Ó Gráda, "The Investment Behaviour of Irish Landlords, 1850-75: Some Preliminary Findings", Agricultural History Review, XXIII, (1975), pp. 139-55

102. Ibid., esp. the evidence from the Bessborough Commission quoted at pp. 144-47

issue of class relations on the land. One recent analysis takes a voluntarist approach, explaining the landowners' reluctance to set rents "simply by reference to financial criteria" in terms of "the prejudices of their class".<sup>103</sup> Donnelly's explanation makes more sense:<sup>104</sup>

Many landlords evinced an earnest desire to improve the material condition of the people and as to rent, left well enough alone; some were restrained by an increasingly powerful public opinion which focussed attention on landlord abuses; and a few were checked by the fear of violent retribution.

In short, the landowners' reluctance to press their property right to the limit was conditioned by customary and political hedges to their legal and economic powers. "Public opinion" and "violent retribution" were the principal practical expressions of the growing economic and ideological powers of the farmers. The best testimony to the farmers' ideological victory was Gladstone's Land Act of 1870, which was expressly designed to curb the mainly imaginary rack-renting landlord, to provide "the remedy for a disease which was not seriously afflicting Ireland in 1870".<sup>105</sup> The act's central purpose was, in fact, to quell the class struggles on the land, class struggles whose most exquisite expression and lasting victory was the retrospective projection of the image of downtrodden peasant onto the face of the increasingly prosperous and powerful farmer.

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103. Steele, Irish Land & British Politics, p. 9

104. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 199

105. Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, p. 87; cf., Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, pp. 61-9



"Those men of bullocks . . . boors in broadcloth" <sup>106</sup>

The main form of the contradiction which shaped Irish society after the Famine was the struggle between two mutually exclusive claims to a proprietary interest in the land. Throughout the period, the juridical rights of property remained firmly in the hands of the seven to eight thousand mostly Protestant, Anglo-Irish Ascendancy landowners. Along with property rights went economic, social and political power. The landowners were the ruling class. They exercised their authority in the Imperial parliament, through the colonial administration at Dublin Castle and in the county grand juries, the boards of poor law guardians, and the judicial benches. At the same time, however, the half-million Catholic tenants gradually came to adopt and advance as their own a claim to the land purporting to rest on an ancient, Gaelic hereditary right which had been spoliated by the colonial conquests, expropriations and settlements of the preceding two centuries.<sup>107</sup> In reality, the conflict

106. This is a Fenian phrase, from Kickham's attack on the strong farmers in the Irish People, quoted extensively by John O'Leary, Recollections of Fenians & Fenianism (2 vols., 1896), (reissue: Shannon: Irish University Press, 1968), ii, pp. 43-44

107. In the hands of the more intelligent nationalists, the hereditary claim was subordinated to a Jacobin-democratic vision. Thus -- "The principle I state . . . is this . . . that the entire soil of a country belongs of right to the people of that country, and is the rightful property not of any one class, but of the nation at large": Lalor's "Letter to the Irish Felon", in L. Fogarty, ed., James Fintan Lalor: Patriot & Political Essayist, (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1918), pp. 60-61

never truly hinged on the question of "rights". At issue throughout was power in the present and the future, rather than vague, romantic notions of a tendentious past. In short, the confrontation between the claims was the ideal form taken by the class struggle between the main forces of agrarian production -- those who owned the land and those who farmed the great bulk of it.

The class which not only survived the Famine but was most effectively tempered by that experience, emerging stronger at its end, was the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, the future ruling class in Ireland. The first task is to arrive at an adequate definition of this class, by way of a comparative and theoretical point of departure.

In 1898, in a section of his study of The Development of Capitalism in Russia, Lenin analysed the "differentiation of the peasantry" in terms which apply almost word-for-word to post-Famine conditions in Ireland. The starting point was the subordination of the countryside to a growing commodity market; gradually or suddenly, by "organic" development or through a cataclysm like the Famine, the older, isolated, self-sufficient forms of production are either destroyed or absorbed by the expanding forces of capital.<sup>108</sup> The result, as described by Lenin, is what the Famine did in Ireland -- "the old peasantry is not

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108. This is a very cursory summary of Marx's treatment of "primitive accumulation" in Capital, i, pp. 667-702; cf., Maurice Dobb, Studies in the Development of Capitalism, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1946); Rodney Hilton, ed., The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism, (London: New Left Books, 1976)

only 'differentiating', it is being completely dissolved, it is ceasing to exist, it is being ousted by absolutely new types of rural inhabitants — types that are the basis of a society in which commodity economy and capitalist production prevail".<sup>109</sup> These new types are the rural bourgeoisie and the rural proletariat. The development of the latter out of the destruction of the cottiers and the potato-nexus has already been examined.<sup>110</sup>

Lenin's analysis of the other new type, the rural bourgeois who are "the masters of the contemporary countryside" rests upon a definition of who they are and of the form of capital which they embody. In the first, formal definition, Lenin lists "the independent farmers who carry on commercial agriculture in all its varied forms, . . . the owners of commercial and industrial establishments, the proprietors of commercial enterprises, etc."<sup>111</sup> The key to these various activities is their common basis: "whether the peasant hires workers for the purpose of expanding production, whether he trades in land . . . or in

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109. Lenin, Collected Works, (4th edition: Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), iii, p. 174

110. Lenin's description of the conditions of the pauperised agricultural proletariat is, again, instructive, bearing as it does on the situation facing many of the small holders in the western Congested Districts: "insignificant farming on a patch of land, with the farm in a state of utter ruin . . . inability to exist without the sale of labour-power . . . an extremely low standard of living". Lenin, Works, iii, p. 177; cf., Ó Gráda, "Seasonal Migration & Post-Famine Adjustment", pp. 62-3, 71-4. Even though these conditions persisted into the early years of the twentieth century, and even to some extent down to the present, they are distinctly atypical of the key developments in Irish agrarian capitalism.

111. Lenin, Works, iii, p. 176

groceries, or whether he trades in hemp, hay, cattle, etc., or money (usurer), he represents a single economic type, and his operations amount, at bottom, to one and the same economic relation".<sup>112</sup> The distinctive feature of this economic relation is the second half of the definition: the main characteristic of the farmers, merchants, money-lenders and businessmen who comprise this rural bourgeoisie is that they stand on the ground of merchant's rather than industrial capital.<sup>113</sup> They represent, indeed, either a transitional stage, the necessary but not sufficient basis for the development of industrial capital,<sup>114</sup> or a social force which "impoverishes the mode of production, paralyses the productive forces instead of developing them".<sup>115</sup> In Ireland, as in Russia, both aspects of merchant's capital existed side by side -- the Irish rural (petty) bourgeoisie did not foster the development of an indigenous industrial capital, but they did make considerable capital-investments in both agriculture and the infrastructure which served it.

Another approach to this class may be made through Emmet Larkin's description of "that most allusive and inclusive" term, the Irish

112. Lenin, Works, iii, p. 184

113. Ibid., pp. 183-86; also, Marx, Capital, iii, Chapters XX ("Historical Facts about Merchant's Capital") and XXXVI ("Pre-Capitalist Relationships"), pp. 323-37, 593-613

114. The transformation of merchant's to industrial capital was, clearly, a crucial stage in the development of Ulster's industrial revolution in the Belfast area. This is the subject of a combative and illuminating section in B&ICO's Economics of Partition, pp. 76-81; Conrad Gill's study of the Rise of the Linen Industry treats this question, but without the theoretical framework.

115. Marx, Capital, iii, p. 596

nation, as "that class of Irish Roman Catholic tenant farmers who since 1750 have occupied more than thirty acres . . . the critical nation-forming class".<sup>116</sup> Before proceeding, it must be said that Larkin's restriction of this class to the farmers strikes me as unduly cautious. Although he does, formally if tentatively, admit that "the numerical strength of this class was of course enhanced by its cousinhood in the cities and towns", and then proceed to include them de facto in his analysis,<sup>117</sup> I think that the case can and should be made more forcefully.<sup>118</sup>

The unquestioned starting point, nonetheless, must be the farmers. The men, and women,<sup>119</sup> concerned are those who would be included in the demotic notion of the "strong farmer". Clearly, this is the sort of category which is prone to defy tidy definitions, spanning a wide range, from the grazier holding hundreds of acres of prime pasture in Meath or Kildare through the stock-breeder with fifty acres of rough upland pasture in Roscommon or Clare to the efficient dairy-farmer on fifteen or twenty acres of good land in Limerick, Cork or Antrim. For

116. Larkin, "Church, State & Nation", p. 1245

117. Ibid., pp. 1245n, 1252, 1254, 1263

118. Several recent works underline the important role played by the farmers' "urban cousins". See, in particular, Samuel Clark, "The Social Composition of the Land League", IHS, XVII, (1971), pp. 447-69; and his "The political mobilisation of Irish farmers", Canadian Review of Sociology & Anthropology, XII, (1975), pp. 483-99; Hoppen, "National politics & local realities", in Cosgrove & McCartney, eds., Studies in Irish History; Lee, Modernisation, pp. 97-99

119. From 1841 to 1911, the proportion of female farmers, "frequently widows refusing to make over the farm to a son, rose from four to fifteen per cent"; Lee, Modernisation, p. 5. Cf., the literary account by Sean O'Faolain, A Nest of Simple Folk, (New York: Viking Press, 1934)

the necessary purposes of clarity, I propose to follow Larkin in using the official statistical line of demarcation at thirty acres, as a general guide to the "strong" as opposed to small farmers. However, in so doing, it must be emphasised that my intention is not to identify the "typical" farm; were that the case, Lyons' argument in favour of "laying particular emphasis on the small farm which bounded the horizon of so many country folk", the holding of between fifteen and thirty acres, would be more cogent.<sup>120</sup> Instead, I intend to identify the leading class force within the farming community. This entails a necessary distinction between the "strong" and the not-so-strong farmer, between the large number of tenants holding fewer than thirty acres and the minority of thirty-acre men. The key process was the growing concentration of economic, political and social power in the hands of the strong farmers and their urban cousins. The basic indication of the strength of the thirty-acre farmers may be traced in the statistical appendix of land-holdings, and in the rounded figures in Table X (p. 186 supra) and in Table XI :<sup>121</sup>

TABLE XI : Thirty-Acre Men - Tenants (acres of holding)

	30-49	50-99	100-199	200-500	over 500	Total
1861	72,500	54,000	22,000	8,000	1,600	158,000
1880	66,000	52,000	21,000	9,000	2,500	150,500
1890	67,000	53,000	22,000	9,000	2,400	153,400
1900	68,000	54,000	23,000	9,000	2,200	156,200

120. Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine, pp. 50-1 & note.

121. Source: as in the notes to the statistical appendix. The discrepancy between the totals here and in Table X stems from the fact that two distinct categories were being counted: in Table X, the number of holdings, the division of the land; in Table XI, the number of tenants, the actual distribution of the land.

The centre of gravity in the rural class structure shifted rapidly and with absolute finality: between 1845 and 1861, more than 300,000 cottiers and small farmers lost their holdings. At a stroke, much of the competition for land was eased, and this helps to explain why the practice of "canting" or putting the land to auction, renting to whoever offered to pay the highest rent, declined during the post-Famine decades.<sup>122</sup> From the Famine onwards, the thirty-acre farmers steadily tightened their hold on the land. In addition to the simple proportional increase in the number of thirty-acre holdings, from less than 19 per cent of all holdings in 1847 to 28 per cent in the 1880s, the reversal of the pre-Famine tendency towards subdivision resulted in growing average farm-sizes. The lion's share of the farm land was held by the thirty-acre men -- in 1864, they held over 70 per cent of the total land in Ireland; by 1881, their share had risen to fully three-quarters of the agricultural land across the country and in the heartland provinces of Leinster and Munster they held almost 90 per cent.<sup>123</sup> As might be expected, the regional distribution of the strong farmers tended to replicate the patterns which we have established for the pastoral economy -- they occupied more of the better land in the richer counties of the midlands and the south (Tables XII - XIII, over).

Just as the massive reduction of the cottiers was vividly

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122. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 190-91

123. For 1864, see the figures cited by Marx, Capital, i, p. 665; for 1881, the "Grimshaw Papers", 1887, (C.4969), xxvi, No. 1, Column 36, p. 974

TABLE XII : Average Size of Holdings, 1841-81 (statute acres)<sup>124</sup>

	Ulster	Munster	Leinster	Connacht	Ireland
1841	17.0	27.4	29.8	17.0	22.0
1851	19.0	37.1	32.8	23.1	26.6
1861	19.2	38.1	34.2	21.4	26.8
1871	20.4	39.1	35.7	22.1	27.9
1881	21.3	40.2	37.3	22.5	28.8

TABLE XIII: Distribution of Thirty-Acre Men (%)<sup>124</sup>

	Ulster	Munster	Leinster	Connacht	Ireland
1841	4.2	10.1	13.3	2.8	7.0
1851	18.0	44.1	30.9	11.0	26.3
1861	18.8	47.3	33.7	18.0	27.8
1871	20.9	49.0	35.2	18.3	29.4
1881	22.6	50.0	37.4	18.1	30.5

recorded in the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of mud-cabins, so the rise of the farmers may also be traced in the housing figures. There was, clearly, a substantial shift towards better housing, within the context of a shrinking total stock. In 1841, less than one-quarter of the homes had fallen into the Census categories of first- or second-class; forty years later, more than half of the total had reached that standard, and by the end of the century the proportion had risen to 70 per cent. In light of the very few gains made by the agricultural labourers in the area

<sup>124</sup>. The sources for these tables are, again, as in the notes to the statistical appendix. The usual qualification about the unreliability of the data for 1841 (according to Bourke's critiques) are in order; they are included, nevertheless, to indicate the dimensions of the shifts. It must be noted, furthermore, that the contrast between Munster/Leinster and Ulster/Connacht tends to be understated by the exclusion of bog and waste from the farm-size data. Larger farms often had larger areas of both and some waste was, in fact, productive, being used as rough pasture.



of housing, and in the virtual absence of urban growth during this period, it may be safely presumed that better housing for the farmers was one of the items in the ensemble of agricultural improvements.<sup>125</sup>

The thirty-acre farmers constituted the core of stability in the pastoral economy. As the population steadily declined and the towns failed to grow into industrial cities, these 160,000 farmers loomed ever more important in the social landscape. On the eve of the Famine, they had been outnumbered by the combined ranks of the cottier-proletariat by as much as ten to one. The strong farmers did, of course, exist before the Famine; they rented farms, reared livestock, grew crops and sold their produce, but they seemed to be swamped in the rising tide of rural poverty and they faced a constant struggle to maintain their hold on the land against the encroachments of the cottiers' potato-nexus. The Famine clearances relieved the pressure. Indeed, it must be stressed that the Gregory clause was a boon to farmers as well as landowners, for many farmers were, through its operation, released from the obligation to pay poor-rates on small sub-lettings of which they were the immediate lessors.<sup>126</sup> Between the Famine and the 1890s, the ratio of labourers to strong farmers fell to about two to one; this decrease was a mark of a basic economic strength in the farming community, the relative independence of the farmers from the need to employ wage-labour in the

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125. The housing data were reprinted in Thom's Directory, 1904, p. 687; cf., Matheson, "Housing of the People"; Synott, "Rural Housing"; and Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 242-44

126. Hone, "Sir William Gregory", pp. 339-40

capital-intensive circumstances of the pastoral economy.

Beside the strong farmers stood their urban cousins, the burgeoning stratum of commerçants, merchants, traders, dealers, shopkeepers, publicans. In Chapter Three, I sketched the main elements in the development, after the Famine, of an extensive commodity economy in the Irish countryside. The crucial links between the farming community as a whole and the urban businessmen were forged by the parallel growth of the market for articles of personal consumption,<sup>127</sup> and of the trading network which guaranteed the exchange of agricultural products for these commodities.

The quintessential part of this "rural-urban" business network was the village shop -- part public house, part post office, part general store, part retail credit outlet, part news medium and, alongside the parish church, the heart of social intercourse in the countryside. The growing importance of the shopkeeper was clearly visible in the Census data. While the population as a whole fell by almost 30 per cent (from 8,175,000 to 5,412,000) between 1841 and 1871, the number of shopkeepers in the aggregated categories of victuallers and butchers, grocers and tea-dealers, wine and spirit merchants, tavern, inn and hotel keepers grew by nearly 20 per cent, from 51,000 to 60,000. The most striking increase was concentrated, predictably, in the ranks

127. The demand for agricultural machinery (the main movable means of production in agriculture) remained restricted for three key reasons: the primacy of pastoral production, the still relatively small size of most farms, and the retardation of co-operative/industrial butter production until the 1890s.

of the middlemen who assured the exchange and distribution of the products of the pastoral economy: the number of dealers in pigs, butter, cheese, eggs, sheep and cattle increased by two-thirds, from 3800 in 1841 to 6400 in 1871.<sup>128</sup> It is essential to attempt to penetrate behind the numbers to a clearer portrait of the class transformation which they signified.

In the first place, the rise of the shopkeeper was measured by the decline of the hucksters and artisans. Before the Famine, much of the retail trade in the countryside, in cloth, trinkets, kitchen utensils and so on, was carried on by the 6,000 hucksters, hawkers and pedlars who roamed from market to market. Within a quarter-century, their numbers had fallen to 1600 -- their place was increasingly occupied by the village store. The sort of shop which we are looking for can still be found in many areas of rural Ireland, but especially in the west, in Gweedore and the Rosses in Donegal, or in Connemara and west Kerry. It is a general emporium, selling everything - seed and fertiliser, flour and sugar, boots and shoes, stumps, pots and pans, fishermen's nets, canvas, rope, harness and tools. The merchant who brought these mass-produced commodities in to stock his shop was the direct agent of the process of modernisation and a major contributor to a significant elevation of rural living standards. But the extent to which the shopkeeper was

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128. Census of Ireland, 1841: 1841, (504), xxiv, p. 440; 1871: 1873, (C.873), lxxii, pp. 18-37

able to monopolise the distribution of these goods was also the degree to which the cobbler, miller, tailor, costermonger, blacksmith and tinker lost their markets and their livelihood.

The basic switch from arable to pastoral production hastened the rise of the shopkeeper, as many of the hundreds of local markets, where farmers had sold their tillage products to wholesale traders and consumers alike, declined in numbers and importance. The former markets tended to be supplanted by larger and more infrequent livestock fairs, where the farmer disposed of his calves, weanlings and bonhams to the travelling cattle and sheep dealers. The fall in the importance of tillage products shifted the focus of the trade, as the farmers' surplus output -- eggs, butter, grains -- was bought by the shopkeepers as stock for their own trade or for re-sale in bulk to wholesalers.<sup>129</sup> In effect, then, the swing to pastoral production had called into being two distinct sets of middlemen, standing between the producer and the consumer -- livestock-dealers and shopkeepers. The latter, in particular, came to wield considerable power, especially over the smaller farmers who were least likely to dispose of sufficient cash to avoid reliance upon credit-trading, the exchange of produce for shop-bought goods. The shopkeeper was, indeed, a perfect exemplar of the capitalist axiom, "buy low, sell

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129. T. W. Freeman, "The Irish Country Town", Irish Geography, III, (1954), pp. 1-12; Synge, Aran Islands, pp. 319-23; Hoppen, "National politics & local realities", (MS. version), p. 5

high", for "the rates for farm produce tended to be depressed and the charges for retail goods inflated".<sup>130</sup>

Finally, the growing commercial importance of the shopkeeper brought social and political power in its train. Even if the shop-cum-pub had been no more than the centre of secular social intercourse, its proprietor would have disposed of considerable influence by virtue of the fact that he was often the first to read the newspaper, and thus the best-informed and perhaps the only news medium in his community. Moreover, the shopkeeper who offered retail-credit, and which of them did not, thereby forged a ready-made network of influence, where financial debts could be recalled in social or political currency, particularly in the form of "exclusive dealing", the tactic which became best-known and most sophisticated under the name of "boycotting" in the hands of the Land League.<sup>131</sup> It was, of course, during the critical years of the Land War that the links binding the strong farmers and the "rural-urban" businessmen became most apparent. It was also then that

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130. Cullen, Economic History, p. 151. The question of the economic powers of the shopkeeper, wielded through the credit relations with the small farmer, is an important and controversial one, for which there is unfortunately insufficient space here. The modern contributions to the debate over the "gombeenman" (i.e., usurer) may be traced in these works -- Peter Gibbon, "Arensberg & Kimball revisited", Economy & Society, II, (1973), pp. 479-98; Peter Gibbon & M. D. Higgins, "Patronage, Tradition & Modernisation: The case of the Irish 'Gombeenman'", Economic & Social Review, VI, (1974), pp. 27-44; Liam Kennedy, "A Sceptical View on the Reincarnation of the Irish 'Gombeenman'", Economic & Social Review, VIII, (1978), pp. 213-22; P. Gibbon & M. D. Higgins, "The Irish Gombeenman: Reincarnation or Rehabilitation?", Economic & Social Review, VIII, (1978), pp. 313-19

131. Cf., Hoppen, "National politics & local realities", passim.

the aptness of Larkin's choice of "cousin" was clearly underlined, for the essential cement which bound together the farming and trading arms of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, behind the cash-nexus, mutual self-interest, credit-dependency and drinking companionship, was kinship. There can be little doubt that a significant proportion of the shopkeepers in the country towns were the sons, cousins, uncles or nephews of farmers; in the words of one official report, describing the situation on the eve of World War I, "many shopkeepers in Ireland are themselves also farmers, or are married to the daughters of farmers, so that the line of demarcation between the two classes is often very indistinct",<sup>132</sup> And there are areas, down to the present, where patterns of retail trading, political affiliation and even farm-cooperative organisation follow what might be called "clan" lines, where the choice of pub or shop is determined by family relationships.<sup>133</sup>

What the foregoing describes, in toto, is the economic skeleton of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie -- strong farmers, generally holding more than thirty acres and concentrating on animal products, and shopkeepers and publicans in the country towns who dominated retail

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132. Cited by Liam Kennedy, "Traders in the Irish Rural Economy, 1880-1914", ECHR, 2nd series, XXXII, (1979), p. 205; cf., Clark, "Political mobilisation of Irish farmers", p. 490. There is also considerable literary and ethnographic evidence to support this proposition. See, for instance, the novels of O'Flaherty and O'Faolain, and the studies by Arensberg: Family & Community in Ireland and The Irish Countryman; Hugh Brody, Inishkillane; and the review of the last, Gibbon, "Arensberg & Kimball revisited".

133. The intersection of "clan" and politics is the subject of a study of Neil Blaney's domination of north Donegal: Paul M. Sacks, The Donegal Mafia: An Irish Political Machine, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977)

trade but relied upon the farmers for produce and custom. This picture remains incomplete, because it has been supposed, arbitrarily but for the sake of clarity, that farmers and businessmen behaved only as economic men. There is, of course, plenty of evidence that they found time for intellectual and political activities too, but it was primarily in periods of most intense class struggle that any more than a minority of them were publicly active. In the intervening periods of calm, real or ostensible, the mental functions of this class were carried on by specialised cadre. In other words, the basic elements which have been established thus far constitute the material boundaries for their class struggles. The key factor which remains to be pursued, through the remaining chapters of this work, is the dream-life, the inner-springs of political and moral thought which comprised the ideal determinants of the rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

### The Balance Tilted

Was the Famine really a significant stage in the development of agrarian capitalism in Ireland? At first glance, it might seem not. After all, the landowners remained in possession of the great bulk of the land; they were still the ruling class, wielding most administrative, judicial and political powers. Most of the strong farmers had been farmers before 1845; their holdings may have been enlarged, but they were still tenant-farmers; they had changed direction from arable to

pastoral production, but they were still producing for the English market. It might be said, then, that the only people who were seriously afflicted by the Famine were the cottiers and labourers who starved and emigrated.

A closer look at the situation after the Famine must dispel such a comfortable notion, for the very magnitude of the destruction wreaked upon the cottiers was bound to have ramifications throughout society. In fact, the Famine's likeness to a forest fire can be pursued, for fire has a cleansing as well as destructive impact; it facilitates new growth. But this is only a metaphor, not an exercise in Social Darwinism. In plain English, the sacrifice of the cottiers on the altar to the fetish of "a rigid application of the economic principles that lie at the base of capitalist society",<sup>134</sup> was a precondition for and the first major step towards the final resolution of the central contradiction in rural Ireland. That contradiction was "the land question", that fact that fewer than 8,000 people owned the land from which a nation sought to make a living. By destroying the potato-nexus and the cottiers, the Famine hastened the processes of capitalist development and clarified the terms of that contradiction.

It would be foolish, however, to suggest that without the Famine Ireland would have remained committed to tillage -- if for no

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134. James Connolly, Labour in Irish History (1910), (Dublin: At the Sign of the Three Candles, n.d.), pp. 129, 135



other reason than that the triumph of the English industrial bourgeoisie was signalled by the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. But it must also be acknowledged that the Famine hastened and facilitated the swing to livestock. By removing the cottiers, the Famine allowed the farmers to stock more land with more bullocks, and to do so rapidly, during a period when the market factors were most favourable. It is this which constituted the real sea-change in the post-Famine transformation. The profitability of pastoral production was the indispensable condition for the rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

Furthermore, it was this very prosperity of the agrarian economy which was the downfall of the landowners. It is my contention that the powers of the landowners, though substantial, were a facade, and that the landowners were the second victims of the Famine. This is not to suggest that landlord powers crumbled in the 1850s -- the decline of the powers of the Ascendancy was not definitively marked until the Land Act of 1881, and there was precious little sign beforehand that they would willingly abdicate. Nonetheless, to the degree that the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie established itself as a fundamental economic class in the wake of the Famine, to that same degree they were measuring the landowners for their coffins. Only a prior understanding of how the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie established its economic hegemony will afford the key to decipher their later victories in the political realm, how they organised their forces for the rise to power, how they were

converted from a "sack of potatoes" into a potential and actual ruling class. The remaining chapters will pursue that task of decipherment, continuing to focus primarily upon the crucial formative period of this class, the quarter-century after the Famine and the climactic struggles of the early 1880s.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE CATHOLIC NATION -- THE MORAL BASIS OF THE AGRARIAN PETTY-BOURGEOISIE

#### Decoding the Inner-Life

The Catholic Church is a national church and if the people rally with me they will have a nation for that church.<sup>1</sup>

Since the coming of St. Patrick . . . Ireland has been a Christian and a Catholic nation . . . All the ruthless attempts down through the centuries to force her from this allegiance have not shaken her faith. She remains a Catholic nation.<sup>2</sup>

It is a commonplace of Orange critiques of southern Ireland to repeat the slogan of the 1880s, that "Home Rule is Rome Rule", that the Catholic Irish are priest-ridden, that the Catholic Church disposes of awesome and inappropriate temporal powers.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the Orange

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1. Daniel O'Connell, "the Liberator", in 1840, cited by E. R. Norman, A History of Modern Ireland, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Book, 1971)

2. An Taoiseach Eamon de Valera, Irish Independent, March 18, 1935

3. A modern and not unintelligent spokesman for the Orange position is Hugh Shearman: Anglo-Irish Relations, (London: Faber & Faber, 1948) and Not An Inch: A Study of Northern Ireland & Lord Craigavon, (London: Faber & Faber, 1942); the far extreme can be found in any issue of Ian Paisley's organ, The Protestant Telegraph. It must be stressed that the Orange position contains an irreducible kernel of pure hypocrisy, since their argument is not really with clerical influence, but with the influence of the Catholic clergy.

critics can present some substantive evidence for their position, such as the embodiment of explicitly Catholic moral teaching in the Constitution of Ireland (adopted in 1937),<sup>4</sup> and the effective veto exercised by the Catholic hierarchy when the Minister of Health, Dr. Noel Browne, attempted to introduce a measure of comprehensive perinatal health care (1948-51).<sup>5</sup> Irish Catholics, especially the writers, approach the matter from another angle, tending to emphasise the elitism of the clergy and the Church's apparently prevalent desire to impose conditions of mental and intellectual dependency, if not serfdom, upon the laity.<sup>6</sup> There is also a left-wing Catholic critique of the Church, usually embodied by the Republicans and most brusquely summarised by Brendan Behan: "I didn't spend a lifetime studying theology, but I know that the Church was always against Ireland and for the British Empire".<sup>7</sup> There is, clearly, some distance between Behan's accusation and the Orange

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4. On Catholic influence on the Irish Constitution, see Jack Gannon, Catholic Political Culture & the Constitution of Ireland, (Belfast: British & Irish Communist Organisation, 1972); D. H. Akenson, A Mirror to Kathleen's Face: Education in Independent Ireland, 1922-60, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), esp. pp. 95-7

5. See Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine, pp. 576-79; J. H. Whyte, Church & State in Modern Ireland, 1923-70, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1971), Chapters VII-VIII, pp. 196-272

6. For representative writing in this vein, see Sean O'Faolain, Vive Moi!, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963)

7. Brendan Behan, Borstal Boy, (New York: Avon Books, 1961), p. 65; cf., Joyce's version of this charge, along with the recital of the litany of the Church's betrayals of the national cause, in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 196; and the sustained bitterness and scathing anger in Sean O'Casey's Autobiographies, (6 vols., London: Macmillan, 1939-54)

charge that the Church has always succoured rebellion. If nothing else, the range of opinion serves to underline just how central to Irish life are the Catholic Church and Catholicism.

The issue will remain trivial if it is not taken beyond the commonplace identification of "Irish" and "Catholic" as virtually synonymous. The central question is to determine the nature of the development of that identity. What part did the Catholic Church play in the development of the class structure which constituted the Irish nation?

The first point is to dispose of a misconception. This is not the story of a conspiracy. The Catholic Church in Ireland did not usurp authority that properly belonged, whether in theory or in practice, elsewhere. Ireland experienced a veritable "devotional revolution" in the latter decades of the nineteenth century,<sup>8</sup> in clear contrast with the dominant European experience of growing secularism and anti-clericalism. One of the results of this process was a large accumulation of temporal power in the hands of the Irish Church, which takes the form of a blurring of the distinction between the secular and the sacred. The convergence of Church and nation was a bilateral process in which each party tended to cede to the other for their mutual benefit.

For an understanding of the Church's role in the development of Irish agrarian capitalism, there are two essential focal points -- economics and moral ideology. The first is an issue which has long

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8. Emmet Larkin, "The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75", AHR, LXXVII, (1972), pp. 625-52

been a point of controversy: in practice, since the 1890s, when some eminent Irishmen accused the Church of impeding economic development;<sup>9</sup> and in theory, since the publication of Weber's and Tawney's works on religion and capitalism.<sup>10</sup> Briefly stated, what role did the Church play in Irish economic development? Did new churches, convents and presbyteries further or detract from economic growth, or were they, perhaps, indifferent?

The second issue is, on the face of it, easier to deal with, since the Catholic Church has long enjoyed a dominant role in some of the most significant zones of Irish daily life. Education, public and private morality, family life and sexuality all came under its purview. The difficulty with this question stems from the necessity to place the priests' role as moral guides within a broader context. I shall argue that one facet of the "devotional revolution" was the recruitment of the clergy as a leading section of the "organic intelligentsia" of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. At the more obvious level, this was simply a matter of the relentless and highly successful doctrinal commitment of the Church

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9. The most notable was Sir Horace Plunkett, a pioneer of the co-operative movement: Ireland in the New Century, (London: John Murray, 1904)

10. Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic & the Spirit of Capitalism, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930); R. H. Tawney, Religion & the Rise of Capitalism, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1938). The most recent contributions to this debate, in the Irish context, are Emmet Larkin, "Economic Growth, Capital Investment & the Roman Catholic Church in Nineteenth Century Ireland", AHR, LXXII, (1967), pp. 852-94; and Liam Kennedy, "The Roman Catholic Church & Economic Growth in Nineteenth Century Ireland", Economic & Social Review, X, (1978), pp. 45-60

to the principle of ecclesiastical control over the education of the faithful. There was also some tension involved, however, for the hierarchy's proclamation of its own absolute authority over the realm of "faith and morals", and of the right to define the boundaries of that realm, ran occasionally into conflict with the attempts by secular political and intellectual leaders to establish their own authority. The balance between these two forces was one of the critical factors in the definition of the ideological and political constraints which determined the forms of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie's struggle for power.

#### The Church that Cullen Built

There are occasions when fundamental shifts in class relations may be read in individual careers, when one man's activities stand out as signposts to a much broader process. One such intersection occurred in 1849, when Paul Cullen came home to Ireland after thirty years at the Irish College in Rome. The occasion was his appointment, armed with the Apostolic Delegacy, to the primal see of Armagh. Three years later, Cullen was translated to the politically sensitive archdiocese of Dublin; and in 1866, he became the first Irishman to wear the Cardinal's purple hat. His reign lasted until his death in 1878, aptly enough on the very eve of the agrarian crisis and political upheaval which posed the most serious threat to the temporal powers of the Church which

Cullen had fought to establish. Throughout his thirty-year career, during the critical formative period of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, Paul Cullen's policies had been directed towards two over-riding goals: to centralise authority within the Church in the hands of the regular meetings of the national episcopal council and to carve out for the bishops a large realm of competence.<sup>11</sup>

The pre-Famine Church had been a ramshackle, autarchic structure, in which each bishop tended to act as a quasi-independent chieftain in his own diocese, owing allegiance to no outside authority save, at best, Rome.<sup>12</sup> Worse, as one prelate complained to Rome, in this "scene of anarchy, confusion and distraction", the bishops often enjoyed little real authority over their priests.<sup>13</sup> The latter had an unenviable reputation for being avaricious, drunken, immoral, fractious, disorderly and litigious. The most pressing problem facing the Church was the internal question of a lack of discipline, of cohesive, centralised

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11. Cullen's career has been usefully summarised by E. R. Norman, The Catholic Church and Ireland in the Age of Rebellion, 1859-73, (London: Longmans, Green, 1965), pp. 4-12; since Cullen dominated the entire period covered by this work, he figures largely throughout. See also, E. D. Steele, "Cardinal Cullen & Irish Nationality", IHS, XIX, (1975), pp. 239-60; Lee, Modernisation, pp. 42-9; O'Farrell, Ireland's English Question, pp. 89-99 and passim; and the important, extensive selection from Cullen's official and private correspondence, Peadar Mac Suibhne, ed., Paul Cullen and his Contemporaries, (3 vols., Naas: Kildare Leader, 1961-65)

12. There were, of course, exceptions to this tendency. The most notable were the autocratic rule of John MacHale over the archdiocese of Tuam (counties Galway and Mayo) and the outstanding influence of James Doyle, Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin in the 1830s.

13. Bishop George Plunkett of Elphin writing, in 1826, to Cardinal Somaglia, Prefect of Propaganda, cited by Emmet Larkin, "Church & State in Nineteenth Century Ireland", Church History, XXXI, (1962),



authority.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the Church experienced increased financial difficulties arising from the rapid growth of the rural population during the decades down to the Famine. Merchants and farmers, the Catholic laymen who had prospered during the wartime boom in the tillage economy, tended to be hard hit by the recession following Napoleon's defeat; these laymen were the crucial source of ecclesiastical income. The result was a squeeze, as the calls on the Church's resources, for charitable activity, rose with the rural population, while her income failed to keep pace with those demands.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the difficulties, the Church was not inactive before the Famine. Ecclesiastical activity was addressed to two main issues. In the 1820s, on the initiative of Daniel O'Connell, the entire clergy was enrolled in the political campaign for Catholic Emancipation, for the removal of the bars on Catholic participation in public life, on the bench and in parliament. During the same period, the hierarchy fought its own battle with the government over the details of the National System of elementary education which was established in 1831. The essential demands of the hierarchy, enumerated in 1826 by

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14. This summary is based upon Larkin, "Devotional Revolution", pp. 625-39; Larkin, "Church & State", pp. 298-301; Connell, Irish Peasant Society, pp. 113-61; Norman, Church & Ireland in Rebellion, pp. 1-32; James A. Reynolds, The Catholic Emancipation Crisis in Ireland, 1823-29, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), pp. 46-53

15. On the financial problems, see Larkin, "Church & State", pp. 302-3; Maureen Wall, "The Rise of a Catholic Middle Class in Eighteenth Century Ireland", IHS, XI, (1958), pp. 91-115; J. A. Murphy, "The Support of the Catholic Clergy in Ireland, 1750-1850", Historical Studies, V, (1965), pp. 103-21

Archbishop Murray of Dublin, remained unchanged throughout the century; the two most important items were the claim to episcopal jurisdiction over both the selection and dismissal of teachers and over the choice of secular as well as sacred text-books.<sup>16</sup> In short, the Church wanted control. In the event, the National Schools did not fully satisfy the bishops, since their curriculum remained formally non-denominational,<sup>17</sup> but the actual administration of the schools, by local managers who were almost always clergymen, gave the Catholic Church de facto control over three-quarters of the system.<sup>18</sup>

Before the Famine, then, the Church's position consisted of credits and debits. On the one hand, the campaign for Emancipation confirmed and advanced a pattern of priestly intervention in politics which would continue,<sup>19</sup> and the establishment of the National Schools had placed a formidable instrument in the hands of the parish clergy.

16. Donald Harman Akenson, The Irish Education Experiment: The National System of Education in the Nineteenth Century, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 98-99

17. Nor was the Catholic Church alone in demanding sectarian education. "In the early 1830s the synod of Ulster [Presbyterian] was dominated by illiberal men and by reactionary attitudes"; "the clergy of the established church, like the presbyterians, disliked sharing control of educational institutions with anyone, be it the government or other denominations"; the outcome was that "the two denominations' activities were complementary, the presbyterians producing curricular denominationalism, the anglicans greatly reducing the possibility of mixing children of different faiths in a single classroom". Ibid., pp. 161, 189, 202. Cf., T. Ó Raifeartaigh, "Mixed Education and the Synod of Ulster, 1831-40", IHS, IX, (1954-55), pp. 281-99

18. See the detailed figures in Akenson, Irish Education Experiment, pp. 214-24

19. See P. J. Jupp, "Irish Parliamentary Elections & the Influence of the Catholic Vote, 1801-20", Historical Journal, X, (1967), pp. 183-96

On the other hand, internal lack of discipline, a marked shortage of capital funds, and the demographic pressure in the countryside tended to undercut the Church's authority. The requirements which solved these problems were met, providentially or coincidentally, at the same time. By sweeping away the rural poor, the Famine established a new balance between clergy and laity, and assisted both by removing the largest single claim on their limited charitable resources. And Paul Cullen came home to take in hand the theological and organisational consolidation of the relations between Church and nation.

The post-Famine reconstruction of Irish Catholicism proceeded on three levels. The visible features were the astonishing material growth of the Church and the "devotional revolution"; but behind them lay Cullen's great achievement, the creation of a uniform, disciplined, national Church. The core of this new-model Church was authoritative (and, within limits, authoritarian) leadership and obedient cadre. This personnel question may be treated first.

One of the Church's pre-Famine problems can be underlined demographically -- from 1800 to the Famine, the ratio of priests to laymen fell from 1:2100 to 1:3000. Since the late nineteenth century, it has often been said that Ireland is priest-ridden; in terms of numbers alone, the observer in modern Ireland cannot fail to be struck by the presence of the clergy. The boom followed the Famine; while the lay

population consistently declined, the clerical establishment grew substantially. In 1845, there had been about 2,200 priests; in 1870, there were 3,200; and by 1911, there were 4,000. The pre-Famine trend was sharply reversed, so that by 1870, each priest catered to about 1,250 people and by 1911 his clientele had fallen to about 900. The number of priests grew relatively gradually, because the number of parishes in the country remained roughly constant, but there was a veritable "population explosion" in the other ranks of the ecclesiastical army. Between 1850 and 1870, the number of nuns more than doubled, from about 1,500 to over 3,700, and the total continued to climb, to 9,000 by 1911; similarly, the number of monks and brothers in the regular orders, mostly teaching orders, rose six-fold between 1850 and 1911, from 200 to 1,200.<sup>20</sup> The number of clergy in Ireland actually understates the extent of the growth of the Church, since Irish exports of cattle and labour-power to the secular industries of Britain and North America were supplemented by an equally significant contribution to the sacred vineyards of the Church's overseas missions around the world.<sup>21</sup> Briefly then, the total establishment of the Irish Church increased more than three-fold between the Famine and World

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20. All the figures are derived from Larkin, "Devotional Revolution", pp. 626-27, 644, 651; cf., Connell, "Catholicism & Marriage", pp. 160-61; Lee, Modernisation, p. 18; Lyons, Ireland since the Famine, pp. 17-19

21. One estimate suggests that the overseas missionaries would add another 25% to the totals given: Jean Blanchard, The Church in Modern Ireland, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1963), p. 86

War I, from about 4,000 to more than 14,000 priests, nuns and monks.

The change was qualitative too. A crucial aspect of the expansion of the Church was the recruitment and consolidation of a disciplined officer-corps, led by a united general staff. Cullen's role in this development was pivotal. The key issue facing the bishops whom he assembled at Thurles for the first plenary National Synod, in 1850, was to establish the rules which would prevent a recurrence of the unseemly public disputes which had riven the hierarchy in the 1830s. To his formal stature as Apostolic Delegate, the direct representative of the Papacy, Cullen added his own "feline sensitivity for the levers of power in the Vatican" and a hard-headed determination to manage the Irish Church. The result was that his rules were adopted, and from 1850 to 1878 he directly influenced the decisions in the choice of all but three of the forty-four bishops nominated to Irish sees.<sup>22</sup>

A general portrait suggests that Cullen's criteria for his selections were strict. It became rare for a parish priest to be promoted or for any cleric to assume the episcopal mitre in a diocese where he might already have formed personal ties which could conflict with his loyalty to the hierarchy. The new men were "better educated,

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22. Emmet Larkin, "The Quarrel among the Roman Catholic Hierarchy over the National System of Education in Ireland, 1838-41", in R. B. Browne, et al., eds., The Celtic Cross: Studies in Irish Culture and Literature, (Evansville: Purdue University Press, 1964), pp. 121-46; Steele, "Cardinal Cullen", p. 245; Larkin, "Church, State & Nation", p. 1258; Lee, Modernisation, p. 43; J. H. Whyte, "The Appointment of Catholic Bishops in Nineteenth Century Ireland", Catholic Historical Review, XLVIII, (1962), pp. 31-2

less insular, younger and more vigorous than those selected in the years before 1850".<sup>23</sup> Cullen preferred men with academic backgrounds, possibly from the regular order, former "rectors or vice-rectors of seminaries -- strict, stern, austere men who had both the experience of, and a proven talent for, efficient administration".<sup>24</sup> In addition to centralised criteria for episcopal appointment, Cullen insisted upon regular, statutory meetings of the provincial and national councils of bishops. The overall result was a well-balanced, finely-tuned machine from which most of the pre-Famine irritants had been purged.<sup>25</sup>

The outstanding characteristic of the Cullenite episcopacy was their sound grasp of business principles, their efficient management of the increasingly formidable economic resources at the Church's disposal. Once again, the Famine clearly marked a turning point. In the early years of the nineteenth century, the Catholic chapel was often little better than the rude mud-cabins of the rural masses; sometimes it was less, a roof without walls or even a consecrated rock serving as an open-air altar.<sup>26</sup> Within a century, the constant capital

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23. Vincent Alan McClelland, English Roman Catholics & Higher Education, 1830-1903, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 90

24. Larkin, "Devotional Revolution", p. 648; cf., Norman, Church & Ireland in Rebellion, p. 19; Lee, Modernisation, p. 43

25. Outspoken, ill-disciplined priests continued to find shelter under the skirts of Archbishop MacHale of Tuam, but the latter was almost wholly isolated in the hierarchy, and in the 1860s he ceased to attend national council meetings: Norman, Church & Ireland in Rebellion, pp. 78, 86-134

26. Some lasted well beyond mid-century; there is a photograph of an outdoor mass at one of these scathlans in county Donegal in 1867, reproduced in L. P. Curtis, Jr., Apes & Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature, (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1971), p. 92

deployed by the Catholic Church had grown immensely. Cathedrals had been built all over the country; the thousand-odd parish churches were large slate-roofed buildings of brick or stone; next door stood the presbytery, often the biggest and most luxurious house in the community. Then there were the convents and monasteries housing the growing regular orders. Finally, the Church either owned or controlled a whole network of institutions which constituted a major portion of the social-welfare activities in Ireland -- schools and colleges, seminaries, asylums and orphanages, hospitals and nursing homes.<sup>27</sup> By 1900, the Church had become a massive business, arguably the biggest in the country. The question is to determine the relationship between the soul-saving business and the formation of the secular economy; more strictly posed, what did the economic activity of the Church signify within the development of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie?

The classical answers come in two forms. In the Weber-Tawney debate, the focus tends to rest upon a psychological model which links character structure and religious formation. An extreme, if well-meaning, Unionist expression of this outlook was stated by Horace Plunkett, who wrote that "Roman Catholicism strikes an outsider as being in some of its tendencies non-economic, if not actually anti-economic . . . The reliance of that religion on authority, its repression

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27. Larkin, "Economic Growth", p. 864; Norman, Church & Ireland in Rebellion, pp. 1, 14-15; T. P. Kennedy, "Church Building", in P. J. Corish, ed., History of Irish Catholicism, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1970), v, fasc. viii

of individuality, and its complete shifting of what I may call the human centre of gravity to a future existence . . . appear to me calculated, unless supplemented by other influences, to check the growth of the qualities of initiative and self-reliance [etc]".<sup>28</sup> Larkin's essay, on the other hand, argues that clerical and secular economic activity represent the poles in a zero-sum relation, that capital in the hands of the clergy represents a net loss to the "real world" of the secular economy.<sup>29</sup> Both answers generally arrive at much the same conclusion: Ireland is economically underdeveloped because it is a Catholic country. A number of detailed issues must be considered in order to judge the merits of this notion. How much money came into the clergy's hands? Where did it come from? How was it employed? Was it converted into capital, variable or constant, and in what proportions? And most important, did clerical disposal of these funds hinder economic growth?

Without access to the precise accounts of every parish, or at least of the dioceses, an exact statement of the Church's income and expenditures is impossible, but there are some useful figures which

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28. Plunkett, Ireland in the New Century, pp. 101-2; cited by W. Alison Phillips, The Revolution in Ireland, 1906-23, (London: Longmans, Green, 1926), p. 41 and by Liam Kennedy, "Church & Economic Growth", p. 46

29. Larkin, "Economic Growth", passim. In a note appended to Liam Kennedy's "Church & Economic Growth", Larkin has retreated somewhat from his original judgement: "I would now be prepared to admit that on balance the Church's role in the economy was more positive than I allowed ten years ago, and may have indeed contributed to rather than retarded what improvement there was in the Irish economy", (p. 60).



allow an estimation of the Church's economic position. First of all, Archbishop MacHale and Bishop Higgins informed the Roman Curia that, during the three decades down to 1847, the Church had spent some £22 millions, nearly ninety per cent of it on the direct maintenance of the clergy; a later estimate, covering the period from 1800 to 1865, conservatively put the total for fixed capital investment, in churches, schools, convents and asylums, at less than £6 millions.<sup>30</sup> It seems clear that the crucial aspect of ecclesiastical finances was the sharp break which coincided with the Famine. Between the pre-Famine decades and those after mid-century, the Church's income rose by about two-thirds, from some £600,000 a year to £1,000,000; and the proportion of this income which was devoted to capital expenditure doubled, from 10 to 20 per cent.<sup>31</sup> These rounded averages actually understate the magnitude of the shift which occurred at mid-century, since it is clear that most of the new buildings were erected before the onset of the agrarian crisis which presaged the Land War at the end of the 1870s.<sup>32</sup> Annual expenditure, estimated in 1867 at £762,000,<sup>33</sup> was divided roughly equally between clerical benefices and the maintenance

30. MacHale-Higgins report and Myles O'Reilly, Progress of Catholicity in Ireland, (1865), cited by Larkin, "Economic Growth", pp. 856-58

31. Ibid., pp. 856, 874

32. Ibid., p. 865; Kennedy, "Church Building", in Corish, ed., History of Irish Catholicism; Norman, Church & Ireland in Rebellion, pp. 14-15

33. Freeman's Journal Church Commission, (1868), cited by Larkin, "Economic Growth", p. 874n.

of the physical establishment. Finally, it must be noted that the Irish Church transferred large sums out of the country, to Rome in the form of Peter's Pence, the direct gifts to the papacy, and throughout the world as contributions to the various missionary orders and to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.<sup>34</sup>

Where did all this money come from? In a word, from the pockets of the faithful. There were, first, the dues which every Catholic was morally obliged to render for the support of the parochial clergy; secondly, the "voluntary oblations" or customary fees payable for a wide range of ceremonial and sacramental services, such as baptisms, marriages, shrivings and burials;<sup>35</sup> and finally, the unremitting series of special collections on designated Sundays, the bazaars and raffles,<sup>36</sup> and towards the end of the century, a growing volume of pious bequests to clerical and charitable purposes.<sup>37</sup> As Larkin nicely puts it, the

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34. After an inaugural contribution of £80,000, Irish donations to the Pope averaged £10,000 a year; by 1865, according to Myles O'Reilly, Ireland had already given nearly £150,000 to the Propagation; Larkin, "Economic Growth", p. 866; cf., M. J. F. McCarthy, Priests & People in Ireland, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1902), p. 149

35. There were (and still are) interesting regional variations -- in Ulster, the main collections for the priest were made at funerals; in Munster, marriage was the more profitable occasion. Cf., Murphy, "Support of the Clergy", pp. 107-10

36. Cardinal Logue was reported to have raised over £30,000 in one day at a bazaar in Armagh in July 1900: McCarthy, Priests & People, p. 35; cf., Connell, "Catholicism & Marriage", pp. 152-55; Larkin, "Economic Growth", p. 865

37. Larkin, "Economic Growth", pp. 867-69, discusses intra-clerical conflicts over valuable bequests; cf., the survey of wills published in the winter of 1901-2, involving more than £90,000 in various forms of bequests to the clergy, in McCarthy, Priests & People, pp. 108-46

Irish Church extracted money from the Irish laity (at home and around the world) with "an ingenuity, a perseverence and a confidence that would make the most hardheaded exponent of the Protestant ethic gasp".<sup>38</sup>

It must be proposed, though this must remain hypothetical, that the crucial source of ecclesiastical income was the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. The proposition must be tempered by the recognition that all Catholics were obliged to provide for the support of their clergy, which may have meant that the poor gave a larger proportion of their disposable income -- and it was certainly said that the poor were more generous.<sup>39</sup> However Larkin flatly asserts that the principal source of the clergy's income before the Famine was "that class in particular . . . who were relatively wealthy -- the Catholic merchants".<sup>40</sup> In either case, the Famine effected a sharp break, for by removing the bulk of the cottiers it reinforced the tendency towards clerical reliance upon the stronger farmers and merchants, while simultaneously opening the way for the latter's rise to prosperity. The claim that the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie became the essential financial base for the Church after the Famine rests on more than speculation, for there is a consistent strain of literary evidence which points in this direction. Several novels and stories describe occasions on which the priest read out from the

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38. Larkin, "Economic Growth", p. 864

39. Murphy, "Support of the Clergy", p. 116

40. Larkin, "Church and State", p. 302

altar the names of parishioners and the amounts of their donations, both dues-payments and voluntary offerings at funerals or weddings.<sup>41</sup> Implicitly or explicitly, what is being described is a form of social blackmail, with the clear understanding that the rich man, the strong farmer or wealthy shopkeeper or publican, was honour-bound to buttress his standing in the community by the measure of his largesse.

In addition to the contributions from the Catholic laity, the Church had one other major source of income, The state provided both direct subsidies and what may be called "invisible earnings". From its establishment in 1795 until 1870, St. Patrick's College at Maynooth, the national seminary, received an annual grant and occasional additional sums for capital purposes, to a total amount of more than £1,000,000.<sup>42</sup> The hierarchy consistently and successfully resisted a series of proposals to institute a state-pension for the Catholic clergy,<sup>43</sup> but they overcame their theological scruples about the non-denominational principle of the National School system in order to assure the orthodoxy

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41. Among the writers whose works, especially on rural Ireland, have treated this subject special mention may be made of William Carleton ("The Station" in Traits & Stories of the Irish Peasantry), Liam O'Flaherty (Land), Sean O'Faolain (A Nest of Simple Folk), Thomas Kilroy (The Big Chapel). Also perceptive are some of the comments of George Birmingham (the pseudonym of J. O. Hannay, a Church of Ireland clergyman) in The Lighter Side of Irish Life, (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1911) and Irishmen All, (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1913)

42. The original annual grant of £8,000 was raised to £9,000 in the 1820s and then to £26,000 in 1845; Larkin, "Economic Growth", pp. 859-60; G. I. T. Machin, "The Maynooth Grant, the Dissenters and Disestablishment, 1845-47", EHR, LXXXII, (1967), pp. 61-85

43. Murphy, "Support of the Clergy", pp. 117-19; Norman, Church and Ireland in Rebellion, esp. pp. 301-38

of the education offered therein. Between 1850 and 1900, the total state expenditure on the National Schools amounted to more than £30 millions. Since Catholic priests managed at least two-thirds of these schools, they disposed of the lion's share of the funding. This access to the public purse must be seen as a huge hidden subsidy since clerical control of primary education was, first of all, virtually absolute and because it freed the Church to concentrate upon the development of the secondary schools run by the regular orders and upon the struggle for the Catholic University in Dublin.<sup>44</sup>

This brings us back to the central issue of whether the Church's use of its economic resources helped or hindered the development of the Irish economy. One may distinguish, firstly, between the soul-saving apparatus -- cathedrals, churches, convents, monasteries -- and the ancillary signs of ecclesiastical pomp, such as the episcopal palaces and well-appointed presbyteries, on the one hand, and the network of socially useful educational and social-welfare institutions such as schools, colleges, hospitals, orphanages and asylums, on the other. Since the first half of the list provided truly "invisible" services whose value could only be collected in the after-life, they might be accounted a net loss to the economy, were it not for the fact that church-building and the maintenance of the clergy were significant economic

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44. Akenson, Irish Education Experiment, pp. 276-77, 308-10, 325, 358-60; Norman, Church & Ireland in Rebellion, Chapters 2, 5-6; McClelland, English Catholics & Higher Education, pp. 87-172

inputs. The Catholic Church was a major employer of labour and capital: architects, masons, roofers, glaziers, plasterers, carpenters, ornamental sculptors and gardeners all found work with the boom in church-building. The ecclesiastical and public educational systems likewise provided employment for thousands of teachers who might otherwise have had to emigrate. This aspect of the argument was best summarised by Liam Kennedy: "By raising the level of domestic demand for such services as building and maintenance services, as well as requiring steady supplies of food and food products — outputs which, on the whole, could only be provided by native industries — it is quite probable that the Church contributed to economic growth rather than the reverse".<sup>45</sup>

There is another aspect which is, perhaps, more speculative. It may very justly be argued that the £60-70 millions which passed through the Church's hands between the Famine and 1914 should have been better spent on satanic mills than on insurance against hell-fire.<sup>46</sup> But would it have been? Did the Church actually divert money from more productive investment? Apart from its own expansion and maintenance, the Church

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45. Kennedy, "Church & Economic Growth", p. 52

46. The total figure is Larkin's estimate: "Economic Growth", p. 874. This is the point at which Catholicism, as a social ideology, may truly be said to have stood in opposition to economic growth, for it was not uncommon for Irish priests to deliver sermons denouncing industrial production as the devil's work. D. W. Miller, Church, State & Nation in Ireland, 1898-1921, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1973), pp. 70-74, quotes from several clerical attacks on the moral dangers inherent in industrialisation.

invested considerable sums in the capital market, but like the banks and most Irish investors, the bishops were cautious men, preferring British government gilt-edgeds over riskier entrepreneurial ventures. In this respect, the Church simply reflected the general tone of conservatism which characterised Irish capitalism.<sup>47</sup> In general then, the Church's economic performance may be said to have had two main aspects. On the one hand, as an important institutional consumer of goods and services and employer of labour, the Church probably enhanced the circulation of funds which might otherwise have remained in savings accounts. On the other hand, although the Church's cautious investment policies contributed to the net outflow of capital from the Irish economy, this was not a function of Catholicism but of the uneven relations between English and Irish, industrial and agrarian, capitalism and of the general pattern of "risk aversion" which constituted the shared outlook of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.<sup>48</sup> There still remains, however, the necessity to consider the significance of Catholicism in the social and ideological development of that class.

### The Cleric on the Hearth

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To say, again, that Ireland is a Catholic nation is to repeat

47. Kennedy, "Church & Economic Growth", pp. 50-51; Lee, "Capital in the Irish Economy", in Cullen, ed., Formation, and cf., pp. 168-74, supra.

48. The phrase is Kennedy's: "Church & Economic Growth", p. 51

the self-evident, but the point is worth labouring because Catholicism is one of the critical political and ideological boundaries which define the Irish nation. Religion is the shorthand identification for national politics: nowhere could this point be clearer than in Belfast. The social origins, class biases, political outlook and social standing of the priest are, therefore, essential components in assembling the portrait of the links between the religion and the national politics of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. The primordial connection was the shared faith of all Catholics, but faith was also transmuted into more worldly class and national concerns. The specific form they took was the result of complex interaction over a long period, a series of conflicts and accommodations which forged the distinctive roles of the Irish priesthood.

Since, to say the least, "it is hard to come by statistical evidence of the priests' social origins",<sup>49</sup> there is a distinctly provisional element in the definition of this aspect of the intersection between clergy and laity. Nevertheless, some evidence can be mustered, much of it literary, to allow the creation of a montage from the impressions recorded by friendly and hostile observers of the priesthood. Indeed, it may be said from the outset that behind the different words and strikingly divergent class biases and moral judgements, most of these observations point towards some areas of fundamental agreement.

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49. Connell, "Catholicism & Marriage", p. 125



The two outstanding Irish clerics who spanned the period of the rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie are a useful point of entry, because they embodied the two main arms of that class. Paul Cullen was the son and nephew of graziers who held large pasture farms in Royal Meath, "the cream of the Catholic tenant farmer class".<sup>50</sup> His obituary in The Times in 1878 recorded that his family owned land as well as renting it, and that his brother was an important figure in the Dublin-Liverpool cattle trade.<sup>51</sup> The Fenians, the revolutionary nationalists who were Cullen's main political antagonists in the 1860s, attacked him on precisely the grounds of his class background, when they predicted that, after the revolution, "men, women and children would take the place of the flocks and herds upon some extensive grass farms with which Dr. Cullen is acquainted".<sup>52</sup> Michael Cardinal Logue, who presided over the Church during the revolutionary years of the Black and Tan war and the Civil War of 1922-23, was the son of a country publican from county Donegal.<sup>53</sup> Between them, these two prelates nicely fulfilled Robert Lynd's brief definition of the Irish priest -- "when he is not the son of a farmer, he is the son of a publican".<sup>54</sup>

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50. Larkin, "Church, State & Nation", p. 1253n.

51. Cited by Steele, "Cardinal Cullen", p. 242

52. Cited by Donal McCartney, "The Church and Fenianism", University Review, IV, (1967), p. 211; cf., Tomás Ó Fiaich, "The Clergy and Fenianism, 1860-70", Irish Ecclesiastical Record, CIX, (1968), pp. 81-103

53. Miller, Church, State & Nation, p. 11

54. Robert Lynd, Home Life in Ireland, (London: Mills & Boon, 1909), p. 124: (Lynd was one of the long thin red line of Belfast Presbyterian Republicans).

A more rounded composite portrait of the priest, summarising his main features as they appeared in mid-nineteenth century fiction, says that "he rarely comes from the middle classes, he is farmer-stock, often put through college at a great sacrifice by poor parents; he is not very cultivated, he has not been cut off from the people by his education, they feel him as one of themselves".<sup>55</sup> In 1827, Dr. Crotty, President of the national seminary at Maynooth, told the Education Commissioners that his students were "generally the sons of farmers, who must be comfortable to meet the expenses . . .; of tradesmen, shopkeepers; and not a very small portion of them are the children of opulent merchants and rich farmers and graziers".<sup>56</sup> A priest told another parliamentary inquiry, in 1853, that most of his confreres were "the sons of persons in business and trade and the sons of comfortable, middle and humble farmers";<sup>57</sup> George Birmingham reiterated the general impression that "the secular priesthood . . . is mainly recruited from the peasant class".<sup>58</sup>

Hostile observers were prone to characterise the Irish priest as boorish, ignorant and insular, and to lay the blame for this condition

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55. Sean O'Faolain, The Irish, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 108. The essay on "The Priests", from which this quotation comes, is a brilliant evocation of the contradictory tension involved in the ecclesiastical mission: to employ human agents on God's work, "the priest is fighting an immortal fight with mortal weapons" (p. 110).

56. Cited by Connell, "Catholicism & Marriage", p. 122

57. Ibid., p. 125

58. Birmingham, Irishmen All, p. 178; cf., the perceptive caricaturistic portrait of the priest in The Lighter Side of Irish Life, pp. 67-90

at the door of the national seminary. Thus, one of Sir Robert Peel's correspondents called the priests "peasants" who graduated from Maynooth "with as great an ignorance of the world as they brought into it".<sup>59</sup> Even Paul Cullen, it may be said, harboured no great respect for Maynooth.<sup>60</sup> One particularly splenetic critic was Samuel Hussey, land agent, landowner and sworn enemy of Fenians, Land Leaguers, Home Rule, Catholicism and progress. It was his ill-considered opinion that Maynooth was "the greatest curse to the Irish nation . . . because it has fostered the ordination of peasants' sons . . . uneducated men who have never been out of Ireland, whose sympathies are wholly with the class from which they have sprung, and who are given no training calculated to afford them a broader view than that of the narrowest class prejudice".<sup>61</sup> From one whose perspective was blinkered in the extreme, this is a revealing comment, but the central proposition was frequently advanced. One of the best commentaries on the priest's place in rural society repeated the essential point in terms which deserve quotation in full:<sup>62</sup>

In Ireland the priests have a peculiar function to perform.  
They occupy towards the Catholic population the place of

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59. J. L. Foster to Peel, 1825, cited by Reynolds, Emancipation Crisis, p. 46

60. "It seems that the training at Maynooth does not favour the development of ecclesiastical virtues"; Cullen to Propaganda, 1853, cited by Whyte, "Appointment of Bishops", p. 29

61. S. M. Hussey, Reminiscences of an Irish Land Agent, (Home Gordon, ed., London: Duckworth, 1904), p. 116

62. E. Lucas, The Life of Frederick Douglass (1886), cited by Whyte, Independent Irish Party, p. 80

a gentry or local aristocracy. Between them and the people is not a gulf of separation, but a bond of the tenderest union. They belong to the same race as the people, and feel for all their sufferings, temporal as well as spiritual. At the same time, the sacerdotal character, the higher view of life, the greater experience of the world, the more cultivated intellect, raise them above the rank in which they were born; and as they form the only educated class which truly sympathises with the people, they necessarily form the only class to whom, in those temporal matters in which the poor Catholic farmer requires an adviser better educated than himself, he can have recourse, and from whom he can receive guidance. It is not merely in the politics of the people that the priest takes a part, but in all their temporal affairs in which they need counsel and advice; politics are not an exception to other temporal business but stand on precisely the same line with all the rest.

Evidently, the gap between this analysis and Hussey's is exactly "the narrowest class prejudice"! Twenty years later, a German visitor re-affirmed the priest's importance across the spectrum of social life: "in many parts of the country, the priest is the match-maker, the arbitrator, the authority which decides whether a man shall buy or sell a farm, the price he shall pay for it, the market at which he shall deal, the manner in which he shall invest his savings, or in a word, the whole business of his life".<sup>63</sup>

During the course of the nineteenth century, the priest's zone of authority gradually extended far beyond the gates of the chapel-yard. O'Faolain has underlined the very important point that this

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63. E. B. Iwan-Muller, Ireland, Today & Tomorrow (1907), cited by Connell, "Catholicism & Marriage", p. 145. Connell's essay is an invaluable collection of evidence from a wide range of sources.

extension of priestly authority in the Catholic nation was, in fact, "the barometer of the political emancipation of the majority. His rise followed their rise".<sup>64</sup> The stages in the development of the clerical powers are worth tracing, not only for their own intrinsic interest but for the lessons they bear for our examination of the formation of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

Clearly, the foundation stone was religion. But this poses an immediate problem. There is no doubt that, under Cullen's leadership, the Church orchestrated a devotional revolution after the Famine, but it may be said that its significance lay in the fact that the pre-Famine Irish were not very Catholic. The question revolves around the Famine once more, and again it turns on the suggestion that the most fundamental impact of that disaster was to complete the extinction of the older, pre-capitalist social order. The pre-Famine rural masses were Catholics, at least on the surface, but their religion harboured a body of superstitions and magical ritual elements which stretched back to and held within them vestigial memories of the pagan gods and fairies.<sup>65</sup> When more "modern" and distinctly puritanical observers remarked that the major festivals and "pattern days" (local patron saints' feast-days) were

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64. O'Faolain, The Irish, p. 107

65. See Maire MacNeill, The Festival of Lughnasa: A Study of the Survival of the Celtic Festival of the Beginning of Harvest, (London: Oxford University Press, 1962); cf., Danaher, The Year in Ireland; Evans, Irish Folk Ways; and the great body of germane literature on Irish folk beliefs and fairy-tales.

accompanied by "drunkenness and debauchery",<sup>66</sup> they had properly identified the keynote of these occasions -- they were celebrations. But as Sir William Wilde clearly saw, there was precious little to celebrate when the potato failed. A functional explanation might suggest that the failure of the potato-harvest marked the breakdown of the religion which had propitiated the gods of food-supply, and that the post-Famine devotional revolution was the creative response.<sup>67</sup>

A closer look suggests that the devotional revolution was more complex. It encompassed two distinct movements. On the one hand, Cullen's selection of new bishops was the highest expression of a qualitative reform of the morality, the morale and the cultural achievements of the clergy, reforms which had been decreed by the Synod of Thurles in 1850. At the same time, Ireland witnessed an astonishing expansion in the practice of their religion by the Catholic laity, to the extent that, even today, upwards of ninety per cent of the Irish abide by the doctrinal requirement to attend Mass and receive the sacraments.<sup>68</sup> The laity were persuaded to become pratiquants through ritual, fetish and organisation. The Mass was up-graded to a splendid

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66. William Shaw Mason, a Protestant clergyman, describing a pattern in north Donegal, c. 1815; cited by David W. Miller, "Irish Catholicism and the Great Famine", Journal of Social History, IX, (1975), p. 92

67. Ibid., p. 91: Miller posits this theory, but his argument is more supple and goes a lot further than this bare outline would suggest.

68. This result was produced by a survey conducted in 1975, published in The Irish Times; cf., C. K. Ward, "Ireland", in Hans Mol, ed., Western Religion: A Country by Country Sociological Inquiry, (The Hague: 1972), pp. 297-98

affair; the number of devotional observations was multiplied, with the institution of novenas, rosaries, perpetual devotion and benediction; the faithful were offered trinkets and spiritual rewards, in the form of holy pictures, blessed scapulars, rosary beads and missals, and indulgences or relief from purgatory. Finally, all of this activity was co-ordinated through missions, confraternities, sodalities and altar societies.<sup>69</sup>

How did the clergy achieve this result? A partial explanation, which supplements the functional model, is Larkin's suggestion that the religious revival offered the Irish "a substitute symbolic language and . . . a new cultural heritage" to replace the Gaelic ones which had died with the cottiers.<sup>70</sup> But this answer, too, needs some elaboration. The changes in religious observation were part of a much broader movement. Catholicism is primarily directed towards the hereafter, but Irish Catholicism had long been the badge of national oppression and political subordination. What had most changed, since before the Famine, but concentrated in those terrible years, were the consciousness of that national oppression and the development of the forms of political organisation to combat it. And in this change, the priests played a pivotal role.

How the clergy became involved in politics is essentially very simple. In some respects, ever since the Cromwellian overlords

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69. Larkin, "Devotional Revolution", pp. 644-45; Miller, "Catholicism & Famine", pp. 82-3

70. Larkin, "Devotional Revolution", p. 649

had offered a £5 reward for the head of a priest or a wolf, in 1650,<sup>71</sup> they had always been involved, but the critical point of entry for this work can be dated with some accuracy. In January 1824, Daniel O'Connell transformed the Catholic Association from a genteel and discreet lobby into a formidable and very modern mass movement, by a simple expedient. He proposed to enrol the entire Catholic population as associate members, on the payment of a "Catholic Rent" of one penny per month; and the instrument was already at hand, since O'Connell also proposed to admit all Catholic clergy as ex officio members of the Association, an idea which had been accepted eight months earlier. In short order, the Catholic chapel became the weekly rallying point, the parish clergy and local shopkeepers providing local leadership which collected tens of thousands of pence to fill the Catholic Association's coffers. Most of all, O'Connell had invented a crucial political role for the clergy -- as enumerators, marshals and managers for the national electorate.<sup>72</sup>

The forms of clerical participation in electoral politics changed substantially during the course of the nineteenth century; as we

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71. Peter Berresford Ellis, To Hell or Connaught: The Cromwellian Colonisation of Ireland, 1652-60, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), p. 29; cf., T. C. Barnard, Cromwellian Ireland, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976)

72. On the history of O'Connell and Emancipation, see Reynolds, Emancipation Crisis; O'Faolain, King of the Beggars, pp. 210-40; Strauss, Irish Nationalism & British Democracy, pp. 88-96; Michael MacDonagh, Daniel O'Connell and the Story of Catholic Emancipation, (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1929); Angus Macintyre, The Liberator: Daniel O'Connell and the Irish Party, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965), pp. 12-19



shall see in Chapter Seven, one of the main forces which brought about that change was the political maturation of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, its acquisition of the capacity and confidence to act on its own behalf. Before that happened, however, there was one important, symptomatic shift which was, appropriately, part of the Cullenite reform. In 1854, the national episcopal council adopted a new set of rules governing clerical behaviour, and intended to define clerical-lay relations and the proper limits of each party's activity. The priests were forbidden to discuss politics in church, or to dissent over their political choices in public. More specifically, Cullen ordered his own diocesan clergy to attempt to restrain the "bribery, perjury, drunkenness and other violations of the law of God and of the state, which frequently disgrace the time of elections".<sup>73</sup> These limits aside, the priests were still expected to take an active part in assuring the election of the "right" candidates, which usually meant to ensure the defeat of Orangemen and Tories. Although Cullen believed that, in the event of the appearance of two equally "sound" candidates, the priests' task was "not to interfere between them but to stick to general principles",<sup>74</sup> the regulations promulgated in 1854 had the opposite effect. Since the clergy were forbidden to argue in public, and since disagreement among them was

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73. Cited by Steele, "Cardinal Cullen", p. 248

74. This definition derives from Frederick Lucas's account of a conversation with Cullen, in Rome in 1855; cited by Lee, Modernisation, p. 46

inevitable, they took to meeting in camera; only then, after the clerical selection had been made, were the lay electors admitted, to endorse the priests' choice!<sup>75</sup> It must be stressed that this was a temporary and abnormal phenomenon; clerical monopoly of candidate-selection continued intermittently down to 1880, but never in all constituencies.

Much more normal and fundamental were, first, the growing congruence between clerical and lay choices and second, the significance of the Church as a ready-made electoral machine. The combination of these two factors, indeed, is the best evidence for the transitional character of the political development of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. This was the growing period. The seeds were sown by O'Connell's mass mobilisations; Parnell gathered the harvest in the 1880s. In the interim period, the priests held the pass. More specifically, the clergy were educated men, accustomed to speak in public, well-known to and usually trusted by their parishioners, familiar with them and their interests, and partly as a result of Cullen's ecclesiastical reforms, increasingly adept in organisational matters. Their support was thus, generally speaking,<sup>76</sup> an invaluable aid to the aspiring politician; they spoke in favour of their

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75. The regulations and their effects are closely examined by Whyte, Independent Irish Party, pp. 114-23; J. H. Whyte, "The Influence of the Catholic Clergy on Elections in Nineteenth Century Ireland", EHR, LXXV, (1960), pp. 246-50; cf., Steele, "Cardinal Cullen", pp. 247-52; Norman, Church & Ireland in Rebellion, pp. 27-9

76. But not always, especially if the clergy were divided, as happened at Louth in 1854 and in the county Cork by-election in 1852; Whyte, "Influence of the Clergy at Elections", pp. 251-52

candidate, at public meetings and in the chapel-yard after mass; and their provision of transport for the rural electors, especially before the Ballot Act of 1872 radically increased the number of polling stations, could literally make the difference between election and defeat.<sup>77</sup> But in order for this sum of priestly influence to work, the priest had to be in step with the wishes of the electors. He might lead but only in the direction they wanted to go. The priests did not dictate political choices for the laity. The most striking example of this fact was the by-election in Tipperary in 1869. Against a Liberal candidate with normally impeccable qualifications and the support of the clergy, the Fenians ran their own man, the most intransigent convicted felon, from his cell. On polling day, as usual, the priests escorted the electors in from the country, but to some consternation Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, the Fenian, won by 1,131 votes to 1,028. He was, of course, subsequently unseated on the legal point that he was a convicted felon.<sup>78</sup>

The development of the congruence between priests and people may be stated epigrammatically -- the Irish became more Catholic as the Church became more Irish; more Irish than English, more national than

77. Whyte, "Influence of the Clergy at Elections", p. 250; Michael Hurst, "Ireland and the Ballot Act of 1872", Historical Journal, VIII, (1965), pp. 326-52

78. Whyte, "Influence of the Clergy at Elections", p. 253; William O'Brien, Recollections, (London: Macmillan, 1905), pp. 103-5; David Thornley, Isaac Butt and Home Rule, (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1964), pp. 71-3

Roman.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, O'Donovan Rossa's victory may be said to have rested on the fact that he was even more Irish than the Church. If Catholicism was the badge of national oppression, it was one normal response of a nation seeking to end its oppression to flaunt its colours. Which is why, in general, the Church's concerns have been popular ones; not that the Church necessarily sought to articulate popular demands, but that the people supported their Church. The cutting edge of ecclesiastical politics was invariably the education question. The Church has never deviated from one axiomatic proposition: from 1838 -- "Catholic bishops alone have the right to regulate the choice of the books out of which the faithful are to draw the nutriment of piety and sound doctrine";<sup>80</sup> to 1944 -- "only the church is competent to declare what is a properly Catholic upbringing . . . and those schools alone which the church approves are capable of providing a fully Catholic upbringing".<sup>81</sup>

And the Church has been remarkably successful. As we have seen, the

79. Both of the outstanding English Catholics of this period, John Henry Newman and Cardinal Manning, failed to understand and sympathise with the Irish perspectives and imperatives of their confreres across the water. Part of Professor Lee's panegyric for Cullen is his insistence that he helped to "break down local boundaries and accustom the faithful to think in national terms": Modernisation, pp. 44-5. Emmet Larkin, The Roman Catholic Church & the Creation of the Modern Irish State, 1878-86, (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1975), pp. 331-96, argues that Cullen's ultramontanistism was turned on its head after his death, by his successors' need to forge a wholly new relationship with the secular political leadership of the Irish nation.

80. Archbishop MacHale of Tuam, cited by Akenson, Irish Education Experiment, p. 208

81. Archbishop McQuaid of Dublin, cited by Akenson, A Mirror to Kathleen's Face, p. 96

National Schools were, in effect, denominational and thus practically monopolised by the clergy, who ensured the selection of properly orthodox teachers. Secondary education, too, was a largely clerical business. In short, the Church had virtually complete control over the formal system for governing the hearts and minds of the Catholic nation.

There were, of course, less formal mechanisms involved in the ideological, or more properly, the moral formation of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. For much of the late nineteenth century, the priests appeared to dominate this zone too, though the relationship was probably a lot more reciprocal than it seems. The most significant expression of the links which bound the fortunes of the Church to those of the strong farmers and merchants was the particular brand of Irish Jansenism which perfectly enunciated the economic imperatives of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. There was a natural coincidence between the moral teachings of the Church and the material interests of the farmers. The first proposed and the second adopted an ideology of sexual repression on the grand scale. The dimensions of Irish puritanism are staggering: a preliminary catalogue of its main features would include clerical authoritarianism, rigid separation of the sexes, enforced celibacy, delayed marriages founded upon match-making and dowry-bargaining, intellectual aridity and reactionary social policy.

The adoption of these features of rural life, in place of what Sir William Wilde had called the "once proverbial gaiety and lightheart-

edness of the peasant people", had a very real basis in the overwhelming trauma inflicted by the Famine. A growing body of evidence, and more intelligent surmise, suggest that the deferment of marriage and the close-fisted vision of the relationship between sexuality, marriage and the land, which characterised rural society after the Famine, were not a sudden innovation.<sup>82</sup> They were, rather, the established practice of the strong farmers, indeed a fundamental source of their strength. The key shift, in other words, was the growing visibility and proportionate strength of these farmers and the extent to which their outlook was imposed upon or adopted by the rest of the farming community. The structure of the farmers' demographic code must be spelled out.

The move towards pastoral production on larger farms, stocked with cattle and other livestock, entailed a falling demand for labour and consolidation rather than subdivision. The first and most obvious victims of this process were the cottiers, whose access to the land was most sharply curtailed. However, in some respects the sons and daughters of farmers faced even bleaker prospects than the cottiers.

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82. Inevitably, this whole section is deeply indebted to Kenneth Connell's pathbreaking work in the essays on "Catholicism & Marriage in the century after the Famine", in Irish Peasant Society; "Peasant Marriage in Ireland: Its Structure & Development since the Famine", EcHR, 2nd series, XIV, (1962), pp. 502-23; and "Peasant Marriage in Ireland after the Great Famine", Past & Present, 12, (1957), pp. 76-91. Some of Connell's conclusions, painted in broad brush-strokes, have been amended and refined by more recent studies: cf., Lee, "Marriage & Population"; Drake, "Marriage & Population Growth"; Carney, "Pre-Famine Population".

The farm had to be kept intact. Only one son (or, rarely, daughter) could inherit the land. So long as he was still capable of working, and with no prospect of an old-age pension, the father was reluctant to pass on the holding. The decision as to which son should inherit might be delayed by patriarchal whim, which served the additional purpose of keeping extra children on the farm, living in hope and continuing to work for little or no remuneration. Facing this uncertain and unenviable future, the only real alternative was emigration. There was, too, an intense psychological combat involved, for the mother resented the possibility that she might be replaced in the kitchen by a daughter-in-law. It is impossible to improve on Professor Lee's blending of the subtleties of psychological and demographic pressures in this situation.<sup>83</sup>

Sons, more patient in waiting for a farm than daughters for a man, became relatively older than their brides. The widening age-gap meant that a larger number of wives became, in due course, widows. Wives and widows, victims of largely loveless matches, projected their frustrated capacity for affection onto their sons, and contemplated with dread the prospect of a "rival" daughter-in-law who might supplant them in their sons' affections. The farmers' wives gave a grimly ironic twist to Parnell's famous warning to "keep a firm grip on your homesteads". To farming mothers the daughter-in-law posed a more pernicious threat than the landlord, and many a mother devoted her later life sapping her son's will to relegate her to the end room in favour of another woman. As a result the proportion of female farmers frequently widows refusing to make over the farm to a son, rose from four to fifteen per cent between 1841 and 1911.

The farm is the basic unit of production in the agrarian

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83. Lee, Modernisation, p. 5

economy and the main guarantee of an income for the rural dweller. Title to the land is, therefore, the crucial factor in the decision to establish a family. In the 1940s, the Irish Central Statistics Office estimated the average age at succession to be between 38 and 40 years. There are good grounds to believe that this modern pattern is of long standing; throughout the post-Famine period, both the proportion of permanently single rural Irishmen and the average age at marriage increased steadily.<sup>84</sup> In short, when the chosen son finally won access to the farm he was probably in his late thirties. By then, the well-springs of passion had been well and truly dammed by the cooler calculation of future prospects, by filial duty, by a broadening social sanction for celibacy and by the clerical elevation of Pauline morality (and misogyny) into the first rule of religious and social conduct.

The crucial result, on the personal level, was the subordination of people to land, of the farmer to the farm. Marriage was primarily a commercial transaction between pieces of land; the bride and groom were mutually assessed in the marital market place according to strict economic criteria -- the size of her dowry, the condition of his farm, the number of livestock, the capacity to work and produce healthy children. The systematic suppression of the impulses towards romantic love, courtship and marriage in the late teens or twenties was a basic guarantee for maintaining the viability of the farm and preventing

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84. Emigration Reports, (Pr.2541), pp. 63-8



competition for the land. It produced the result which was graphically described by Michael MacDonagh, "the average peasant takes unto himself a mate with as clear a head, as placid a heart and as steady a nerve, as if he were buying a cow at Ballinasloe fair".<sup>85</sup> The same simile occurred also to a correspondent who wrote to W. P. Ryan's paper, the Irish Peasant, to explain that "marriage was viewed in the whole countryside much in the same light as trucking with cattle at a fair. The daughter was reserved for the highest bidder, no matter if he was a physical or mental degenerate."<sup>86</sup> The guiding principle resolved itself into, 'Is it a good match?'. The same writer then proceeded to describe "the match", noting that many couples met for the first time at the altar, because "the parents often make a match on a fair day in the town and reach home with the news, telling the son or daughter they will be married that day week, and 'a £200 fortune'".<sup>87</sup> Another of Ryan's correspondents, from county Wexford, drew out the explicit connection between match-making and the pastoral economy. "To divide the farm", he explained, "is impossible; they have no education that would enable them to work it at a profit and set two of them up in farms of their own. They get careless and setting grass

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85. Irish Life & Character (1899), cited by Connell, "Peasant Marriage: Structure & Development", p. 503

86. This writer sounds very like an unrequited suitor. The point is certainly overdrawn, for it was in nobody's interest to overlook the mental and physical attributes of the partners to the match, least of all the parents who were attempting to ensure the continuity of the family farm!

87. Cited by W. P. Ryan, The Pope's Green Island, (Dublin: Maunsel & Co., 1912), pp. 81-2

yields a profit, so the land is set . . . where a marriage amongst people of the farming class takes place it is purely a matter of business with no 'foolish sentiment' attached".<sup>88</sup> While the match/dowry system may seem "a degraded sale of human beings", at least one perceptive commentator underlined the fact that "to the people engaged in it no such idea occurs. Each side is really endeavouring to make the best possible arrangement for the future of a household and family".<sup>89</sup>

There is no doubt that this entire system could have been elaborated without any intervention by the priests, in a purely secular setting, but it was not. The priests played a very important part in the process, or rather a series of parts in each stage of the system. From an early age, in school and in the chapel itself, boys and girls were kept apart,<sup>90</sup> so as to avoid the deadliest "occasion of sin" in the Irish canon, the possibility of sexual pleasure. Week after week, in the Sunday sermon, and especially in the special missions conducted by preaching orders such as the Redemptorists, the priests "thundered against the dangers of sex".<sup>91</sup> The quasi-orgiastic pattern days and the much more

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88. Ryan, Pope's Green Island, p. 83; cf., Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 221; Birmingham, Lighter Side of Irish Life, pp. 150-55; and the old Kerryman who described marriage as "just a business like buying or selling a farm", cited by Connell, "Peasant Marriage: Structure & Development", p. 503

89. Birmingham, Lighter Side of Irish Life, pp. 154-55

90. To this day, sexual division of the congregation still continues in some parts of Ireland: men and women sitting either side of the aisle.

91. Sean O'Faolain, "Love among the Irish" (1954), cited by Connell, "Catholicism & Marriage", p. 137. A Jesuit manual of Moral & Pastoral Theology (1938) declared that "it is grievously sinful in the unmarried to deliberately procure or accept even the smallest degree of venereal pleasure" (cited, ibid., p. 137)

chaste crossroads dances declined after the Famine under clerical interdiction. By the end of the century, the story of the priest armed with his sturdy blackthorn chasing and beating couples caught "keeping company" in his domain was commonplace around the country.<sup>92</sup>

It would be absurd to pretend that the priests constructed and enforced this code of sexual repression out of personal malice. They did, it must be admitted, have some personal and corporate stake in the match/dowry system, since the priest's "wedding gift", sometimes calculated "in ratio to the number of acres or the stock the parties possess",<sup>93</sup> could represent a significant proportion of parochial income, and some priests were not above setting their hand to match-making for their own nieces and nephews.<sup>94</sup> But the Church's success in this area of "faith and morals" rested upon the degree to which the moral guidance coincided with the direction in which the farming community was already moving. The Irish Church's version of the Pauline code involved a curious doctrinal contradiction, since it required a formal aversion to one aspect of Catholic family policy -- the sanctity and value of the family for procreation and propagation of the faith -- in favour of the

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92. Connell, "Catholicism & Marriage", pp. 138-42; Ryan, Pope's Green Island, pp. 78-9. Frank O'Connor is probably the best literary witness to the strain of repression in Irish Catholicism.

93. Ryan, Pope's Green Island, p. 82

94. In 1843, T. Chisholme Anstey, an English Catholic, told the Vatican that "it is a vulgar and proverbial saying throughout Ireland that the best and richest matches are to be had with the kindred of priests and that their farms are certain to be well stocked and furnished"; cited by Larkin, "Devotional Revolution", p. 634. Cf., the remarks to the same effect collected by the Irish Folklore Commission and cited by Connell, "Peasant Marriage: Structure & Development", pp. 504-5

more direct, material goal of the farmers, namely the sanctity of the farm and the provision of an heir. This particular Irish Pauline code, the sternest in the western world, offered religious justification and moral sanction for the demographic behaviour required by the post-Famine reconstruction of the agrarian economy in the likeness of the strong farmer.

### Moral Authority: Political Power

The Catholic Church was the only organisation whose cadre covered the entire country in a dense network throughout the nineteenth century, and it was the organised expression of the religious beliefs of the overwhelming majority. These were the fundamental structural sources of its strength. The Church's principal task is to safeguard the salvation of the souls of the faithful. Since this world is a minefield of "occasions of sin", the priest must intervene, to the best of his ability, in ever-wider circles, in order to provide proper guidance to the laity. Thus, from education to politics to everyday life, the priest was a ubiquitous influence. But the choices made by the Church as a whole, and by most priests, were never simply Catholic: they were not neutral as to class. The Church clove consistently to a programme of moderate reformism, in its own corporate interests and on behalf of its crucial devotional and financial base. In the light of the grave

shortage of more explicit evidence, it must be repeated that this proposition is hypothetical rather than definitive -- let it be stated, that the Church tied its fortunes, principally, to the rising class, to the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.<sup>95</sup>

The authority of the Church worked on several levels. Globally, the corporate structure of the Church, especially as it became centralised after the adoption of the rules passed by the Synod of Thurles requiring public unanimity of all clergy, meant that priests in Donegal and Wexford tended to share a uniform point of view. Moreover, if it is the case, as seems most probable, that the priesthood was mainly recruited from the sons of farmers and merchants, then their doctrinal unity was reinforced by a common class outlook. At the level of the individual parish, of course, clerical influence was subject to several factors, including the personal piety of the priest, the extent to which he sympathised with and expressed the interests of his flock and, even under Cullenite centralism, the character, piety and politics of his bishop.<sup>96</sup> Behind the variations, however, some common features characterised the priesthood as a whole.

The priests enjoyed both formal and informal power . Not unnaturally, the distinctions between them could often become blurred in practice. The basic formal power of the priest was sacerdotal; he was

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95. This proposition is most boldly advanced by Larkin, "Church, State & Nation", p. 1253 and n.

96. See, for instance, the analysis by Ó Fiaich, "Clergy & Fenianism", esp. pp. 97-103

the laity's link with heaven, their pastoral leader and spokesman, the definitive authority in matters of "faith and morals". With the spread of the National School system along denominational lines, the priest-manager directed the education of the children and thereby indirectly guided the attitudes of their parents. The extraordinary piety of the laity, which was the principal manifestation of the devotional revolution, gave the priest a captive audience every Sunday. And during the rest of the week, the priest's freedom from productive toil allowed him the opportunity to exercise both formal and informal powers, to visit his parishioners and counsel them, in temporal as easily as in spiritual matters. Part of the priest's informal authority may have rested on a very narrow basis, on his standing as the first literate man in the relatively restricted social order of the rural community. This aspect of the priest's powers seems to have been in Kickham's mind, behind his desire to insult, when he diagnosed clerical arrogance -- "the farmer's son who looked with awe upon the village despot . . . finds himself suddenly metamorphosed into an object of reverence; finds those who looked down upon him ready to court and flatter him. It should be a strong head that this could not turn".<sup>97</sup> The point may also be confirmed in a negative sense by noting that the Church's successes in the educational field accelerated the spread of literacy and encouraged

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97. Cited by O'Leary, Recollections, ii, p. 114 (from Irish People, 1864); it is worth recalling that the Fenians' main anti-Church spokesman was Kickham, the most devout Catholic in the leadership of the IRB!

the rise of the literate laity which could, and in the 1880s did, challenge the authority of the priest.

The blending of sacerdotal and social authority had some distinctively positive aspects. When Daniel O'Connell recruited the priests as his campaign managers in the struggle for Emancipation, he actually created a dual role for them. On the more obvious level, they were local agents for a mass movement which undoubtedly remained centralised in O'Connell's hands. But the other aspect of the priest's task was exemplified by James Doyle, Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, prolific pamphleteer and polemicist, who appeared before a number of parliamentary inquiries in the 1820s and 1830s as the authoritative and representative spokesman, the tribune, for his people. This pattern was repeated time and again down through the nineteenth century. In fact, the priests ceased to be simply spokesmen, passive conduits for the thoughts and demands of others. Their formal sacerdotal powers and their informal social standing were not infrequently augmented by very real economic and political powers which derived from their direct participation in the development of the agrarian economy.

Despite the attempts to regularise, and restrain, the business activities of the clergy, which had aroused some scandalised comment in the early decades of the nineteenth century, attempts which were a significant element of the decrees adopted by the Synod of Thurles and again by the second National Synod, held at Maynooth in 1875, the

farmer-priest was not unknown.<sup>98</sup> Most of these priests were discreet enough to vest their holdings, nominally or in reality, in the hands of relatives, but one notorious clerical businessman was quite brazen -- the priest in Galway City who owned the Lough Corrib Steam Company and served as President or Chairman of the Town Corporation, the Gas Company, the Mechanics' Institute and the Commercial Society.<sup>99</sup> In the later stages of the century, during the transitional phase when the Ascendancy's powers were clearly on the wane after the Land War, the clergy frequently played leading roles in pursuit of their conception of economic development and social reform. In many cases, they were co-opted by the state as the "natural leaders" of their communities, to manage the activities of the Congested Districts Board, to co-ordinate local government reforms and, of course, to direct education.<sup>100</sup> In the case of the co-operative movement, however, the clergy played a more complex, equivocal role which tends to further substantiate the essential proposition that they were a fraction of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. The evidence recently adduced by Liam Kennedy strongly suggests that, apart from one or two notable exceptions, very many of

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98. On the synodical decrees, see T. P. Cunningham, "Church Reorganisation", in Corish, ed., History of Irish Catholicism, v, fasc. vii; also, Larkin, "Economic Growth", pp. 863, 866

99. Norman, Church & Ireland in Rebellion, pp. 16-17

100. Micks, Account of the Congested Districts Board; Digby, Horace Plunkett; Miller, Church, State & Nation; Kennedy, "Church & Economic Growth", pp. 53-4; Akenson, Irish Education Experiment



the parochial clergy were actively or tacitly opposed to the co-operative movement, for the best of reasons. Politically, co-operation was tainted with the appearance of being a Unionist plot, part of the strategy of "killing Home Rule with kindness". More fundamentally, co-operation harboured an implicit threat to the economic position of the merchants, and Kennedy suggests that "considerations of social status, revenue and kinship" tended to bind the priests more closely to the merchants than to the small-holders who stood to gain most from a full-scale co-operative movement.<sup>101</sup>

The development of the Church's everyday influence in the fields of education, moral instruction, social policy and economic activity, bolstered by the tradition of clerical political activism which had been formalised by O'Connell, founded upon the general reluctance of the laity to dispute the Church's authority in its own sphere of competence, and, finally, as we shall see, maintained by adroit turns in the political arena, produced the Orangeman's nightmare. Home Rule did mean Rome Rule, but only within definite limits. On the one hand, the Church's pretensions are enormous. They were clearly stated, for instance, when Bishop Kinane explained, in 1935, that since the bishops are "divinely constituted authoritative teachers in faith and morals", each bishop's "authority includes the right to determine when faith and morals are involved, so that one cannot evade his authority by

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101. Liam Kennedy, "The Early Response of the Irish Catholic Clergy to the Co-operative Movement", IHS, XXI, (1978), pp. 55-74

the pretext that he has gone outside his own proper sphere". However arrogant, Dr. Kinane was at least logical -- "accordingly . . . subjects should not oppose their bishop's teaching in any way".<sup>102</sup> But it would be flagrantly dishonest to end on this note, for the Church's pretensions have almost always been tempered by an extraordinarily finely-tuned understanding of the limits to clerical power. In Ireland, those limits have been principally defined by the development of the other forces and forms of organisation which arose during the rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. The economic and political struggles for control of the land, the essential means of production, and for national independence generated secular social and political leadership from among the ranks of the farmers and merchants, parallel to the existing spiritual leaders, with whom the bishops and priests had to contend and come to terms.

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102. Cited by Akenson, A Mirror to Kathleen's Face, pp. 93-4

CHAPTER SIX  
AGRARIAN CLASS WAR: STRUGGLE  
FOR THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION

Surveying the Primrose Path

Parnell: "Are the people greatly interested in the land?"  
Kickham: "I am only afraid that they would go to the  
gates of hell for it!"<sup>1</sup>

The Fenian leader's fearful reply is an apt acknowledgement of the central importance of land in Irish class struggles, a demotic version of Marx's observation that "the land question has hitherto been the exclusive form of the social question". It will be useful to start by repeating the basic terms of the contradiction on the land. In the 1870s, fewer than eight thousand landed proprietors owned the bulk of the means of production; the land was occupied and worked by some 600,000 tenants, but most of it was in the hands of the 160,000 strong farmers who held

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1. Charles Stewart Parnell: the Protestant landowner of American-Anglo-Irish descent who led the Irish parliamentary party and most of the national movement throughout the 1880s. Charles Joseph Kickham: President of the Supreme Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood; intransigent, deaf, author of an important and popular novel of country life (Knocknagow). Their conversation was recorded by R. Barry O'Brien, The Life of Charles Stewart Parnell, (2 vols., New York: Harper & Bros., 1898), i, p. 183; cf., Palmer, Land League Crisis, pp. 110-11; Pomfret, Struggle for Land, p. 118

thirty or more acres. By 1921, when Ireland's (partial) independence was finally recognised by the Imperial parliament, most of the land had changed hands. The tenants had become proprietors; the landowners had been expropriated, albeit with generous compensation. The central contradiction was resolved in favour of the tenants, and particularly, in favour of the strongest forces among them. This chapter will examine how the farming wing of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie won the class war for control of the means of production.

That victory was the outcome of a long process of agrarian class struggle, in a variety of forms, pursuing different immediate or medium-term goals, often inventive and increasingly complex. One essential prize underpinned all agrarian conflict -- access to the land, possession of the means of production and survival. The task of this chapter is to trace the invention and discovery of the strategies and tactics, the forms of organisation and sources of leadership with which the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie conducted, and eventually won, the basic economic contest for the land.

One critical feature of this analysis is to distinguish old from new, to relate the changing forms of agrarian class struggle to the more fundamental transformations underway in the rural class structure, especially during the post-Famine period. The focal point is the Land War of 1879-82 which, after the Famine, was the second qualitative advance for the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. There were, inevitably,

apparent anachronisms in the conduct of the Land War. It was the culmination of a long process, in which new liquor was distilled from old wines, innovations super-imposed upon a tradition which had been in ferment for a century. Novel styles of struggle co-existed with much older tactics. This combination had a dual significance. On the one hand, the old forms of struggle were retained, even after the conditions which had engendered them had been largely superseded, partly at least because they embodied a folk-memory and a moral sanction which the new had not entirely displaced. The other aspect is the main issue, for the new and the old tended to express contradictory class forces within the united front which bound all tenants together in the confrontation with the landowners.

In order to arrive at a coherent analysis of the Land War, it will be necessary to examine two aspects of the land question before that climactic struggle. The first is the long and violent story of agrarian terrorism. This topic is important on two distinct levels. In the first place, agrarian terrorism was a traditional school for proletarian activists; and secondly, the decline of terrorism in the post-Famine decades is a sharp reminder of the losses inflicted on the rural working classes by the Famine, and by extension, a negative register of the gains made by the petty-bourgeois farmers. The second major element in the land question was the thorny problem of "tenant-right", a complex

structure of quasi-legal forms and customary usages which hedged about the landowner's legal rights and prerogatives. Both terrorism and tenant-right must be considered as antecedent steps towards the Land War.

There is, finally, an aspect of the agrarian class struggle which has already been broached, in Chapter Four's discussion of the discrepancy between the rack-renting theory and and general practice of the landowners. As the class struggle on the land intensified the facts of the matter probably became less and less relevant. Indeed, it probably mattered not whether the farmers or their spokesmen actually believed in their own depiction of the landowners: the point was that the rack-renting theory was primarily an ideological weapon, which was employed with impressive skill. It may be proposed, in fact, that the farmers won the battle in the ideological arena long before they succeeded in expropriating the landowners.

#### Agrarian Terrorism: Pre-Famine Rural Syndicalism

The most elementary form of class struggle in the Irish countryside was the variety of activities defined by the government as "agrarian outrage", those "crimes" which were "directly traceable to some specific motive connected with land".<sup>2</sup> This form of activity

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2. This definition was provided for the House of Commons by Chief Secretary Balfour in 1887: 1887, (140), lxviii, p. 25

enjoyed a very long tradition -- between the 1760s and the Famine, agrarian disaffection and the attendant outrages were endemic, and they re-appeared sporadically down to 1919-20, at least.<sup>3</sup> The struggles undertaken in this way sometimes assumed insurrectionary proportions, though more often in the overheated imagination of the government and the landed gentry than in the actual practice of the agrarian secret societies. Agrarian terrorism involved a wide range of activity, engaged in by dozens of picturesquely-named local groups, for what seemed to be disparate goals. In fact, however, there were some common strands in the apparent confusion.

The activities, goals or demands, and forms of organisation adopted by the agrarian terrorists point to two main conclusions. The activity and the heroism were collective rather than individual: "Rory of the Hills" and "Captain Rock" were organisational pseudonyms. And secondly, while appeals to abstract justice can be found in the secret societies' oaths and lists of demands, the principles of retributive justice which they actually pursued tended to be very concrete. The general picture of agrarian terrorism can be drawn quite accurately because, although the terrorists were seldom literate men, they caused

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3. The final resurgence of these old conceptions of direct-action agrarian struggle, in the cattle-driving and pasture-ploughing which erupted in Connacht in the early stages of the Black & Tan War, was aimed at the redistribution of the large grazing farms. The IRA, acting on behalf of Sinn Fein and in the name of national unity, sternly repressed the movement; the leading position of the strong farmers was confirmed. Ernie O'Malley's remarks, in On Another Man's Wound, (London: Rich & Cowan, 1936) and The Singing Flame, (Dublin: Anvil Books, 1978), are no less instructive for being elliptical.

the government sufficient alarm to require investigation by the inevitable series of parliamentary inquiries. Fortunately, the main themes in the evidence which had been gathered down to about 1830 were published in a valuable summary.<sup>4</sup> During four of the eight decades preceding the Famine, the agrarian secret societies had been particularly active. In the 1760s, much of Munster was virtually under siege by the Whiteboys,<sup>5</sup> the name derived from their night-riding habit of a white shirt worn over their clothes and the name which became a generic term for all agrarian terrorists. There was another near-uprising in the 1780s; and from 1816 to 1820, the secret societies were active across wide areas of Munster and Leinster. Finally, in the early 1830s, the activities of the Terry Alts in Galway and Clare "led the gentry to abandon their homes, the magistrates to call for an insurrection act, and the peasantry to believe that they might divide the land among themselves".<sup>6</sup> But it must be said that this was probably the last time that the agrarian terrorists "were able to control sizeable areas of rural Ireland for considerable periods of time".<sup>7</sup>

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4. George Cornwall Lewis, On Local Disturbances in Ireland, (London: B. Fellowes, 1836)

5. See R. E. Burns, "Parsons, Priests & People: The Rise of Irish Anti-Clericalism", Church History, XXXI, (1962), pp. 3-15; J. S. Donnelly, Jr., "The Whiteboy Movement, 1761-65", IHS, XXI, (1978), pp. 20-54; Lee, "The Ribbonmen" and Maureen Wall, "The Whiteboys", both in Williams, ed., Secret Societies, pp. 13-35, 26-35

6. R. B. McDowell, Public Opinion & Government Policy in Ireland, 1801-46, (London: Faber & Faber, 1952), p. 144

7. Galen Broeker, Rural Disorder & Police Reform in Ireland, 1812-36, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 137



Whiteboys appeared, at various times, across most of the country, under a score of different names -- Blackfeet, Shanavasts, Canavets, Black Hens, Lady Clares, Magpies, Riskavallas, Terry Alts, Rockites, Oakboys, Peep o' Day Boys,<sup>8</sup> and Hearts of Steel.<sup>9</sup> The very multiplicity of names underlines a couple of significant features of these organisations. On the one hand, they were local bodies, seldom having more than the most tenuous regional links and even less frequently co-ordinated beyond their immediate area. Secondly, the prevalence of the conditions which gave rise to agrarian terrorism produced similar bodies in many areas. The actual organisation of the secret society seems to have followed an almost invariable model. One or more local leaders enrolled others, usually cottiers, labourers or small

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8. The Peep o' Day Boys were a Northern Protestant organisation, both agrarian and sectarian, fighting both for tenants' rights and against Catholic tenants and their organisations; the name came from their practice of raiding their enemies' homes at dawn. Hereward Senior, Orangeism in Ireland & Britain, 1795-1836, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 7-18, argues that the Peep o' Day Boys evolved into the Orange Order; this claim is disputed by Peter Gibbon, "The Origins of the Orange Order & the United Irishmen", Economy & Society, I, (1972), pp. 134-63 and in his The Origins of Ulster Unionism, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), pp. 22-43

9. The Hearts of Steel, based on the Donegall estates in Antrim & Down, were responsible for one of the most spectacular "outrages -- "Numbers of the former tenants, neither able to pay the fines nor the rents demanded by those who, on payment of fines and fees, took leases over them, were dispossessed of their tenements, and left without means of subsistence. Rendered thus desperate, they maimed the cattle of those who had taken their land, committed other outrages, and to express a firmness of resolution, called themselves Hearts of Steel. To rescue several of their number, confined on a charge of felony in Belfast, some thousands of peasants . . . marched with the Steelmen into the town, and received the prisoners from the military guard . . ." -- Lewis, Local Disturbances, p. 35

farmers' sons like themselves. Recruits were bound to the organisation by an oath, more or less specific as to goals; and recruits would, in turn, attempt to engage their neighbours. The principal functions of the oath were to bind the members to secrecy and to commit them to attend at the summons of "the captain".

These organisations may be called "terrorist" because they enforced their will by applying a primitive form of "red terror", aimed at ensuring discipline in their own ranks and compliance among their class enemies. In effect, there was a scale of activity, three levels of sanction. The most common was the proclamation of intent, a combination of threat, edict and demand, which laid down the law according to the usually immediate needs of the people whom the terrorists actually or ostensibly represented. The delivery of the warning or threatening notice seldom involved mass participation, but since it was a criminal offence in the eyes of the authorities, a prima facie case of combination and intimidation, its effectiveness depended upon two factors. The secret society needed the residual complicity of many or most people in the "disturbed" area, and they had to have the capacity to punish those who chose to refuse the demands and disregard the threats. In many areas, that capacity certainly existed. From the 1760s to the eve of the Famine, the government's apprehension about the agrarian terrorists was based upon their ability to mass for night-riding, stock-driving, levelling of fences, attacking and burning houses or physically assaulting those who

transgressed; and upon the amount of mass support or complicity they enjoyed, which was measured by the frequency with which the government was simply unable to find witnesses who were prepared to risk testifying against the secret societies.

The second stage was the advance to attacks on property. Fences were pulled down, whence the original Whiteboys of Munster were also called Levellers. As late as 1844, "bawn" or good pasture was dug up at night by massed cottiers in search of potato-ground. Stock-driving, to clear the land engrossed by graziers and free it for tillage, or more commonly, the destruction of livestock by "houghing" or maiming, were common tactics. Offenders against Captain Rock's law sometimes lost more than pasture or cattle. Homes were burnt down, easily done when most were thatched. Night-riders shot into farmers' houses by way of warning rather than as a serious attempt to kill. Rich farmers, land agents and, very occasionally, landowners suffered raids by terrorists in search of arms. The ultimate sanction, the final level of activity, was, of course, the capacity to injure or kill the terrorists' enemies.

The effectiveness of the secret societies was in inverse proportion to their violent activity -- the terrorist organisation which had to act on its threats was weak. The critical factor was the support or complicity of the community. That relation of mutual confidence, respect, fear and solidarity which often frustrated the efforts of police

and magistrates to prosecute men who were well-known to be active terrorists was based on the degree to which the secret societies acted on behalf of or in the interests of their neighbours. The most characteristic demand of the pre-Famine agrarian terrorists was their aggressive defence of the smallholders' access to the land.<sup>10</sup> Resistance to evictions, deterrence of "land-jobbers" or "grabbers",<sup>11</sup> attacks on grazing land and assertions of various conceptions of tenant-right all served this main purpose. However, there was more to it than simple possession of land, for the struggles often revolved also on the moral and financial terms on which it might be held. In essence, the issue centred on the distribution of the surplus-value realised in agriculture, and the agrarian secret societies were, most often, the organised expression of the class interests of the pre-Famine cottier proletarians.

Thus, even when, as in 1831, the Terry Alts in the west attacked the very idea of rent, striking at the heart of the land question, the underlying class contradiction between the farmers and the cottiers and landless men remained. The essential class basis for agrarian terrorism was most clearly expressed in the struggles they conducted

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10. Lewis, Local Disturbances, stresses this point throughout; e.g., "That the main object of the Whiteboy disturbance is to keep the actual tenant in undisturbed possession of his holding, and to cause it to be transferred at his death to his family, by preventing and punishing ejection and the taking of land over another's head, is proved by a whole body of testimony" (p. 102).

11. The "jobber" or "grabber" was the greedy and ambitious man who would occupy a farm from which another had been evicted; like the "gombeenman" or village usurer, he was the object of universal contempt.

during the difficult decades of the tillage system, from 1815 to 1845. Some of the Whiteboy formations, especially in the more highly developed areas such as the Golden Vale in Limerick, Tipperary and Kilkenny, often posed "pure" proletarian demands -- for higher wages and for job security through the establishment of a crude form of "closed shop" which would exclude "strangers" from work on the farms in the area.<sup>12</sup> But the basic issue, necessarily, was land, in particular the cottier's and labourer's access to conacre for the essential crop of potatoes.<sup>13</sup> In this light, Lewis's definition is the most useful approach to the pre-Famine Whiteboy movement; it was, he suggested, "a vast trades' union for the protection of the Irish peasantry;<sup>14</sup> the object being, not to regulate the rate of wages,<sup>15</sup> or the hours of work, but to keep the actual occupant in possession of his land, and in general to regulate the relation of landlord and tenant for the benefit of the latter".<sup>16</sup> This vision of the agrarian terrorists as trades unionists is most perceptive because it captures the vital class distinction. The apparent convergence

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12. Lewis, Local Disturbances, pp. 102-13

13. Lee, "Ribbonmen", in Williams, ed., Secret Societies, pp. 28-30

14. Lee (ibid., p. 34) stresses the crucial semantic point that in the early nineteenth century "peasant meant labourer and cottier, not farmer. The term was used at the time to distinguish the labourer from the farmer".

15. On this point, Lewis is clearly wrong in two senses. First, this directly contradicts the evidence he had advanced which confirmed that the Whiteboys did fight for higher wages. More serious is the objection based on the analysis in Chapter Two, above, of the potato-nexus, for in the absence of money-wages and employment, potato-ground became, at least in part, a substitution of payment in kind.

16. Lewis, Local Disturbances, p. 99

of the farmers' movement against tithes in the 1830s,<sup>17</sup> and the continuing activities of the agrarian terrorists, who sometimes included the abolition of tithes among their demands, masked the more crucial divergences, the very real contradictions between the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, especially the farmers, and the rural proletarians.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout their existence, the agrarian secret societies remained primarily the organisations of the smallest tenants, cottiers and labourers. They existed to defend the access to the land and the incomes of the "men of no property" against the encroachments of landowners, tithe-proctors, bailiffs, middlemen and strong farmers. The latter were the most usual targets of the attentions of the agrarian terrorists, since the landowners, even when resident on their estates, were seldom the direct and visible cause of complaint. Landowners did not occupy land from which small tenants were evicted. Landowners were often held to be better employers than farmers, most probably because the latter, operating on slimmer profit-margins, could afford neither the gentry's standard of generosity nor their paternalistic assumptions of responsibility.

The Famine significantly reduced the potential for agrarian

17. Patrick O'Donoghue, "Causes of Opposition to Tithes, 1830-38", Studia Hibernica, V, (1965), pp. 7-28; Patrick O'Donoghue, "Opposition to Tithes, 1830-31", Studia Hibernica, VI, (1966), pp. 67-98; Macintyre, The Liberator, pp. 170-88; McDowell, Public Opinion & Government Policy, pp. 144-51; T. A. Jackson, Ireland Her Own, pp. 203-11

18. Clark, "Importance of agrarian classes", p. 29. Lewis also noted the distinction: "the great and organised resistance to tithe in 1831 and 1832 was altogether independent of those [Whiteboy] combinations". Local Disturbances, p. 120

terrorist violence, by sweeping away thousands of the cottiers and labourers who had formed the base for the agrarian secret societies and by leading to a changed status and improved living standards for the remaining rural labourers. But agrarian class struggles did not cease with the decline of the secret societies. The transformation in the rapport des forces in the rural class structure after 1850 involved more than the relative pacification of the countryside. The focus of class contradictions shifted decisively towards the conflict between the landowners and the tenant farmers. The substratum of potential (and sometimes actual) violence persisted, but it was increasingly subordinated to the more sophisticated, gradualist perspective befitting the coming men. Access to land lost ground in favour of demands which were more significant to men whose hold on their farms was generally secure. The main demands focussed on the tenant's share of the surplus-value, in the form of lower rents and higher, more secure values for the "goodwill" element in tenant-right.

"Tenant Right is Landlord Wrong"<sup>19</sup>

Behind the constant struggle between tenants and landowners over the value of rents, the farmers and their spokesmen elaborated a moral position which would stand them in good stead for their later

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19. The epigram is Lord Palmerston's, who also accurately described the House of Commons as "a house of landed proprietors".

victory. The landowner's property rights were eroded through the constant counter-assertion of the tenants' rights to possession. No matter that the putative ancient hereditary right, founded on the extinct Gaelic Brehon legal system, was neither accurate history nor of any real consequence for the future. The farmers' position was based on a combination of material and ideological factors. The rise and spread of broadly democratic conceptions of national freedom, natural justice and property ownership found a receptive soil in the increasing economic strength of the farmers. Their victory -- the translation of alleged ascribed rights into actual possession -- was founded in 1881 and largely accomplished before national independence was won in 1921.

The Tithe War in the 1830s was the most vivid demonstration of the class differences among the Irish tenants; it was, as Clark has put it, "the first national movement in Ireland by and for farmers".<sup>20</sup> The final assault on Irish landlordism was launched fifty years later, in the Land War of 1879-82, from a high ground of positive strength which the farmers had gradually established in the intervening period. The Famine clearances of the cottiers and the post-Famine rising market for Irish pastoral goods were the main social and economic sources of the farmers' strength. There was also an underlying core of steel at the heart of the landlord-tenant relationship, in the variety of forms of "tenant-right", which ranged from the para-legal status

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20. Clark, "Importance of agrarian classes", p. 29



enjoyed by the Ulster Custom in the north to the more furtive practices which were widespread on southern estates.

Tenant-right has a long and very tangled history, but it is possible to identify its most important aspects. They were, essentially, two. It was, first of all, in the indignant word of John Pitt Kennedy, the secretary to the Devon Commission, "a mere purchase of immunity from outrage".<sup>21</sup> In other words, it was the farmer's protection from the unwelcome attentions of the agrarian terrorists; though it must be noted that the insurance policy was not comprehensive since the purchase of the "goodwill" and peaceable possession of a farm did not entail any responsibility towards meeting the most important and pressing needs of the cottiers and labourers, for potato-ground, work and wages. The other element of tenant-right was clearly primary -- it constituted a developing assertion by the tenants of a proprietary interest in their holdings, as against the claims of the landowner.

Neither the precise historical genesis of the Ulster Custom,<sup>22</sup>

21. Kennedy, ed., Devon Digest, i, p. 291

22. Barry O'Brien's was the most specific account. He alleged that the Ulster Custom originated in the "Orders & Conditions of Plantation" issued in 1618-20 for the governance of the Ulster colony and in the subsequent series of transactions whereby the English grantees imported Scottish settlers to occupy their lands in order to prevent the dispossessed natives from drifting back onto the land: The Parliamentary History of the Irish Land Question, (London: Sampson, Low & Co., 1880), pp. 131-201. Much the same story was advanced by James McKnight, a founder-member of the Tenant League in 1850, editor of the Banner of Ulster in the 1850s and the Londonderry Standard in the 1870s, a long-time Presbyterian advocate of the tenants' cause; cf., Whyte, Independent Irish Party, pp. 12, 158-59; McKnight's testimony before the Bessborough Commission -- 1881, (C.2779-I), xviii, pp. 171-75; Palmer, Land League Crisis, pp. 44-5, 48

nor the claim that this northern version was the fons et origo of that province's industrial prosperity,<sup>23</sup> are as significant as the mature assessment that "the long struggle for tenant right suggests rather a claim which was gradually established than a principle admitted from the outset".<sup>24</sup> Behind the struggle and its eventual resolution is the key factor -- what exactly the principle or claim of tenant-right asserted. In a word, Property. The northern situation, because it was more advanced but not qualitatively different, testifies quite sharply to the fact that whenever the tenants won the "right", they had established some claim to possession, to a major encroachment on the absolute, de jure property rights of the landowner. For instance, when a tenant, holding at-will on one of the Downshire estates, wished to "give up quiet and peaceable possession" of his farm, he requested that his relative be installed in his place, on the grounds that the said relative's "late father was the original proprietor of the said farm".<sup>25</sup> That this was not a slip of the pen, but rather a well-founded notion in everyday use in the north, and not infrequently on many southern estates, was amply testified by many witnesses at the Devon Commission inquiry.<sup>26</sup>

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23. A recent version of this claim is B. A. Kennedy, "Tenant-Right before 1870", in Moody & Beckett, eds., Ulster Since 1800: First Series, pp. 39-49

24. Gill, Rise of the Linen Industry, p. 30. A recent study suggests that while the custom was certainly the product of struggle, it was nowhere near as old as Barry O'Brien had claimed, but that it arose in the late eighteenth century as a response to subdivision, high population density and landlord-middleman conflicts in the linen-weaving country: W. H. Crawford, "Landlord-Tenant Relations in Ulster", pp. 20-1

25. Cited by Maguire, Downshire Estates, p. 141 [emphasis added]

26. The evidence was collated in Devon Digest, i, pp. 294-325

William Sharman Crawford, landlord and MP, who was the most prominent and persistent proponent of giving the custom legal sanction, offered this authoritative definition of northern usage -- "it is practically a letting in perpetuity subject to a revaluation of the rent from time to time. Thus every tenant holding under this custom may be considered as a peasant proprietor".<sup>27</sup> In the eyes of the Downshire tenants, "the nub of the Ulster custom of tenant-right . . . was occupancy, and not the contractual relationship with the landlord".<sup>28</sup>

The first formal recognition of the strength of the farmers' position was Gladstone's Land Act of 1870, which legalised the Ulster Custom in that province, recognised similar usages in other parts of the country, and offered the remaining tenants the right to claim compensation for improvements which they had made in the event of "disturbance" or "capricious eviction".<sup>29</sup> Since the conference of the Tenant League in August 1850, the notion of tenant-right had been codified and confused by the adoption of the "Three Fs": "fair rent", "fixity of tenure" and "free sale".<sup>30</sup> The basic flaw in Gladstone's

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27. W. S. Crawford, Depopulation Not Necessary (1849), cited by Pomfret, Struggle for Land, p. 57. Between 1835 and 1852, Crawford introduced no fewer than nine attempts to grant legal recognition to the Ulster Custom. See B. A. Kennedy, William Sharman Crawford, 1780-1861, (unpublished thesis, Belfast: Queen's University, 1953) and "Sharman Crawford on Ulster Tenant Right", IHS, XIII, (1963), pp. 246-53; cf., the definition of Ulster Custom by John Hancock, a land agent in county Armagh, in Devon Digest, i, pp. 294-96, cited by Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, pp. 21-2

28. Maguire, Downshire Estates, p. 143

29. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 204-5

30. See the summary in Whyte, Independent Irish Party, pp. 12-13

Act was its premise. It presumed that the Ulster Custom was the sufficient cause of the north's prosperity and the relative agrarian peace in Ulster -- neither of them indisputable claims. But the Act compounded the error by assuming that the key to the custom was the payment for improvements, that capital was kept in circulation where the outgoing tenant was recompensed for his outlay on the farm. While payment for improvements was a useful stick to beat the Tory/landlord cow,<sup>31</sup> it was very much a secondary matter as far as most farmers were concerned. In the first place, as we have seen, landowners were not inactive in investing capital in fixed improvements to Irish farming. The other, more evident contradiction had been grasped by William Greig, in 1821, who had pointed out that the claim to tenant-right was habitually made even "where no lease existed and where no improvements have been made".<sup>32</sup>

To repeat -- the crux of the matter was occupancy. The form seemed intangible, but it had a very high material value: the cost of the "goodwill" of a farm. Kennedy's definition of goodwill as an insurance policy was never more than partially correct. Incoming tenants certainly purchased peaceable possession, but they paid for the land, in order to obtain the peace. Even on the many southern estates where this principal form of tenant-right was hedged about with

31. The political context of the first Gladstonian land reform, especially its use by Irish nationalists, is extensively treated by Steele, Irish Land & British Politics, passim.

32. Greig, General Report, 1821, p. 169 [emphasis added]

constraints, up to and including the veto-power of the landlord or his agent,<sup>33</sup> the essence of the transaction was a farmer-to-farmer deal. The farmers bought and sold land, acting to the best of their ability as if the land was properly their own. One interesting irony in the failure of the 1870 Act's provisions to meet the tenants' central demands was the fact that the Bright clauses, which had sought to facilitate the outright purchase of their holdings by the tenants, resulted in fewer than 900 sales during the act's ten years of life;<sup>34</sup> this part of the act was "little more than a pious gesture".<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the compensation provisions specifically excluded leaseholders and were toothless in the event that a tenant was evicted for non-payment of rent, the most common occurrence.<sup>36</sup>

In summary, the fatal misunderstanding in this first attempt to provide a comprehensive settlement of the land question lay in the confusion of a generally understood and common English and European practice, namely that an outgoing tenant should be compensated for his capital investment in the farm, with a rather different Irish demand, which was, in effect, for perpetual possession. The problem was in the

33. See the useful account of the variations in tenant-right practices in Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 204-18; also Reports of the Poor Law Inspectors on . . . existing relations between Landlord & Tenant, 1870, (C.31), xiv, pp. 37-192; and Minutes of Evidence of Bessborough Commission, 1881, (C.2779), xvii-xix

34. Hooker, Readjustments of Agricultural Tenure, pp. 56-8

35. Lyons, Ireland since the Famine, p. 146; Lee, Modernisation, pp. 60-1

36. The Bessborough Commission's mandate was to examine the workings of the 1870 Land Act; cf., Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, Chaps. 2-3

grey area where "free sale" and "fixity of tenure" overlapped. The value of the goodwill and the security of tenure tended to be mutually determinant; that is, an incoming tenant would pay a good price for a farm on which he had reasonable prospects of long-term possession, regardless of whether the legal terms of tenure were leasehold or tenancy-at-will. In fact, when the landowners sought to protect themselves from tenants' claims for improvements, under the terms of the 1870 legislation, by issuing leases, these leases themselves became a grievance.<sup>37</sup> The broadly moderate rate of rent-increases and the reluctance of most landowners to evict signified that, in practice, the farmers had made substantial steps towards ensuring "fair rent" and "fixity of tenure". The Land Act of 1870 confirmed the trend by offering partial legal sanction to "free sale".

The act failed, however, to the extent that it avoided the heart of the matter, which lay in the tenants' largely unspoken demands. What they sought, above all, was guaranteed possession of their land. Tenant-right offered a partial safeguard, but it was permanently endangered by the continued existence of the landowner's broad rights to set rents and order evictions. Nor was it simply a question of holding onto the land, for the farmers were bound to be concerned about the terms of their possession, about the share of the surplus-value which they

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37. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 205-10; Donnelly, Landlord and Tenant, pp. 65-9

might anticipate. So long as prices continued buoyant, riding at high levels during the 1860s and 1870s, rents did not make intolerable inroads on the farmer's portion. But when prices started tumbling in the late 1870s, the ground had already been cleared for the final assault. Relatively secure tenure in a period of undoubted prosperity had enabled many farmers to pay their rents and amass profits; and the profitability of pastoral production was of intimate concern to the dealers, traders and shopkeepers who had become more wealthy and more numerous during the boom years. During the Land War, these two main wings of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie came together in defence of their livelihood. They focussed their demands on the issue of "fair rent" -- they waged a highly successful political struggle over a fundamental economic question, for a radical redistribution of the total value created in agriculture. In so doing, however, they inevitably confronted the final basis of the contradiction on the land: "the Irish land question is a social question, the whole agelong fight of the Irish people against their oppressors resolves itself in the last analysis into a fight for the mastery of the means of life, the sources of production, in Ireland. Who would own and control the land?"<sup>38</sup>

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38. James Connolly, "Michael Davitt: A Text for a Revolutionary Lecture", in Owen Dudley Edwards & Bernard Ransom, eds., James Connolly: Selected Political Writings, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), p. 212

The Land War: Heroism and Counter-Revolution<sup>39</sup>

The answer to Connolly's question was provided by the Land Wars, the series of political mobilisations of Irish tenant-farmers from 1879 to 1901, which finally produced the land purchase legislation known as the Wyndham Act of 1903.<sup>40</sup> It is my contention that the definitive movement was the Land War of 1879-82 and that, although the final resolution was deferred for twenty years, the crucial victories were won by the strong farmers under the auspices of the Land League during this first "heroic phase". The Land War may be briefly defined as a political mass movement of the Catholic nation, organised within the formal framework of a united front, under the hegemonic leadership of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

The Land War was triggered by a depression in the agrarian economy. Three wet summers in a row caused serious losses to all the main crops; the potato harvest was particularly hard hit, and then, in 1879, almost destroyed by the recurrence of the blight.<sup>41</sup> In monetary

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39. "Heroism" is the term applied to the first stage of the Land War by F. S. L. Lyons, John Dillon, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 60; Michael Davitt described the disintegration of the Land League in 1881-2 as a "counter-revolution", in Fall of Feudalism, pp. 349, 377-78

40. The land struggle was resurgent most notably in 1885-86 (the Plan of Campaign) and in 1898-1901, when William O'Brien's United Irish League pursued the demands of the western smallholders for the division of the large grazing ranches.

41. Salaman, History & Influence of the Potato, Appendix I, p. 607



terms, the losses in the potato harvest were enormous, from £12.5 millions in 1876 to £3.3 millions in 1879;<sup>42</sup> but the real problem was social, for the potato was still a mainstay of the diet of very many small tenants in the west. These losses were aggravated by two additional problems. The weather had also adversely affected fuel supplies, since almost all western smallholders and many farmers in the rest of the country relied upon dry, windy summers to prepare their turf for the winter. Finally, another crucial factor in the western small-farming economy, earnings from migratory labour on the British harvests, had suffered major losses since 1876.<sup>43</sup> By the summer of 1879, the outlook in Connacht was grim; talk of famine was in the air once again.

While there can be no doubt that the crisis was most grave in Connacht, the whole country was affected. The value of tillage crops fell by nearly £30 millions during 1877-79;<sup>44</sup> butter and livestock prices had fallen by about ten per cent;<sup>45</sup> and worse still, large numbers of the stock taken for sale at the great cattle and sheep fairs at Ballinasloe and

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42. "Grimshaw Papers", 1887, (C.4969), xxvi, pp. 982-88; also cited by Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 187; O'Connor, Parnell Movement, pp. 292-93

43. W. N. Hancock, the leading Irish economist, reported that the migrant workers from Connacht alone lost £250,000 worth of wages in the single year of 1879; cited by O'Connor, Parnell Movement, p. 293; Palmer, Land League Crisis, p. 66. Cf., Ó Gráda, "Seasonal Migration & Post-Famine Adjustment", pp. 72, 76

44. Donnelly, "Agricultural Depression, 1859-64", p. 52; Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 187

45. Barrington, "Review of Prices", pp. 252-53

Banagher remained unsold.<sup>46</sup> Although the depression of 1876-80 was less severe in financial terms, than that of 1859-64, its impact was exacerbated by the fact that it threatened a sharp reversal of the fortunes which farmers had enjoyed since the mid-1860s.<sup>47</sup> During those boom years, many farmers had taken advantage of the expansion of credit facilities; now, at the end of the 1870s, the downturn was reflected in shrinking bank deposits, as many of these farmers were forced back onto their savings to meet debts and rent.<sup>48</sup> Worst of all, in 1878-79, as Gladstone graphically admitted, the eviction notices were again "falling like snowflakes".<sup>49</sup> In short, the material incentives for a major struggle were present in plenty.

What remained was to discover and activate the subjective factors -- and it is abundantly clear that the most important one was the fact that 1879 was a very different year from "Black '47". When Parnell told the tenants, "you must not allow yourselves to be dispossessed as your fathers were dispossessed in 1847",<sup>50</sup> he was calling forth a potent myth. But the tenants he was addressing were, in fact, unlikely to be the sons of men who had been "cleared" during the Famine; the crucial

46. The figures were reported in Thom's Directory, 1885, pp. 692-93

47. Donnelly, "Agricultural Depression, 1859-64", pp. 52-4

48. The Richmond Commission on Agriculture (1881, (C.2778), xv) investigated this question quite thoroughly; cf., Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, pp. 85ff; Clark, "Mobilisation of farmers", p. 487; Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, pp. 71-2

49. Cited by Palmer, Land League Crisis, p. 150

50. From Parnell's speech at Westport, county Mayo, June 8, 1879, his first intervention in the land struggle; quoted by Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 154

basis for the Land War was the transformations which had occurred in the rural class structure since 1847. The tenants were no longer cottiers. Even in the west, where over-population, uneconomic small-holdings and some reliance upon the potato persisted, the tenants were small farmers. Furthermore, the penetration and expansion of the commodity economy throughout the countryside and the massive growth of the Church meant that farmers everywhere, large and small, were bound together by ties of commercial relations and provided with an organised and disciplined clerical leadership. Most important of all, the hegemony of agricultural production and the integration of farmers and merchants, of town and country, were clearly reflected in the numerous descriptions of the depression in 1879. William O'Brien, a former member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) who was to become Parnell's right-hand man in the agrarian and nationalist movements throughout the 1880s, reported from Mayo to the Freeman's Journal, in August 1879, that "all manner of men of all manner of opinions . . . agreed . . . that the farming classes, and with them the shopkeepers of this county, are passing into and not out of a crisis unparalleled since the Famine".<sup>51</sup> James Daly, proprietor and editor of the Connaught Telegraph, a journal which played a catalytic role in organising the early stages of the agitation in the west, underlined the link between the farmers and

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51. Cited by Palmer, Land League Crisis, p. 70; cf., Bew, Land and the National Question, pp. 56-7

merchants: "In Ireland trade depends altogether on its agricultural class, and now that they are reduced to such extremities the consequence is that the business portion of the population are, if not in a worse, certainly in as bad a position, as those upon whom they must depend".<sup>52</sup> Finally, to broaden the spectrum, listen to the comments of Bishop Nulty of Meath, the richest pastoral diocese in the country -- "I never remember to have seen such a depression in trade and such universal poverty among the farming and grazing classes".<sup>53</sup> Throughout the winter of 1879-80, similar reports became increasingly common from all over Ireland. The fact that the depression at the end of the 1870s was not the worst since 1847 is essentially beside the point, for the central factor was the unanimous consciousness of crisis. The key advance was to provide the organised expression and strategic leadership which would translate that consciousness into a mass movement.

The successful accomplishment of this task inevitably took the form of a united front, involving several distinct forces which may be readily identified. The fundamental alliance, emphasised by Clark and Lee,<sup>54</sup> was the political and social expression of the identity of economic interests of the two main wings of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, the farmers and merchants. Even the western activists who initiated and

52. Cited by Clark, "Social Composition of the Land League", p. 450

53. Cited by Larkin, Church and State, p. 16, with several similar comments by other bishops.

54. Lee, Modernisation, pp. 97-9; Clark, "Social Composition of the Land League", passim.

organised the most famous of the early mass meetings, that at Irish-town in county Mayo in April 1879, clearly embodied this alliance. They included two tenant farmers, two shopkeepers, a commercial traveller, a strong farmer's son, another farmer's son turned building contractor, the Mayo agent and auditor for a large Dublin milling company, a barrister who held 7,000 acres of farmland, a schoolteacher, and James Daly, who described himself best: 'I pay rent to four landlords. I am a newspaper proprietor by accident; farming is my forte'.<sup>55</sup>

It is essential to stress that the majority of the tenants in Connacht who provided the mass support for the initial agitation during the spring and summer of 1879 were small farmers, because when, in October 1879, the National Land League of Ireland was established in Dublin, after the spread of the movement into Munster and Leinster, those provinces introduced a significantly distinctive element into the struggle. That inaugural meeting in Dublin was preceded by negotiations between Davitt and the Connacht men on the one side, and Parnell and A. J. Kettle on the other. The latter spoke for the partially moribund parliamentary structures of the Home Rule organisation and for the

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55. In order: James Daly and Daniel O'Connor, John O'Kane and Thomas Sweeney, J. W. Walshe, P. W. Nally, Matthew Harris, Thomas Brennan, J. J. Loudon, J. P. Quinn, and James Daly of the Connaught Telegraph. The sources for biographical information include: Lee, Modernisation, pp. 67-70, 94-99; Clark, "Social Composition of the Land League", pp. 458-60; Bew, Land & the National Question, pp. 237-45; Mark Ryan, Fenian Memories, (Dublin: Gill & Son, 1946), pp. 35-39; Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, pp. 146-47; John Devoy, "Michael Davitt's Career", Gaelic American, (17 parts: June-November 1906); Henry Boylan, Dictionary of Irish Biography, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1977)

older, pre-Land War Tenants' Defence Associations and Farmers' Clubs, which had existed intermittently since the days of the Tenant League in 1849-50. It is necessary to underline, once more, that these bodies represented primarily the interests of the strong farmers, the cattlemen and graziers on the better lands in Munster and Leinster. As Paul Bew has recently indicated, these men had their own incentive for joining a movement which had been initiated by men whom they distrusted around a mass base with which they would otherwise have had little in common: they were facing stiff competition from American cattle exporters in the crucial British market and, according to one account, the value of their stocks had fallen by as much as £15 millions in 1879-80.<sup>56</sup> The result of the rapprochement between the western radicals and the central moderates was a "reasonable compromise" -- the new national organisation would focus its activities towards winning legal reforms through parliament and the strong farmers' organisations would be absorbed en bloc into the Land League.<sup>57</sup>

Before passing to our analysis of how the Land War was conducted in the field, it is important to complete the examination of the

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56. Bew, Land & the National Question, pp. 54-5 (citing the report of the Mansion House Relief Committee, 1880); on the background, see Whyte, Independent Irish Party, pp. 5-6 & passim; Thornley, Isaac Butt, pp. 31, 69-75, 192; Lee, Modernisation, pp. 39-40; Clark, "Importance of agrarian classes", p. 32; Clark, "Mobilisation of farmers", pp. 494-95

57. Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, pp. 68-70, 168, 170; Clark, "Mobilisation of farmers", p. 495; Bew, Land & the National Question, pp. 70-72

constitution of the united front. There were two extra elements: the Fenians and the clergy. The significance of the Fenians may be clearly seen in the fact that five of the eleven men listed as principal figures in the Irishtown meeting (above, p. 318n.) were members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Michael Davitt, whose energy and commitment was a decisive driving force impelling forward the agrarian agitation in the west, was only provisionally free on a "ticket of leave" from a gaol-sentence which he had been serving for Fenian gun-running in the north of England. Finally, while the Land League was definitely very distinct from the IRB, and almost certainly not what had been in the minds of the Fenian leaders who were present at the creation,<sup>58</sup> it would be a grave underestimation to disregard John Devoy's claim that though the agrarian movement "evolved on its own lines . . . Mayo Fenianism had the lion's share in starting it, and the rank and file of the organisation, outside of the cities, were the men who made it a power in the land".<sup>59</sup> At least five executive officers of the Land League (Davitt, Thomas Brennan, Patrick Egan, P. J. Quinn and Joseph Biggar), another half-dozen members of the League's original central committee, and some of the League's key organisers (notably, Matt Harris, John

58. This is the important controversial question of the "New Departure". The canonic study is by T. W. Moody, "The 'New Departure' in Irish Politics, 1878-9", in H. A. Cronne et al., eds., Essays in British & Irish History in Honour of James Eadie Todd, (London: Frederick Muller, 1949), pp. 303-33; other recent contributions include the relevant section in F. S. L. Lyons, Charles Stewart Parnell, (London: Oxford University Press, 1977); Bew, Land & the National Question, pp. 49-54, 72-3; Lee, Modernisation, pp. 72-9

59. Devoy, "Davitt's Career", xii, Gaelic American, (Sep. 8, 1906) p. 5

Walsh, P. W. Nally, and P. J. Leonard) were active or former IRB men.

The final distinctive force within the Land League was the Catholic clergy. As the intensity of the crisis in the winter of 1879-80 led to a mounting level of land agitation, the priests were gradually drawn into the movement. Cynically, the clergy's motive could be ascribed to the explanation given to Rome by Bishop MacEvilly of Tuam, who reported that since "some dishonest trading Politicians . . . acting on the credulity of our artless people, have managed to gather them together at large meetings . . . it has been deemed prudent for the priests to formulate the restlessness at meetings in the interest of order and religion, to take the lead and keep Godless nobodies in their place"; and, he continued, the key to the situation was that "whether the priests will it or not, the meetings will be held . . . if the priests keep aloof, these meetings will be scenes of disorder; if the priests attend they will keep the people attached to them".<sup>60</sup> This position should be contrasted with Archbishop Croke's outright refusal of the idea that the clergy should "play the part of policemen and peace-makers for the government".<sup>61</sup> Even allowing for internal differences of political position and attitude towards the agrarian movement within the Church, it is not necessary to adopt the jaundiced view. By the time

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60. Cited by Larkin, Church and State, p. 29

61. Ibid., p. 52



of the enlarged Land League conference held in April 1880, the clergy were deeply involved. The reason was elementary. Priests led many branches of the Land League because, like the secular businessmen, they had a direct and continuing interest in the prosperity of the farmers and because they shared much of the basic social and national formation and outlook of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.<sup>62</sup>

More systematic evidence of the class interests represented by the Land League can be found in Dr. Clark's analysis of the arrests of local leaders under the provisions of the Protection of Person and Property Act of 1881, the coercion legislation which was "used specifically to intern individuals involved in the land agitation".<sup>63</sup> Nearly 70 per cent of the total number of people arrested (655 out of 955) can be clearly identified as belonging to the rural and urban wings of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie -- farmers, farmers' sons, traders and business proprietors, innkeepers and publicans, teachers and journalists.<sup>64</sup>

Two important groups were significantly under-represented among the internees: priests and workers. Why was only one priest arrested, given that they certainly did play an important role in the League? "The unwillingness of priests to advocate violence, and the embarrassment

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62. See the delightfully naive description of an inaugural meeting in Peadar Ó Laoghaire, Mo Scéal Féin (My Story), (C. T. O Ceirin, trans., Cork: Mercier Press, 1970), pp. 112-15; cf. Kennedy, "Early response of the clergy to the co-operative movement", p. 70

63. Clark, "Social Composition of the Land League", p. 451

64. Ibid., pp. 452-53

caused to authorities by their arrest, constitute sufficient explanation".<sup>65</sup>

The fact that less than fifteen per cent of the internees were workers, who comprised nearly one-third of the labour force,<sup>66</sup> calls for more detailed consideration. It is, in the first place, eloquent negative testimony to the class structure and biases of the Land League. Despite some generous gestures, emanating particularly from Michael Davitt and P. F. Johnson, who called for land-nationalisation, trade unionism for the agricultural labourers and long-overdue improvements in rural proletarian housing, it is clear that the Land League was generally indifferent or unsympathetic to the labourers' interests.<sup>67</sup> But the absence of the working class from the ranks of the Land League should not be misinterpreted for passivity. There had been some attempts, in the 1870s, to establish branches of the British National Agricultural Labourers' Union, particularly in Cork and Limerick.<sup>68</sup> Although the Land League did not represent them, its development seems to have had an influence among the agricultural labourers, for they appear to have adopted the League's tactics to their own struggles. Thus, in the summer of 1881, when very good summer weather promised a fine harvest, at the height of the Land League's power, rural workers

65. Clark, "Social Composition of the Land League", p. 457

66. Ibid., pp. 455-56

67. Cf., Clark, "Importance of agrarian classes", p. 32; and p. 202, supra.

68. P. L. R. Horn, "The National Agricultural Labourers' Union in Ireland, 1873-79", IHS, XVII, (1970-71), pp. 340-52

in county Cork conducted a series of wildcat strikes for higher wages, by organising mass meetings which progressed from farm to farm, putting their demands and calling out the harvest workers.<sup>69</sup> In county Roscommon, during the same year, the League of Associated Herdsmen won a short strike, the main demand of which was for a new pay-scale which testified to the continuing need of the agricultural workers for a piece of land to supplement earnings; their gains were reported by a parliamentary paper: "herds in charge of less than 100 acres receive a house, 2 acres of land and the keep of three cows; those in charge of 100 to 150 acres receive 3 acres of land and 3 cows; and those who have the care of more than 150 acres receive 4 acres of land and 4 cows".<sup>70</sup> The most significant feature of the relations between farmers and their employees was the fact that the workers' main grievance, their squalid housing, was not effectively tackled until after the farmers had won their main gains in the battle for control of the land, and then only as part of a Britain-wide programme of social reform.

In summary, the main constituent forces of the Land League may be identified as having been drawn from the agricultural, commercial and ideological-political<sup>71</sup> strata of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. Once the basic unity of small and strong farmers and country businessmen had

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69. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 238-39

70. Fifth & Final Report of Royal Commission on Labour, 1894, (C.7421), xxxv, pp. 247, 259

71. Fenians and priests were two distinct parts of this stratum, to whom must be added the cadre of professional politicians recruited by Parnell for the parliamentary arena: see below, Chapter Seven, passim.

been formally established, with the creation of the national Land League, the task was to expand the organisation's influence. By the end of 1879, a clear pattern had emerged. Local leaders called a mass meeting, which was addressed by local notabilities and nationally prominent figures such as Parnell, William O'Brien, John Dillon, and Davitt; these events were truly mass meetings, crowds of tens of thousands being quite common. Out of such a meeting, a local branch of the League would be formed which, hopefully, embraced all the tenants in the area, with an executive committee including one or two priests, farmers or shopkeepers with a "good national record", and perhaps a Fenian or two. By the latter half of 1880, the League was holding about 90 meetings each month;<sup>72</sup> and by the end of the year there were, perhaps, as many as one thousand branches, embracing 200,000 or more members.<sup>73</sup> Once the branch had been formed, it would select one or more locally iniquitous landlords, to whom the tenants' demand for a rent-reduction would be presented, in the form of the rents in cash, minus the demanded abatement. "And if they get no reduction", declared Parnell, "then I say that it is the duty of the tenant to pay no rent".<sup>74</sup>

The question of rents, and particularly of Parnell's interesting definition of "fair rent" as "a rent that the tenant can reasonably pay

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72. J. L. Hammond, Gladstone and the Irish Nation, (London: Macmillan, 1938), p. 192

73. Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 301; Palmer, Land League Crisis, pp. 172, 180

74. Cited by Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 168

according to the times",<sup>75</sup> was clearly so central to the Land War that it requires an apparent digression. The main tactical approach was nicely captured in one of T. D. Sullivan's "Lays of the Land League", not great verse but effective doggerel:<sup>76</sup>

That's the word to say  
To end their confiscation;  
Not a cent we'll pay  
But 'Griffith's Valuation'!

Barbara Solow has demonstrated, with admirable rigour, that the appeal to the Griffith Valuation was basically fraudulent. The valuation, which had been conducted between 1852 and 1865, was the official rating of the value of each holding for the purposes of taxation. In theory, it should also have revealed "the net annual value of the holding . . . the fair letting value to a solvent tenant".<sup>77</sup> The most glaring deficiency of the valuation was the fact that the market-price indices which had been employed in the calculation of the net worth of Irish agricultural output were based on 1849-51, three of the most depressed years in the entire century. Thus, during the boom years of the 1870s, the Griffith valuation represented an underestimate of about one-third.<sup>78</sup> When the farmers,

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75. Cited by Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 154; cf., F. S. L. Lyons, "The Economic Ideas of Parnell", Historical Studies, II, (1959), pp. 60-78

76. Cited by O'Connor, Parnell Movement, p. 349

77. Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, p. 60 (the entire analysis occurs at pp. 57-69).

78. *Ibid.*, p. 66. Both Sir Richard Griffith and his successor, John Ball Greene, were well aware of the undervaluation, and they testified to that effect before the Bessborough Commission. Even in the bad years at the end of the 1870s, animal prices still ranged between 70 and 100 per cent above those used for the Valuation; cf., Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 269

then, adopted the Land League strategy of demanding rent reductions to that level, their challenge could not have been said to rest on an "objective" economic standard of the "real value" of the land. But, once more, objective criteria were essentially beside the point; the farmers and their leaders had seized upon a brilliant agitational weapon. Moreover, by focussing on rents, the Land League posed the question which struck at the foundations of the land system by offering what the tenants were prepared to pay for the right to occupy the land.

Having established formal unity and a common demand, the Land League's organisers faced the task of maintaining and enforcing collective solidarity. And it was precisely in the realm of solidarity that the old and the new, terror and persuasion, were most closely interwoven. The outstanding systematic innovation of the Land League was the extensive and highly publicised employment of the boycott; the tactic itself was not entirely novel,<sup>79</sup> but the audacity with which it was applied was. Both Davitt and Parnell argued for this tactic of "moral Coventry" (Parnell) during the winter of 1879-80. Characteristically, Davitt's version was more down-to-earth -- "if such a traitor to your cause enters this part of the country, why, keep your eyes fixed upon him -- point him out -- and if a pig of his falls into a boghole, let it lie

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79. The earlier form, "exclusive dealing", was apparently in quite common use as a form of political pressure during borough elections; Hoppen, "National Politics & Local Realities", (Ms. version), pp. 7-9. There was however, a vital distinction between boycotting at the point of distribution (against shopkeepers) and the boycott at the point of production, when the Land League was able to withdraw all labour and services from its enemies.

there".<sup>80</sup> One function of the mass meeting was to identify these traitors: tenants who treated with the landlord, men who paid the rent, families who dealt with boycotted merchants, electors who voted for the landlord's candidate. Generally, moral force sufficed to maintain solidarity, but occasionally it broke down. An ambitious farmer or mortgage-holder or cattle-dealer who was determined to over-reach himself, and dare public opinion as a "land grabber"<sup>81</sup> or by buying distrained livestock, might be tempted to ignore a League boycott, but his ardour would be cooled if his cattle were maimed, his house or farm buildings burnt to the ground, or his own ear scissored off.<sup>82</sup> The moral force at the League's disposal was not negligible; like the ultimate sanction of violent retribution, it too claimed an honourable tradition. The agrarian terrorists had generally acted from the ground of a conception of justice -- their own, not the state's legal version;<sup>83</sup> and

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80. Cited by Palmer, Land League Crisis, p. 196; cf., Parnell's version, clinical, dispassionate, patrician, and in his own words, "more Christian and more charitable", also cited in ibid., p. 196 and by Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, pp. 236-37

81. Ring the bell! Ring the bell! The landlord oft is bad;  
The agent and his bailiffs are enough to drive one mad;  
But of all the hateful robbers by whom our land is curst,  
Since Cromwell came to plunder us, the grabber is the worst.  
Another of Sullivan's "Lays of the Land League", cited by Palmer, Land League Crisis, p. 176

82. The last was the penalty meted out to a tenant in north-west Cork who defied a League rent-strike and secretly paid his landlord; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 284

83. Lewis, Local Disturbances, pp. 19-101; Lee, "Ribbonmen", in Williams, ed., Secret Societies, pp. 31-33; and the highly coloured, if not entirely imaginary account of a Ribbon "trial", in Trench, Realities of Irish Life, pp. 117-27

during the campaign for Catholic emancipation in the 1820s, the priests and lawyers who ran the local organisation had also found it necessary to establish a sub rosa legal system of land-arbitration "courts".<sup>84</sup>

The tradition of popular justice and the model of the O'Connellite "courts" were re-created by the network of Land League courts, which adjudicated land disputes, determined boycott targets, and punished transgressors -- both those who broke ranks and those who employed too much violence.<sup>85</sup>

Another important tactical element in the Land War which signified the extent of the transformation in the tenants' consciousness of their own organised power, and of their capacity to wield it, was the determined resistance to evictions. Before the landlords resorted once again to "tumbling",<sup>86</sup> it was not uncommon for evicted tenants to be reinstated by the massed forces of the League. In the event that the League was unable to restore an evicted tenant to his farm, the land would be boycotted. The key to successful resistance to evictions lay further back, in the subversion of "due process" through the use of yet another traditional tactic: tenants assembled to prevent the process-servers from delivering the ejectment notices. During the Land War,

84. Reynolds, Catholic Emancipation Crisis, pp. 17-22, 51-55; Macintyre, The Liberator, pp. 44ff.

85. Palmer, Land League Crisis, pp. 160-71; Bew, Land & the National Question, p. 124, indicates that the League tended to discourage these bodies after Timothy Harrington's prosecution in early 1881.

86. One infamous "tumbler", S. M. Hussey, had the tables turned when a body of moonlighters attempted to blow up his house and him in it. He left the country. See his own account, Reminiscences, pp. 194-267



this became a regular guerrilla struggle, especially in the west, where evictions were most frequent.<sup>87</sup>

Behind the open and quasi-constitutional struggles, legal battles,<sup>88</sup> mass meetings and demonstrations, rent strikes and boycotts, there still lurked the final arbiter and last resort in agrarian struggles: the masked and armed supporters of Captain Moonlight. Economic crisis in the ranks of the tenants, especially among small farmers, can be traced in the steady increase in the number of evictions from 1878 to 1880, but as the Land League spread throughout western and southern Ireland, the tenants fought back. Between 1871 and 1877, permanent evictions had averaged about 470 per year; in 1878, 834 were recorded; in 1879, over a thousand and by 1880 the total had nearly doubled, to 1,893.<sup>89</sup> A brief glance at the official records for "agrarian outrages" clearly underlines the relationship between evictions and outrages, and even more sharply, the time-lag. In 1878, the number of outrages was only about eleven per cent above the average for the preceding seven years; in 1879, the number had jumped from 300 to 863; and during the peak years of the Land League's influence the totals were enormous: 2,600 in 1880 and 4,400 in 1881.<sup>90</sup> While

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87. See, for instance, the account of the "battle of Carraroe", a defeat for the process-servers in Connemara, in Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, pp. 198-203

88. Paul Bew's study (Land & the National Question) lays particular and instructive emphasis upon the legalistic conduct of much of the Land League's campaigns.

89. Return of Evictions, 1849-1880, 1881, (185), lxxvii, pp. 726-47

90. Returns of Outrages, 1844-1880, 1881, (C.2756), lxxvii, pp. 887-914; Return of all agrarian outrages, 1881, 1882, (72), lv, pp. 17-20

it is certainly true, as T. P. O'Connor was quick to point out, that many of the reported outrages were essentially trivial,<sup>91</sup> and that most "outrages" were in fact simply Land League proclamations of boycott, there was also a striking increase in the use of violence. Houses and farm-buildings were burnt down, grabbers' cattle were maimed, grabbers and faint-hearted tenants were beaten, shot at or maimed, police and process-servers were attacked -- there can be little question that the Land War was an intense and often brutal struggle. It was, after all, a life and death struggle, since it was about the basic source of survival. And it must be asserted that the tenant-farmers won; in the most immediate sense, the intensification of violent activity, particularly during the winter of 1880-81, achieved its main purpose. The rate of evictions was significantly lowered: of the total of 2,110 evictions carried out in 1880, fewer than 200 occurred during the last three months of the year.<sup>92</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that intimidation, backed up by occasional terrorist attacks, was the factor which decisively tipped the scales for the farmers' more significant long-term victory.

The real novelty of the Land League struggle was the success with which

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91. O'Connor, Parnell Movement, pp. 421-22, cited from the official Returns such "outrages" as "a wooden gate broken up with stones . . . several panes of glass maliciously broken in an unoccupied house . . . a barrel of coal tar maliciously spilled".

92. Hammond, Gladstone & the Irish Nation, p. 192; cf., the very important analysis of the eviction/outrage figures by Lee, Modernisation, pp. 79-85

widespread and democratic quasi-legal activity was, generally at least,<sup>93</sup> co-ordinated with the sub-stratum of traditional recourse to violent agrarian struggle, under a central, nationally-established leadership which comprised both constitutional moderates and Fenian revolutionaries. In short, the principal economic aspect of the contradiction on the land had been given an adequate political form.

An early hint of what was afoot was offered to the government by the Mayo magistrate who reported that the people who gathered to prevent an eviction in November 1879 were "much more determined and earnest than on any former occasion, and much more under the control of the persons directing their movements".<sup>94</sup> Eighteen months later, The Times thundered its approval of the passage of the coercion measure (the Protection of Person and Property Act) as "the overthrow of the system of lawlessness embodied in the Land League, which aspired to, and in August and September last [1880] had succeeded in, establishing a rival Government to that of the Queen throughout the greater part of Ireland".<sup>95</sup> After six months of coercion, Chief Secretary Forster advised Gladstone that the only alternative to the internment of the League's central leadership was to "allow the Land League to govern Ireland, to determine what rent shall be paid, what

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93. There was, inevitably, a resurgence of agrarian terrorism outside the control of the Land League; see, e.g., Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 284-86

94. Cited by Clark, "Social Composition of the Land League", p. 463

95. Cited by Larkin, "Church, State & Nation", p. 1264n.

decision by the commission shall be obeyed, what farms shall be taken, what grass lands shall be allowed, what shops shall be kept open and what laws shall be obeyed".<sup>96</sup> Alarmist these comments may seem, but they sound essentially the right note. The Land League's great achievement, the Land Act of 1881, Gladstone's second attempt to resolve the land question, was the result of a qualitative advance in the developing maturation of the class consciousness of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. The threat, and to a limited degree, the actuality of dual power in the Irish countryside forced the concession of dual ownership, leaving "landlords and tenants confronting one another as sort of bilateral monopolists".<sup>97</sup>

The Land Act of 1881 was frankly devised and passed as a political solution to a political problem. Contemporary or historical critiques which focus upon its deficiencies as an economic policy are fundamentally irrelevant;<sup>98</sup> it is for this reason that Solow emphasises that the measure was proposed "less as an economic policy than as a political stroke".<sup>99</sup> Davitt's assessment is still the best short definition: the farmers had won "a legislative sentence of death by slow processes

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96. Cited by Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 339

97. Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, p. 169

98. The contemporary critiques were written by Arthur MacMurrough Kavanagh, an Irish landowner, as a minority report to the Bessborough Commission, and by Bonamy Price, in a memorandum to the same year's Richmond Commission. The modern historical critique, par excellence, is Barbara Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, esp. Chap. 6, pp. 147-66; cf., Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, pp. 65-7

99. Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, p. 155

against Irish landlordism";<sup>100</sup> even if, as Davitt was obliged to recognise, this was not immediately apparent at the time.

The sixty-two convoluted clauses of the Land Act represented formal recognition of the determination of Irish farmers to achieve the broadest possible interpretation of their "rights". Within certain minor limits, tenants were now free to sell their interest in the occupancy of a farm to the highest bidder; so long as they adhered to the conditions of tenancy, eschewed subdivision and paid the rent, they could not be evicted. Most important of all, the act provided for the establishment of "fair rents" through the county courts, newly-created Land Commission courts or by private negotiation between landlord and tenants.<sup>101</sup> In the abstract, the legislation could appear to have done little more than grant legal sanction to the elements of tenant-right which many farmers already enjoyed in practice. In fact, however, both landlords and tenants were quick to grasp the revolutionary implications of the creation of the rent tribunals. One indication of their importance was the paradoxical fact that the tribunals were given no criteria by which to measure the "fairness" of the rents they were to determine.<sup>102</sup> In the absence of objective economic standards, the real

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100. Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 317

101. The Land Act is usefully summarised by Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, pp. 321-29; Hooker, Readjustments of Agricultural Tenure, pp. 60-63; Palmer, Land League Crisis, pp. 248-62

102. As late as 1898, Lord Justice Walker, in the Court of Appeal, curtly reiterated the complaint which the land commissioners had been making for two decades: "I emphatically decline to give any definition of fair rent". Cited by Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 324

criterion was the balance of class forces, the determination of the tenants versus the resistance of the landlords. The fundamental shift in favour of the tenants was captured in the delightful slip of the tongue with which the clerk announced the first session of the Land Commission: "This Land League court is now declared open".<sup>103</sup>

In the nature of things, the fact that the act was passed in haste and under compulsion, in an essentially futile attempt to balance tenant-right and "landlord wrong", it was virtually inevitable that it would be flawed. The central problem was that two large groups of tenants were excluded from the operations of the act. The first were those who held their land under leases, about one quarter of all tenants or some 150,000 in all; it would require a further sharp decline in agricultural incomes and resurgent land struggle, the "Plan of Campaign", to get the leaseholders admitted to the rent-reduction terms of the legislation.<sup>104</sup> More serious, particularly in the short term, was the provision in the land act which excluded those tenants, as many as 130,000, who had fallen into arrears in rent-payments. Most of the tenants in arrears were small farmers, especially the tenants of small, uneconomic and often very poor land in the overcrowded or

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103. Cited by Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 340

104. Pomfret, Struggle for Land, pp. 246-51; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 308-51; Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, pp. 84-92; F. S. L. Lyons, "John Dillon & the Plan of Campaign, 1886-90", IHS, XIV, (1965), pp. 313-47; L. P. Curtis, Jr., Coercion & Conciliation in Ireland, 1880-92: A Study in Conservative Unionism, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 142-44, 337-43

"congested" areas in the west.<sup>105</sup> These people had suffered heavy losses during the three bad years of wet summers, poor crops, low prices, potato-blight and unemployment in the migratory sector the bulk of their debts was precisely the rent-arrears which they had been able to amass during the rent strikes of 1880-81, when the powers of the Land League had curbed the landowners' temptation to evict for non-payment.<sup>106</sup> As it rapidly became clear that the land tribunals, which were flooded with 22,000 applications for rent-settlements in their first six weeks,<sup>107</sup> were reducing rents by an average of a little over twenty per cent the small farmers had a sharp grievance.<sup>108</sup>

Moreover, the government's internment of virtually the entire central leadership and very many of the local leaders of the Land League effectively destroyed the collective discipline, the social and political cement which had held in balance the non-violent and terrorist tendencies and thus the contradictory class forces which these tended to reflect. Somewhat disingenuously, Davitt argued that "the responsible league leaders now in prison had to some extent checked, where that was

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105. Bew, Land & the National Question, p. 203; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 292-93; Lee, Modernisation, pp. 88-9

106. The landlords' attempts to recover arrears, or to punish by evictions, led to an upsurge of violent attacks in the winter of 1881-82; Bew, Land & the National Question, pp. 206-7

107. Palmer, Land League Crisis, p. 301

108. Bew, Land & the National Question, p. 201; Pomfret, Struggle for Land, pp. 196-200; Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, pp. 174-75 see also, K. T. Buckley, "The fixing of rents by agreement in co. Galway, 1881-85", IHS, VII, (1950-51), pp. 149-79

possible, extreme boycotting. The line was drawn at violent intimidation. Outrages were never encouraged except by eccentric characters or wild men who held no responsible position and exercised no influence".<sup>109</sup>

The winter of 1881-82 was tense and violent. The "wild men", the old-line agrarian terrorists and unreconstructed Fenians came into their own; one famous landowner sardonically remarked that "the landlord shooting season has set in with great briskness in my country".<sup>110</sup>

Coercion encouraged landowners to step up the rate of evictions; once again, the British state and British bayonets were at the service of the Ascendancy. The reaction is most vividly marked in the contrast between the first quarters of 1881 and 1882; in the former year, there were only eight homicides or shootings, a year later, there were thirty-nine.<sup>111</sup>

After six months of serious unrest, violent, sporadic and largely unco-ordinated, compounded by the rush of eligible tenants to the land tribunals and the struggles of the ineligible to obtain relief, the real and titular leaders of their respective nations reached a political compromise. Gladstone released Parnell and the League leaders from gaol; in return, Parnell promised to calm the agrarian struggle and to collaborate with the Liberals in British politics. But the real price was

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109. Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 340 -- the claim that "violent intimidation" was beyond the League's pale is outrageous; plenty of the local and national League leaders indulged in the inflammatory language that was guaranteed to encourage violence.

110. Sir William Gregory, cited by Donnelly, Landlord & Tenant, p. 79

111. Barry O'Brien, Parnell, 1, pp. 329-30; Bew, Land & the National Question, pp. 202-7; and the useful compilation, "Agrarian Outrages in Ireland, 1850-1913", Joseph V. O'Brien, William O'Brien & the Course of Irish Politics, 1881-1918, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), Appendix A, pp. 249-52



monetary -- the government was obliged to pass the Arrears Act, in August 1882, which provided relief for the tenants in arrears. The latter were required to pay off one year's rent owing; the government paid the landowners £800,000 from the consolidated Church funds; and more than £2.6 millions worth were simply wiped off the slate. With this relief, thousands of small farmers were also free to apply for judicial rent-reductions.<sup>112</sup>

The significance of the Land Act's commitment to "fair rents" was best outlined by Parnell, in the course of an in camera meeting of the League's leadership held on the eve of the conference at which the League determined its attitude towards the act. Parnell admitted that the measure "won't settle the question", but "it will bankrupt one-third of the landlords . . . and it will make the rest only too happy to be purchased out as an escape from the lawyers. It does not abolish landlordism, but it will make landlordism intolerable for the landlords". With a weather-eye always on the central political import of developments, Parnell added that "if we had rejected this bill, the farmers of Ireland would very properly have chased us out of the country. It we were not to make the best use of it now, the only effect would be that it would be used in spite of us, but that the landlords would get off with half the reductions we can, with judicious handling, knock

112. Return of payments to landlords . . . and of rent charges cancelled, 1884, (C.4059), lxiv, pp. 101, 231; Lee, Modernisation, pp. 88-9; Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 292-93

out of these Land Commissioners".<sup>113</sup> Indeed, there is some evidence that Parnell's judgement was impeccable, for there is a clear contrast between the reductions set by judicial ruling and those arrived at by negotiations between landlord and tenant; the gap was nowhere near half, but from 1882 to 1896 the courts consistently offered a better deal.<sup>114</sup> The original terms of the Land Act defined the period of judicial rents as fifteen years, but the renewed agitation in the mid-1880s, following on the heels of another agricultural depression, led to yet another Royal Commission and yet another revision of the settlement. Judicial rents were now to be set for five years; tenants whose rents had already been reduced by the land commissioners could apply for further reductions; and finally, the leaseholders were admitted to the "fair rent" provisions. Within little more than a decade, by the early 1890s, the tenants had won the Land League's main tactical demand -- they had pushed rents down to the level of Griffith's Valuation, an average reduction of about thirty per cent across the country.<sup>115</sup> It is worth

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113. Cited by O'Brien, Recollections, pp. 328-29

114. See, e.g., the details from county Cork in Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 296-307, 372-74; Buckley, "Fixing of rents by agreement in Galway"; and the comparative table in Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, p. 175

115. The proceedings of the land courts were extensively reported to parliament, in the series of Reports from Irish Land Commissioners, 1881 to 1921; the main figures are conveniently tabulated in Pomfret, Struggle for Land, pp. 200-2, and analysed by Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, pp. 173-81. On the workings of the Land Act before the revisions of 1887, see the evidence and Report of the Cowper Commission, 1887, (C.4969), xxvi, passim.

noting, finally, that the Cowper Commission recommended and the land legislation of 1887 embodied Parnell's original definition of what should constitute a "fair rent", by allowing tenants to apply for rent-reductions on the basis of price-declines.

Before leaving this topic, there was one other element in the land legislation which must be considered, because it was, at least implicitly, the ultimate goal of the agrarian struggle and the resolution which inexorable logic dictated. It will be recalled that Gladstone's first attempt to deal with the land question had half-heartedly proposed to settle the farmers on the land by allowing them to buy it outright. A decade later, the Land Act of 1881 established an untenable system of dual ownership, untenable because the "partners" were locked in economic, political and national conflict. The Land League's influence can be seen in, among other things, its "ripple effect", as in the irony that it was in Ulster, the province which the League most signally failed to capture, where the tenants who were thought to be most loyal to their landlords were the first to take advantage of the expanded facilities for land purchase offered by the Ashbourne Act of 1885.<sup>116</sup> And it was an Orange tenant who said, "I used to consider it a religious duty to pay my landlord as I would pay my other debts. I think otherwise now".<sup>117</sup> The main slogan of the Land League was "the land for

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116. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, p. 368

117. Cited by J. L. McCracken, "The Consequences of the Land War", in Moody & Beckett, eds., Ulster Since 1800 First Series, p. 65

the people"; as John Dillon explained to a New York audience, this meant that "the ultimate object of the Irish Land League is to bring it within the power of every Irish farmer to acquire possession of his own farm".<sup>118</sup> That this goal was in fact deferred for two full decades must be explained by the combination of several factors. First of all, the landowners strenuously resisted the loss of their property and sought to forestall for as long as possible the capitulation which became, as time passed, increasingly inevitable. Secondly, the tenants came under considerable political pressure, from the re-organised nationalist movement which emerged from the ashes of the Land League in 1882, not to purchase while the national question remained unsettled. Finally, land purchase was delayed for the very best of material reasons: all of the land purchase provisions from 1870 to the end of the century were unacceptable to one or other party to the proposed transaction. Landowners were dissatisfied with the terms of the annuities offered to them; or tenants objected, often with good reason, that they could have the land at lower cost by continuing to drive the rents down in the courts. The result can be simply outlined. Fewer than 900 tenants bought their holdings during the 1870s; only 731 took advantage of the provisions in the 1881 Act; even under the generally more favourable terms offered from 1885 to 1896 fewer than 72,000, out of more than half a million holdings, had changed hands before the

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118. Cited by Lyons, Dillon, p. 36

end of the century.<sup>119</sup> The contrast with the performance of the Wyndham Act of 1903 could hardly be clearer. On March 31, 1920, the Estates Commissioners reported that sales were completed or pending on 318,000 holdings. Thus, when Irish independence was formally won in the following year over 13,000,000 acres, the great bulk of the agricultural land, had been transferred to the occupying tenants. As the dominant forces within the Land League had intended, the independent nation was founded upon a large and stable class of peasant proprietors.

#### Whose Agrarian Revolution?

In September 1880, the Dublin Evening Mail, a decidedly Orange organ, declared that the assassination of Lord Montmorres, a Galway landowner, was but "the coping stone of a huge edifice of lawless outrage which has ruled the west of Ireland under a reign of terror as powerful and as absolute as that of the French Revolution".<sup>120</sup> In the following year, as we have seen, The Times and the government seemed to believe that they were in real danger of losing control of the country to the dual power established by the Land League. The coercive response was not lightly undertaken -- by 1882, the para-military Irish Constab-

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119. Pomfret, Struggle for Land, p. 275; Hooker, Readjustments of Agricultural Tenure, pp. 56-70; Lee, Modernisation, pp. 102-3

120. Cited by Palmer, Land League Crisis, p. 190

ulary force of 20,000 men had been augmented by a garrison of 25,000 regular troops.<sup>121</sup> These "alarums and excursions" clearly pose an essential question of the struggle which Davitt called the "Land League Revolution". But what sort of revolution was it? Davitt's formulation in the main title, "the fall of feudalism", offers a useful, negative point of departure. Rather than pursue the essentially fruitless issue of whether the Irish land system on the eve of the Land War was, in any meaningful sense, "feudal", the crucial point to emphasise is that the Land War was a bourgeois revolution. Tracing the balance of class forces which developed through and emerged from the Land War tends to confirm this proposition.

The significance of the Land War of 1879-82, and one of the best reasons for calling it a "revolution" of some sort, was the extent to which it collapsed "normal" time. Social and political developments were accelerated. Major advances on each of the three fronts of the class war -- economic, political and theoretical-ideological -- were concentrated into the short span of a little over three years. It is my contention that the principal beneficiaries of those advances were the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. Revolutions, however, pose this problem: the concentration of development implies a dense weave, from which it is more than ordinarily difficult to isolate the various strands.

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121. Pomfret, Struggle for Land, p. 182

It is most convenient to start by returning, once again, to some of the basic economic factors. The Land War was a laboratory in which the relative strengths of tenants and landlords were gauged. The immediate result, it must be admitted, was not conclusive. Both sides still displayed weaknesses and strengths. The Parnell/Gladstone settlement in 1882 demonstrated that neither had won a clear-cut victory, but on balance it may be said that the farmers emerged from the Land War with their position enhanced, the landowners with theirs restricted. The basis of the farmers' strength was their predominance, amounting to virtual monopoly, in the realm of production: they reared the cattle, grew the crops and churned the butter, and their cousins in trade controlled most of the process of distribution. Against this, of course, the great weakness of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie was that they were locked into the imperial market, and therefore dependent on price-levels in that market. The depression of the late 1870s threatened the entire farming community with grave difficulties, if not with absolute ruin. With prices tumbling, profitability had to be sought in lower costs; for most farmers, those costs hinged on the fixed payment of rent. The essential economic power which the Land League organised and mobilised was the tenants' ability and capacity to halt, however temporarily, the flow of rents. The semi-annual "gales", usually payable in March and September, were seriously disrupted on estates

throughout the west, and in much of central and southern Ireland, for at least one year. It should, of course, be acknowledged that the very need for the Arrears Act indicated that the flow of rents had actually been dammed or greatly reduced, under the involuntary pressure of simple inability to pay, before the Land League organised and defended rent-strikes. The League's critical contribution was to curb the landowners' normal recourse in the event of non-payment: the ejectment notice. Nothing in the past behaviour of the landowners could have led anyone in Ireland to expect that, without the intervention of the Land League, the depression of 1879 would not have been accompanied by a recurrence of the Famine clearances. The Land League effectively represented, therefore, what the power of the state embodied for the landowners: political muscle to be employed in the economic sphere. The virtual abolition of evictions under the provisions of the Land Act of 1881 testified to the efficacy of the League's dual power, and marked a major constraint on the powers of the landed Ascendancy. But it was the inauguration of "fair rents" which represented the most significant economic victory for the tenants. Increasingly from 1881, tenants were able to lower their costs, while those of the landowners (encumbrances, taxes and management charges) remained relatively invariable. Worse, from the landowners' point of view, was the political-economic judgement of the money-market: their property declined in value and became less



credit-worthy, and therefore less able to withstand the continuing challenges of the tenants.<sup>122</sup> The economic outcome of the Land War was, in short, a significant shift in the zero-sum relation between landlord and tenant: the latter enhanced their incomes (or, in a falling market, stabilised them) at the expense of the landowners.

The victories which launched the tenant-farmers on the road from "fair rents" to eventual land purchase were, in principle, in the interests of all tenants. But, as we have seen throughout this work, "tenant" was a term covering a multitude of sins; and "land for the people" was a formula which masked some crucial class contradictions within the range covered by "tenant". The sharpest demonstration of this point was the fact, which became increasingly clear from the 1890s onwards, that even the complete abolition of all payments (rents or annuities), especially on the crowded small holdings in the western congested districts, would not significantly improve the conditions of many small tenants. One solution which might have changed their lot was the call for the division of large grazing lands among the small tenants; an idea which would, necessarily, have entailed a new emphasis on tillage and the development of more scientific and skilled mixed farming. Although this demand was posed repeatedly -- by western leaders such as Matt Harris, James Daly and John O'Connor Power in

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122. Donnelly, Land & People of Cork, pp. 304-6; Solow, Land Question & Irish Economy, pp. 173-94

1879-80, by William O'Brien and Davitt in 1898-1900, by Ernie O'Malley, Liam Mellows and the Communist Party of Ireland between 1919 and 1923, and again in the 1930s by Peadar O'Donnell, Frank Ryan, George Gilmore and the left-wing republicans<sup>123</sup> -- it was never acted upon. The simplest illustration of the outcome was that, in 1911, "the 6,000 largest farmers in Connacht held roughly the same amount of land as the 70,000 smallest holders".<sup>124</sup>

There can be no doubt that the Land War united all tenants (except, of course, the sleveens or backsliders) against the landlords; and the principal gain registered in the Land Act of 1881 was a defeat for the latter. But I believe that this victory was predicated upon and, in some respects, secondary to a more fundamental "internal" conquest. During the "heroic phase" of the struggle, this internal relationship appeared as the natural subordination, by accommodation, of distinct and potentially antagonistic class interests within the nationwide united front. Strong farmers and small-holders, country businessmen and agricultural labourers,<sup>125</sup> priests and Fenians, constitutional

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123. Lee, Modernisation, pp. 88, 100; O'Brien, William O'Brien & Irish Politics, pp. 105-8, 130-32; Lyons, Dillon, pp. 179-81, 183-83, 222-26; Greaves, Liam Mellows, pp. 179-91, 357-58; O'Malley, On Another Man's Wound and The Singing Flame; Michael McInerney, Peadar O'Donnell: Irish Social Rebel, (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1976); Peadar O'Donnell, There will be another day, (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1963); O'Neill, War for the Land

124. Lee, Modernisation, p. 100

125. Bearing in mind the qualifications already noted, the rural working class was not absent from the struggles during the Land War.

politicians and agrarian terrorists had all apparently submerged their differences in the fight for the "common" cause. The true common factor which held them and the movement together was not, in fact, the "agrarian locomotive" so much as the "nationalist train" to which it was hitched.<sup>126</sup> The "reasonable compromise" reached by Davitt and Parnell for the creation of the national Land League in 1879 established a pattern which would remain dominant for forty years, down through the defeat of the Republicans in the Civil War of 1922-23. In its elemental terms, that pattern consisted of sacrificing divisive class issues on the altar of national unity. In the course of speech in Galway City in October 1880, Parnell had explained his perspective with admirable clarity. "I wish to see the tenant farmers prosperous", he declared, "but large and important as this class of tenant farmers is . . . I would not have taken off my coat and gone to this work if I had not known that we were laying the foundations in this movement for the regeneration of our legislative independence".<sup>127</sup> From 1882 to 1921, trouble-makers who raised demands in the interests of small tenants, agricultural labourers or the urban working class were repeatedly reminded that no problems could really be solved until national freedom

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126. This image, a seminal one in Irish political thought on the central issue of the relationship between the social and national questions, was first advanced by Fintan Lalor, in the programmatic letter "To the Confederate & Repeal Clubs in Ireland" (1847); in Fogarty, ed., Lalor, p. 83

127. Cited by Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, p. 240; Lyons, Parnell, p. 138

had been won, and that to raise such issues was potentially traitorous to the national cause.

This sleight of hand rested upon the identification of the Irish nation with the interests of its leading class. The agrarian petty-bourgeoisie established its claim to political leadership in the transition from the semi-revolutionary Land League struggle to the distinctly constitutional campaign for Home Rule. One structural grounding for the decline of the Land League was provided by the Land Act itself. The heroism of the preceding months had consisted, in part, of the development of popular forms of collective struggle, but the concession of "fair rents" called a halt to the collective conduct of the conflict by removing the locus of the fight from the estate-office to the land court. William O'Brien tried to put a brave face on it when he called for bringing to the land courts "the spirit which cowed the tyrants in their rent offices",<sup>128</sup> but there was no hiding the fact that a critical change had occurred. The land courts did not recognise collective plaintiffs in the matter of rent-adjudication. Matt Harris, who knew them well said that "farmers as a rule are very selfish men";<sup>129</sup> to the extent that this was true, it was a characteristic that the new land courts could only reinforce.

This structural formation of individualistic politics was, in

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128. In United Ireland, the Parnellite organ which O'Brien edited, cited by Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, p. 302

129. Cited by Lee, Modernisation, p. 97; Bew, Land & the National Question, p. 229

fact, a symptom, not the whole situation. If the Land War was a revolution, it was a cautious one, engaged in by cautious and often very conservative men. Tumult, riot, collective action were not their favourite forms of activity.<sup>130</sup> The achievement of the Land League's principal victory rested on an impressive deployment of strategic and tactical weapons and judgement, but these factors were most effective because the farmers and rural businessmen who constituted the local leadership and the essential class basis for the struggle had already established their social and economic right to lead Irish rural society. The reconstruction of the agrarian economy after the Famine, the creation of the national Church, and now the successful campaign to wrest control of the means of production out of the hands of the landed Ascendancy were steps towards a higher goal. So long as the landlords could continue to collect the rental tribute, the tenants' rights in the land were constrained. So long as relief was a matter of begging, cajoling or compelling the English parliament to grant concession, the freedom of Ireland as a nation was constrained. Within the nation, the Land League Revolution provided confirmation and additional consolidation of the economic powers of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. On the basis of economic power and moral authority, the task before them was to prove their political maturity, their capacity to assert their leadership in the struggle for the ultimate prize -- state power.

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130. The main value of Paul Bew's recent study is the stress he lays on the importance of legalistic struggle at the height of the Land War.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE PARNELLITE THERMIDOR: FORGING THE POLITICAL HEGEMONY OF THE AGRARIAN PETTY-BOURGEOISIE

#### Nationalist Themes: Ballots and Bullets

The modern period in Irish politics was defined by the Parnellite decade, the years between the New Departure of 1878-79 and the deposition of Parnell in 1890-91 by a combination of his party colleagues, the English Liberals and the Irish Catholic hierarchy. The principal achievement of that decade was the welding together of the central features of the modern Irish state. Under Parnell's lead, the dialectics of class, nation and party were resolved into a lasting form. Parnellism was the consummate organised political expression of the class interests of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie in Catholic Ireland.

Parnellism appeared to involve a recombination and reconstitution of elements from the two main traditions of Irish nationalism. It was neither an eclectic mixture nor an equal partnership. The main aspect of Parnellism was the recapitulation and refinement of concepts of constitutional, parliamentary politics which

were first elaborated during Daniel O'Connell's campaign for Catholic Emancipation during the 1820s. The secondary element derived from the republican and revolutionary tradition which was formally initiated by the Society of United Irishmen in the 1790s. While the contrast between these two traditions, one constitutional, the other revolutionary, can provide a formal framework for understanding Parnellism, a more fundamental issue underpinned the whole movement of Irish politics in the nineteenth century. This was the contradiction between the British Empire and the Irish nation, the subordination and oppression of the latter within and by the former. The guiding thread running through the whole maze of Irish politics from Wolfe Tone to Eamon de Valera is the question of the national united front against imperialism. How is that front constituted? Who is to be included and who excluded? What is the most adequate form of organisation? What strategies and tactics are necessary, to win which goals? The political question of the united front was, in effect, the Land League writ large; a point which entails significantly more than mere analogy. The crucial social and national contradictions overlapped, tending even to be synonymous; the landowners and the British Empire were not exactly the same, but they were very closely identified. As in the Land League, so in Parnellism, the creation of the necessary unity between potentially contradictory classes entailed the subordination of some class interests. In the

definitive form supplied by Parnellism, the class whose interests were paramount was the rising agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

The focal point of this chapter is the Parnellite solution to the question of the national united front, that is, on decoding the balance of class forces within the Irish nation which was expressed through and determined the specific outcome reached during the 1880s. The great national leaders -- O'Connell from 1823 to 1843, Parnell in the 1880s, and de Valera during the War of Independence -- were characterised by their capacity to submerge, under the guise of transcendence, the actual and potential class conflicts within the national ranks. But they did not resolve the contradiction; it was the uninvited guest at the banquet, the revenant which always returned to haunt the festivities. At the risk of simplifying, the formal political referents for this contradiction seem consistently to have been principally questions of strategy -- reform or revolution, constitutional moderation or republican separatism, moral suasion or armed force, ballots or bullets. Another characteristic of the leaders cited was their ability to seem to straddle the line between these choices, to juggle strategies. In part, this talent simply reflected a fundamental source of agreement, the common ground of a commitment to the elementary notion that Ireland was a nation and, as such, should be independent, free to conduct her own affairs.

In this light, it must be stressed that "pure" Unionism, that



is, full acceptance of the Act of Union binding Ireland to England, commitment to the Empire, and self-identification as British, became increasingly external to Irish politics. During the second half of the nineteenth century, in particular, Unionism grew two faces. On the one hand, in Catholic Ireland it became more and more an appendage of British politics, a rallying cry for the increasingly embattled Ascendancy and a tactic for ambitious place-hunters. Of far greater significance, however, was the evolution of Unionism in north-east Ulster, where it became the crucial political and ideological expression of the separate and uneven development of that region.<sup>1</sup> By 1885, when Parnell had essentially completed the task of forging the hegemonic bloc within the Catholic nation, Unionism was simply not a viable stance for any politician aspiring to lead that nation.

The essential proposition of this chapter is that since political struggle is ultimately a question of which class shall wield state power, political organisation is the most concentrated expression of class interests. In the late nineteenth century, the issue of class and political power was unequivocally resolved -- the Ascendancy was gradually ousted, the rural and urban working classes were defeated, and the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie established its hegemony, its claim

1. It may be noted that Catholic Irish political leaders, from Parnell to de Valera, consistently erred in confusing these two aspects of Unionism; the repeated reference to the Orange "bluff" rested, systematically, upon a correct assessment of the weakness of southern Unionism and a complete failure to grasp the real powers of the Ulster variety. Unfortunately, the Imperial ruling class never made the same mistake: Northern Ireland is the result.

to rule society in the name of the nation. The decisive moment of their triumph was the Parnellite decade.

In order to understand the Parnellite solution, two essential points must be clarified. First, it must be emphasised that the definitions of the 1880s did not spring full-blown from Parnell's brow; they were founded on precedents stretching back to the 1820s. These earlier stages in the development to political maturity of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie must also be examined for a second reason. The Parnellite solution was a finely-balanced juggling act in which three distinct sources of political and ideological leadership were co-ordinated. The earlier steps had rehearsed the final performance. In the 1820s, O'Connell enrolled the Church. In the 1870s, Isaac Butt's Home Rule party collaborated with the Fenians. The genius of Parnell consisted in overseeing the recruitment and training of a third force, the cadre of professional politicians in the party organisation, which managed to hold both priests and Fenians in an uneasy but essential equilibrium.

#### O'Connell to Butt: Emancipation to Home Rule

The foundations of Irish constitutional politics were laid before the Famine. For more than thirty years, Irish (and British) politics were dominated by Daniel O'Connell, banker, brewer, lawyer,

nicknamed The Liberator and The Counsellor, a demagogue who entered Irish folk-lore in his own lifetime as a giant and a modern epic hero. Nor was it only in Ireland that he acquired epic stature. Michael MacDonagh opened his centenary biography of O'Connell with an amusing anecdote. "An Irishman on a visit to Heidelberg asked a postillion whether he had ever heard of Daniel O'Connell. "Yes", replied the German, "he is the man who discovered Ireland".<sup>2</sup>

O'Connell's indisputable triumph was the passage of Catholic Emancipation in 1829. Two things must be said about that achievement. The first is to recognise that it was a measure for the liberation of the Catholic middle classes. The landless men, the cottiers, the rural and urban workers were afforded no real improvement, in either their legal status or their living conditions. Emancipation did precious little to meet the needs of the rural proletarians who joined the agrarian secret societies; one cottier was said to have asked his parish priest, "What good did emancipation do us? Are we better clothed or fed, or our children better clothed or fed? Are we not as naked as we were, and eating dry potatoes when we can get them?"<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the passage of emancipation was traded off against a massive restriction of the

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2. MacDonagh, O'Connell & Emancipation, p. xv; the indispensable study of O'Connell is Sean O'Faolain's King of the Beggars.

3. Lewis, Local Disturbances, p. 109. Cf., the comment attributed to a Whiteboy leader: "Emancipation has done nothing for us. Mr. O'Connell and the rich Catholics go to parliament. We die of starvation just the same"; cited from de Tocqueville's Journeys in England & Ireland (1836), by Mansergh, Irish Question, p. 57

franchise, which struck the forty-shilling freeholders, over eighty per cent of the electorate, off the rolls.<sup>4</sup> At one stroke, the measure which removed the final legal barrier to Catholic middle class aspirations for state office and access to the professions also excluded from further participation the very people whose electoral revolt had constituted the mass-democratic basis for O'Connell's victory.

The particular forms of that mass democratic movement were the second major aspect of the emancipation campaign. It was accurately defined in Lecky's characteristically jaundiced assertion that "it was in the long popular agitation for Catholic emancipation that the foundation was laid for the political anarchy of our own day",<sup>5</sup> that is, in its Parnellite guise. O'Connell was an innovator and thus anachronistic. His principal electoral base lay in the heartland central and southern counties where the strong farmers were concentrated. But during the pre-Famine period their position tended to be undercut by the sheer press of numbers of cottiers and landless men and by the conflicts with the agrarian terrorist politics of the pre-Famine rural proletariat. Thus, although O'Connell devised the fundamental ground-rules and organisational principles for the respectable Catholic nation, the period before the Famine was one of relative economic and political immaturity for the class whose aspirations he organised and expressed.

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4. Reynolds, Emancipation Crisis, pp. 168-69

5. Lecky, History of Ireland, (Curtis edition), p. 255

As early as 1797, more than thirty years before he would be legally allowed to enter parliament, O'Connell confided to his diary his ambition to do so, along with a declaration of his political outlook. "Moderation", he declared, "is the character of genuine patriotism, of that patriotism which seeks for the happiness of mankind". Having only recently fled before the advance through Normandy of Dumouriez' revolutionary army, O'Connell stressed that there was "another species which is caused by hatred of oppression. This is a passion. The other is a principle".<sup>6</sup> The clash between the "principle" of constitutional moderation and the "passion" of revolutionary hatred of oppression was a recurrent theme in the development of Irish nationalism. One key to Parnellism would be the creation of a framework which accommodated passion as an arm of principle.

O'Connell invented or discovered the principal forms for the pursuit of the politics of principle. A simple catalogue of the main innovations in his campaigns for emancipation in the 1820s and Repeal of the Act of Union in the 1830s and 1840s will underline the dimensions of his achievement. The most important were these -- the unity of all classes in the Catholic nation, the alternation between "independent opposition" and temporary, opportunist alliances with the Whigs, the attempt to create a disciplined party (more honoured in the breach than

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6. Cited by Denis Gwynn, Daniel O'Connell, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1947), p. 50

in practice), centralised control of both party and mass movement from Dublin, more or less formal alliance with the Church, and the fixed resolve to resist all appeals to revolutionary action combined with the constant flirtation with revolutionary rhetoric.<sup>7</sup> This list comprises both strategic perspectives and prescriptions for constitutional activity which recurred constantly throughout the nineteenth century.

The first national united front, for emancipation, is worth another look, because it was the basic model. As we have seen in Chapter Five, moderation took the immediately paradoxical form of sectarian organisation. By enrolling the priests and the entire rural population in the Catholic Association, O'Connell gave the first formal definition to the Catholic nation. The combination was explosive, for where else to collect subscriptions and organise the mass support but at the chapel gates, and who better to serve as collectors and organisers than the parish clergy? Within a year, a basic pattern had been established. In order to mount a successful mass-democratic movement, the surest, if not the only, way was to engage the priests as local leaders and organisers.

The most substantial Marxist account of this period, Erich Strauss's Irish Nationalism and British Democracy, described O'Connell's

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7. The main sources for this list are Reynolds, Emancipation Crisis; McDowell, Policy & Public Opinion; MacDonagh, O'Connell & Emancipation; O'Faolain, King of the Beggars; O'Hegarty, Ireland under the Union; Strauss, Irish Nationalism & British Democracy.

reliance upon the clergy as a symptom of "clericalism" -- "a state of affairs where the needs of society at large are subordinated to the interests of the dominant Church", whose power derives from "its peculiar position in society as arbitrator between conflicting interests".<sup>8</sup> It would certainly be foolhardy to deny that the clergy arbitrated conflicts, especially in the embryonic "land courts" which dealt with agrarian disputes, but I do not think that this was the principal aspect of the Church's part in the O'Connellite movement. Nor can it truly be said that emancipation was an issue or a movement which subordinated society to Church. It should be suggested instead that Engels' contemporary estimate of O'Connell was closer to the mark.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, the clergy acted as a "transmission belt" and bulwark between O'Connell and the rural masses. More significantly, the congruence between ecclesiastical and O'Connellite politics rested upon a common class outlook and common class interests: the priests embodied and gave an organised form to the interests of the leading section of the farming community and thus constituted the first links between the rural and urban wings of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. It was, in fact, less a question of priestly interference, or domination than of participation by the clergy in a movement from which they and their principal base stood

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8. Strauss, Irish Nationalism & British Democracy, pp. 93, 206

9. Engels, "Letters from London", (1843), in Marx & Engels, Collected Works, iii, pp. 389-91

to gain. O'Connell was the first Irish political leader to make explicit the developing identity between the Church and the "national interest" as it appeared to the crucial "nation forming" class, the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.<sup>10</sup>

The main problem facing any national united front, from O'Connell onwards, was the danger inherent in calling forth a mass-democratic movement to win reforms which would not significantly benefit the masses at the base. None of the major leaders who sought to harness the energies of a mass movement to the lumbering cart of national unity could afford simply to suppress the class struggles which inevitably tended to break out within the national ranks. They might pretend that these conflicts were unimportant, but they had to alleviate or resolve some of the more blatant ones. What Larkin has called the "embryo state", which I have been calling "dual power", were the arbitration mechanisms with which national unity could be maintained. The first example were the "land courts" created by the Catholic Association's lawyers and priests in order to arbitrate land disputes and to furnish proof of moderation by suppressing Whiteboyism.<sup>11</sup>

Even after these informal bodies had gradually disappeared, towards

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10. Larkin, "Church, State & Nation", pp. 1251-52; and cf., Macintyre, The Liberator, Appendix D, pp. 309ff, for an analysis of the principal distribution of O'Connell's electoral strength, which tends to confirm the centrality to O'Connellism of the areas of strong-farming in Leinster and Munster.

11. Reynolds, Emancipation Crisis, pp. 29, 136-41, 149



the end of the 1830s, the priests continued to play "an active mediating role" down to the brief reign of the Land League courts, and even later.<sup>12</sup>

After Emancipation, O'Connell's main task was to develop a parliamentary strategy for the pursuit of the ultimate goal, Repeal of the Union. The first aspect of that strategy, the Whig alliance, was probably inevitable, given the context of Tory Orangeism and O'Connell's own deep-seated aversion to the radical alternative of the "ultra-democratic" Chartists.<sup>13</sup> The parallel attempt to forge a distinct and independent Irish party at Westminster was a more significant innovation. The coterie of Catholic MPs around O'Connell in the 1830s and 1840s and the so-called Independent Party of the early 1850s were the direct ancestors of the triumphal Parnellite party. The lack of discipline and clarity, the vacillation and tendency to place-hunting which beset these early parties should occasion no surprise. The very idea of the party in the modern

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12. Lee, Modernisation, p. 91, argues that the League courts played an important part in circumscribing clerical authority in secular matters, but an important recent essay by Liam Kennedy suggests that the priests were still playing an active role, particularly in balancing the conflicting interests of strong farmers and traders on the one hand, against those of small farmers, in the 1890s: "Early response of the clergy to the co-operative movement", passim.

13. See Macintyre, The liberator; Senior, Orangeism; McDowell, Policy & Public Opinion; MacDonagh, O'Connell & Emancipation. There is a fine body of work on O'Connell's relations with the working class and Chartism: Donald Read & Eric Glasgow, Feargus O'Connor: Irishman & Chartist, (London: Edward Arnold, 1961); Clarkson, Labour & Nationalism, Chap. V; Rachel O'Higgins, "Irish Trade Unions & Politics, 1830-50", Historical Journal, IV, (1961), pp. 208-17 and "The Irish Influence in the Chartist Movement", Past & Present, 20, (1961), pp. 83-96; Patrick Holohan, "Daniel O'Connell & the Dublin Trades: A Collision, 1837-8", Saothar, I, (1975), pp. 1-17

sense had hardly been formulated, let alone established as the basic framework for political activity. Moreover, the relative political immaturity of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie was accentuated by the restrictive property qualifications for membership in the select parliamentary club -- the range of possible candidates for O'Connell's "party" tended to be limited to the small class of minor Catholic gentry, merchants and lawyers, of whom O'Connell was the perfect representative. Indeed, O'Connell's party had strong aspects of clan organisation, since the core of his "tail" as it was derisively called was the "household brigade": O'Connell himself, his three sons, two sons-in-law and a brother-in-law!<sup>14</sup> And it is a striking confirmation of the political adolescence of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie that throughout his long career, O'Connell's own tactical considerations and political prejudices remained consistently paramount in the parliamentary arena.

Yet while O'Connell's attention was focussed on parliament, the farmers themselves conducted a major land struggle, the Tithe War of the 1830s, which went a long way towards proving that their "political immaturity" was a very relative thing. Across broad areas of Munster and Leinster, the strong farmers and priests who had been active in the emancipation campaign took the lead in organising widespread resistance to the tithe-proctors, refusal to pay tithes, "exclusive

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14. Macintyre, The Liberator, pp. 74-77

dealing" to enforce solidarity against distraint and evictions, mass meetings of protest to petition parliament for relief. The Tithe War was unequivocally concentrated in the regions where the strong farmers dominated the tillage system. It is significant that the more perceptive contemporary observers, such as George Cornwall Lewis and Sir John Harvey, Inspector General of the Constabulary in Leinster, drew a sharp distinction between the anti-tithe struggle and the parallel activities of the agrarian secret societies.<sup>15</sup> In fact, it ought to be said that the men who fought the Tithe War were every bit as skillful and versatile as their grandsons who fought the Land War. The critical distinctions were, first, the relative social weight of these strong farmers before and after the Famine and, secondly, their greater access to and experience in translating local struggles onto the national and parliamentary stage in the 1880s.

This "taste for organisation", as O'Faolain has called it, that the farmers acquired in the emancipation struggle and turned to their own immediate ends in the Tithe War, was the basic political lesson which O'Connell had irrevocably taught. From the 1830s to the Land War, Irish farmers' organisations existed in several areas, but most particularly in the regions dominated by the strong farmers: the heartland counties in Leinster and Munster and grazing lands like East Galway.

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15. Lewis, Local Disturbances, p. 120; Harvey, cited by O'Donoghue, "Opposition to tithes", p. 92; cf., Clark, "Importance of agrarian classes", p. 29; Lee, "Ribbonmen", in Williams, ed., Secret Societies, pp. 27-8; Reports . . . on Irish tithes, 1831-2, (271, 663), xxii; 1831-2, (177), xxi; 1834, (589), xxiii

These organisations were generally concerned with the principal agrarian issues -- rents, prices, security of tenure, agricultural development and tenant-right; they sometimes acted as bargaining agents between landlords and tenants; and, in the later period, they voiced the political concerns of their main constituents. The crucial failure of the period between the Tithe War and the Land War was the inability to weld these bodies together into a single hegemonic political machine. Each of the main steps towards the Parnellite solution was characterised by this defect. The Tenant League in the 1850s, the National Association in the 1860s and the Home Government Association and Home Rule League in the 1870s all failed to achieve the absolutely indispensable breakthrough, in that none of them was able to balance the concrete demands of the farmers against the apparently more abstract approaches to the national question.<sup>16</sup> Part of the problem lay in the localistic and relatively apolitical nature of the farmers' clubs themselves;<sup>17</sup> and in the class background and political calibre of many of the politicians after O'Connell, who were not such as to merit the unstinting confidence of the farming class. There was, too, a seeming disinclination on the part of the farmers to pursue political

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16. Whyte, Independent Irish Party, and the briefer account in The Tenant League & Irish Politics in the 1850s, (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press for the Dublin Historical Association, 1972); Norman, Church & Ireland in Rebellion, pp. 135-89; Thornley, Isaac Butt & Home Rule; Lawrence J. McCaffrey, Irish Federalism in the 1870s: A Study in Conservative Nationalism, (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1962)

17. Hoppen, "National Politics & Local Realities", in Cosgrave & McCartney, Studies in Irish History

agitation while the economy remained buoyant. It required, in short, a jolt of the dimensions of the depression at the end of the 1870s to enable the re-establishment of the nation-wide political organisation which had characterised O'Connell's greatness.

The shock of the "earthquake" which Parnell would ride<sup>18</sup> consisted of the concatenation of several distinct factors, involving some immediate precedents for the Parnellite breakthrough. These must be examined in some detail.

The most important contribution to the nationalisation of Irish agrarian politics was made, malgré eux, by the Fenians, by the revolutionary purists whose single-minded devotion to achieving Irish independence through armed struggle entailed disdain for the crass material demands of the farmers and contempt for the constitutional attempts to win reforms. The Fenian uprising in 1867 was the last of the comic-opera armed outings in the nineteenth century; by any "rational" standards, it should have put an end to further talk of revolution. That it did not, and that the Fenians would play a critical role in assembling the Parnellite bloc, is a paradox which must be explained.

The main aspect of the paradox may be summarised by analogy: the Fenians were the Jacobins of the Irish bourgeois revolution,  
 18. "It will take an earthquake to settle the land question, Mr. Parnell", someone said to him. 'Then we must have an earthquake' was the reply". Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, p. 174

the most radical force, the most consistent and democratic elements, the ones most closely in touch with the proletarian and semi-proletarian masses. Although in general they subscribed to Wolfe Tone's judgement that "if the men of property will not support us they must fall. We can support ourselves by the aid of that numerous and respectable class of the community, the men of no property",<sup>19</sup> and though the Fenian base lay mainly in the urban working class, in Ireland and in the exile communities in Britain and North America, the IRB signally failed to develop a progressive social programme. Indeed, they barely aspired to a social programme of any kind, beyond the skeletal calls for the separation of Church and state and for a "democratic republic" in the insurrectionary proclamations of 1867 and 1916.<sup>20</sup> The discrepancy between the Fenians' politics and their class base is the heart of the matter. On the working class basis of Fenianism, especially in its first phase, down to the 1867 rising, there can be little doubt. James Stephens, the "central Organiser of the Irish Republic", described the situation well in a retrospective manuscript: "We had with us the farmers' sons, the mechanics, the artisans, the labourers and the small shopkeepers; but the professional men and the men of wealth kept rigidly

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19. This justly famous tag is cited by Jackson, Ireland Her Own, p. 132; cf., Frank MacDermot, Theobald Wolfe Tone & His Times, (Tralee: Anvil Books, 1968)

20. Lee, Modernisation, p. 54; T. W. Moody, "The Fenian Movement in Irish History", in Moody, ed., The Fenian Movement, (Cork: Mercier Press, 1968), pp. 99-111; cf., the discussion of the "Democratic Programme" of the Irish Republic and the IRB's attempt to suppress it, in O'Hegarty, Ireland under the Union, pp. 726-27

aloof, or were violent in their opposition" and "we had to contend with the apathy of the farmers".<sup>21</sup> Given this class basis, the Fenians' refusal to grapple with social as well as national questions appears odd, even after ad hominem allowances are made for the quasi-aristocratic pretensions of men like John O'Leary. It becomes even more puzzling in the light of some important early facets of Fenianism. It is known, for instance, that there were links between the Fenians and progressive social and political thought -- Stephens is said to have been a member of the proto-socialist Blanquist organisation in Paris;<sup>22</sup> both he and Devoy were members of the International Working Men's Association; and another Fenian, J. P. McDonnell, was Irish secretary on the First International's Central Committee.<sup>23</sup> In what appeared as the other side of this same coin, the Fenians quite often became embroiled in serious political and physical clashes with both the clergy and the farmers' clubs.<sup>24</sup> O'Leary gave a nicely Jacobin ring to their disdain

21. "Fenianism--Past & Present", cited by Desmond Ryan, The Fenian Chief: A Biography of James Stephens, (Dublin: Gill & Son, 1967), pp. 327, 326; cf., Moody, "The Fenian Movement", in Moody, ed., The Fenian Movement, pp. 106-7; Lee, Modernisation, pp. 53-9

22. Ryan, Fenian Chief, pp. 50-1, 83

23. J. W. Boyle, "Ireland & the First International", Journal of British Studies, XI, (1972), pp. 44-62; Cormac O Grada, "Fenianism & Socialism: The Career of Joseph Patrick McDonnell", Saothar, I, (1975), pp. 31-41; The General Council of the First International: Minutes & Documents, (5 vols., Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962)

24. On the conflict with the Church, see O Fiaich, "The Clergy and Fenianism"; Steele, "Cullen & Irish Nationality"; Norman, Church and Ireland in Rebellion, pp. 86-134; Lyons, Ireland since the Famine, pp. 122-38; McCartney, "The Church & Fenianism"; O'Leary, Recollections, ii, pp. 40-2, 52-4, 112-27, 180-85

for constitutional reformism, when he declared that "a people who are not prepared to fight in the last resort rather than remain slaves will never be made free by any sort of Parliamentary legerdemain whatsoever".<sup>25</sup>

The key problem in Fenian history is to explain how, with this class basis and these political preferences, the IRB became, in effect, the armed wing of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie during the Tan War.<sup>26</sup> The answer lies in the original construction of Fenian politics. By suppressing all class issues and all reforms in favour of the monomaniac call for independence by armed force, and by refusing to make a conscious political choice, the Fenians committed themselves, unwittingly perhaps but ineluctably, to the side of the class which was actually strongest.

The explanation of this problem calls for an examination of how the Fenians emerged, re-organised and re-vitalised, from the apparently absolute and ignominious military defeat in 1867. This story

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25. O'Leary, Recollections, ii, p. 57. Cf., Lenin: "An oppressed class which does not strive to learn to use arms, to acquire arms, deserves only to be treated like slaves"; "The Military Programme of the Proletarian Revolution", Collected Works, xxiii, p. 80

26. This outcome was, naturally, most evident during the most intensive period of national struggle (1919-20), when the IRB-led Irish Volunteers (the IRA) were employed as a force for law and order, specifically to suppress both the soviet movement in rural industry and the resurgent struggle of the western small-holders for the redivision of the grazing ranches. See The Constructive Work of Dail Eireann, (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1920); O'Neill, War for the Land, pp. 112ff; Greaves, Liam Mellows, pp. 188-92; and Ernie O'Malley's allusive but insightful reflections, especially on the role of Michael Collins and the IRB, in The Singing Flame.



involves a consideration of both the main Fenian contributions to the Parnellite solution and the tentative, preliminary approaches to that solution which occurred during the 1870s. The foremost Fenian contribution was their assistance to the process of nationalising Irish politics; and in this, as Joseph Lee has pointed out, they worked in tandem with their most consistent opponent, Cardinal Cullen.<sup>27</sup> The very failure of the 1867 insurrection and the evident selflessness and unrepentant defiance of the Fenian convicts and exiles served to make revolutionary nationalism an honourable, if misguided, position; it had the effect of "raising the threshold level of constitutional demands and infusing constitutional politics with a vigour and determination lacking hitherto".<sup>28</sup> The extent of the IRB's back-handed success in this respect can be seen in the adoption of at least some of their rhetoric by men who were, and remained, unflinchingly moderate,<sup>29</sup> and in the significance of Fenians in the development of the "active" parliamentarism which foreran Parnell's ascendancy. This was best described, in rather general terms, by John Devoy, who claimed that

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27. Lee, Modernisation, pp. 45, 57; cf., Larkin, "Church, State & Nation", pp. 1260-62

28. Lee, Modernisation, p. 58

29. The outstanding moderate opportunists were the Sullivan brothers. In 1867, they rushed into print with Speeches from the Dock, a founding text in the iconography of romanticised Fenian nobility; a text which John O'Leary called "more than a little imaginative throughout"! (Recollections, ii, p. 219). T. D. Sullivan wrote "God Save Ireland", a maudlin dirge commemorating the three Fenians hanged in Manchester in 1867 -- for a useful critique of how this song flagrantly misrepresents Fenianism, see Brown, Politics of Irish Literature, pp. 211-16

"the chief influence of Fenianism was in giving the people habits of organisation and of acting together, developing qualities of leadership, and breaking down sectarian prejudice. It found Ireland disorganised, the people standing still, and having no confidence in themselves whatsoever. It gave organised shape to the national idea, set the people moving in the direction of nationality, and filled them with a spirit of self-reliance that has never deserted them since".<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, there was more to it than a national "tone", for the "organised shape" of nationalism took specific forms. Essentially, this second Fenian contribution was the recruitment and training, the political formation of a whole generation of mass leaders and organisers. That most of these men subsequently deserted the IRB and joined Parnell's decidedly constitutional movement was never the intention of the Fenian leaders; the latter called those who left "traitors", but the fact remains that these ex-Fenians were a crucial element in the Parnellite bloc.

There was, finally, another probably unintentional service provided by Fenianism to Parnellism. The combination of radical bourgeois politics with a proletarian mass base meant that the Fenians acted as the recruiting sergeants who brought the hitherto largely unorganised Irish working classes into the national bloc. This aspect of the Fenian contribution is more arguable than the preceding ones, but

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30. John Devoy, The Land of Eire (1882), cited by Desmond Ryan, The Phoenix Flame: A Study of Fenianism and John Devoy, (London: Arthur Barker, 1937), p. 182 [emphasis supplied]. Cf., the similar comments in Devoy, "Davitt's Career", Gaelic American, (1906)

it can be traced, clearly if indirectly, in the developments which brought Parnell to the fore in Irish politics. During the 1860s, the two main lines of national politics had been defined in ways which tended to follow the class frontiers. The clergy, the urban middle class and the strong farmers and rural businessmen had, generally speaking,<sup>31</sup> opted for the constitutional-bureaucratic road of parliamentary activity and discreet lobbying. The fundamental national question was left aside for future consideration, pending the expectation of immediate relief in the fields of education, land-law reform and disestablishment of the (Anglican) Church of Ireland. On the other side, the Fenians recruited a mass base for separatism among the Irish working classes, at home and abroad, in the ranks of the many Irishmen in the British Army and among the agrarian secret societies. This last base of recruitment was both the most difficult area for the Fenians and their most important breakthrough. Between 1862 and 1864, O'Donovan Rossa and Ned Duffy undertook several organising tours through Connacht and south Ulster, in the counties where the Ribbonmen still wielded considerable influence; and there is some evidence that when the authorities began the mass arrests of Fenians in 1865 the men they were picking up in Roscommon, Mayo, Longford and Monaghan already had a reputation, as organisers

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31. This qualification is essential because it is clear that many of the Fenian leaders -- men like Matt Harris, Pat Egan and Joe Biggar from Belfast -- were unequivocally from the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. A key to Parnell's success lay in his ability to accelerate the convergence of the two lines.

and militants in the Ribbon societies (that is, the post-Famine name for Whiteboys).<sup>32</sup> The significance of the Fenian penetration of the Ribbon areas would not become manifest until the Land War, but the influence in that struggle of men like Harris, Egan, Nally and Walshe would tend to confirm that Fenianism had overcome at least some of the original resistance of the agrarian secret societies. To their proletarian supporters, the Fenians offered a programme which put all immediate issues in abeyance, until the apocalyptic day when the Republic would have arrived. Ostensibly, and actually in the wills of the intransigents in both camps, the choice between reform and revolution seemed to lie between two mutually exclusive poles.

The break with this deadlock came during the 1870s, under the leadership of Isaac Butt. The main forces which were brought together under Parnell were already in ferment; under the banner slogan of "Home Rule", the "revisionists" in both camps rehearsed, by trial and error, the Parnellite solution. Traditionally, the rapprochement between revolutionaries and constitutionalists has been dated from the "New Departure", the tacit alliance negotiated by Parnell, Davitt and Devoy in 1879. Professor Moody has persuasively argued, however, for

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32. Seán Ó Lúing, "A Contribution to a Study of Fenianism in Breifne", Breifne, III, (1966), pp. 155-74; Roney, Irish Rebel & California Labour Leader, pp. 55-75; Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, pp. 42, 75; Ryan, Fenian Chief, p. 328; Devoy, "Davitt's Career", Gaelic American (1906); John Devoy, Recollections of an Irish Rebel (1929), (reprint: Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969), pp. 32-3; Lee, Modernisation, p. 58

the existence of three "new departures" -- the accommodation between Butt and the Fenians in 1873, Devoy's offer to renew the relationship in 1878, and the definitive amalgamation of the political and agrarian movements effected by Davitt and the Land League in 1879.<sup>33</sup> To these, one might also add the earlier and more limited co-operation which was initiated in the aftermath of the suppression of the rising of 1867, when Butt and other moderates were persuaded to participate in the mass movement for Amnesty for the imprisoned Fenians.<sup>34</sup>

The basis for these "new departures" was organisational, the series of initiatives towards party organisation undertaken during the 1870s. The first was the re-organisation of the IRB. Although the defeat of 1867 had seemed to disorganise, disarm and decapitate the Fenians, both the fact that the Organisation had never been as formal or disciplined in practice as in Stephens' theory and the continued liberty of at least a score of able organisers allowed the Fenians to regroup. Between 1868 and 1873, the IRB adopted a new constitution, incorporating elements of democratic-centralist party principles: in the place of Stephens' provisional dictatorship, an elective Supreme Council was created; new centres were appointed and the circles were re-organised

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33. T. W. Moody, "The New Departure in Irish Politics", in Cronne et al., eds., Essays in British & Irish History, pp. 303-33; subsequent study by Professor Moody, reported by Lyons, Parnell, p. 81n., has refined this original argument.

34. Thornley, Isaac Butt & Home Rule, pp. 53-6, 65-74, 87-91

and re-armed; and the IRB began to hold frequent if irregular provincial and national congresses.<sup>35</sup> The ultimate goal, armed revolution, was not abandoned but the new leaders began experimenting with ways in which to expand their influence by working through more open agitation. J. J. O'Kelly, a member of the Supreme Council at this time and later one of Parnell's closest adherents, said afterwards that "we thought that by taking part in every political and semi-political movement that was going on we could exercise much influence and mould these movements to our own ends".<sup>36</sup> Just who moulded whom would become a subject of bitter recrimination within a decade, when Parnell triumphed in the early 1880s.

In a pamphlet written for the Amnesty campaign, Isaac Butt offered the best short explanation of the impact of the Fenians upon the moderate camp. "Gradually the conviction forced itself upon everyone", he wrote, in attempting to explain to English readers why there was so much mass support for the Fenian prisoners in Ireland, "that the men whom they saw meet their fate with heroism and dignity, were not a mere

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35. Both the original (1869) and amended (1873) constitutions have been reprinted, from the papers of Charles Doran, Secretary of the Supreme Council in the mid-1870s, by T. W. Moody & Leon O Broin, "Select Documents: The IRB Supreme Council, 1868-78", IHS, XIX, (1975), pp. 286-332; the 1873 constitution, which remained in force until 1917, can also be found in Bulmer Hobson, Ireland Yesterday & Tomorrow, (Tralee: Anvil Books, 1968), pp. 103-7

36. Cited by Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, p. 65; cf., the comments of John O'Mahony, the Irish-American founding father of Fenianism, and John Daly, the archetypal hard man from Limerick: cited by Thornley, Isaac Butt & Home Rule, pp. 68, 89; Ryan, Fenian Memories, pp. 115-16

band of assassins, actuated by base motives — but real and earnest patriots, moved by unselfish thoughts, and risking all in that which they believed to be their country's cause".<sup>37</sup> Besides eloquence, and mass demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands,<sup>38</sup> the moderates were undoubtedly influenced by the fact that the Fenians were able to have their man, O'Donovan Rossa, elected in the Tipperary by-election of 1869 and to organise the defeat of the crown prosecutor at the Fenian State trials.<sup>39</sup> In short, the fact that the Fenians had tapped a wellspring of public sympathy obliged the moderates to respond with more than a sneer or a sanctimonious gesture, with a coherent and more advanced political programme of their own.

The first step was a revival of the O'Connellite project, Repeal re-stated as Home Rule, but without the distinctive mass organisation which had underpinned O'Connell's movement. The preliminary agreements between Butt and the Fenians produced two "parties" (the Home Government Association of 1870 and the Home Rule League of 1873); both, however, were bedevilled by the old residue of Whiggism. The principal form this took was Butt's adamant refusal to countenance the transformation of the Irish parliamentary representation from a loose collection of individualists into a formal, disciplined party. In principle,

37. Ireland's Appeal for Amnesty (1870), cited by Thornley, Isaac Butt & Home Rule, p. 67

38. Ibid., pp. 65-7; Norman, Church & Ireland in Rebellion, pp. 126-31

39. Thornley, Isaac Butt & Home Rule, pp. 58-61; cf., p. 276 supra.

men who were elected as Home Rulers were pledged to vote en bloc on the annual motion for legislative independence; in practice, even that degree of disciplined unity was often lacking. In 1873, at the founding conference of the Home Rule League, the Fenians Doran and Biggar proposed a motion calling for united action on every issue. In arguing for the rejection of the motion, Butt declared that such a pledge would "destroy every particle of moral influence which any action of his would have" -- the essence of Butt's position was his perdurable belief that members of parliament were fair-minded individuals who would judge and decide upon issues on their own merits.<sup>40</sup> It was a naive perspective. Parnell's victory would rest on his capacity to forge a disciplined party around the much harder point of view which was first clearly stated by one of the earliest Fenian MPs, Joseph Ronayne, who said, "Let us interfere in English legislation; let us show them that if we are not strong enough to get our own work done, we are strong enough to prevent them getting theirs".<sup>41</sup> The other problems with Butt's position were a persistent attempt to rally the Ascendancy to the national cause, the failure to advance the farmers' demands for further reforms of the land laws, and a relatively narrow social base, which led William Shaw, who later became Butt's short-lived successor at the head of the moderates, to call the Home Government Association "a Dublin shop-keeping move-

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40. Thornley, Isaac Butt & Home Rule, p. 167

41. Cited by Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, p. 93



ment".<sup>42</sup>

The two most important innovations in the advance of the Home Rule position were brought by the "revisionist" Fenians. The first practical demonstration of "advanced" parliamentarism was Biggar's adoption of Ronayne's suggestion. On Parnell's first day in the House, Biggar read from a pile of Blue Books for over four hours, interjecting the odd comment in his harsh Belfast "corncrake" accent. His aim was neither to persuade nor to "morally influence" anyone; but this project of "obstruction" was not entirely negative. Certainly, from Butt's all too respectful perspective, it was potentially destructive, for despite the undeniable gains which the obstructionists did achieve,<sup>43</sup> their main purpose was precisely to prevent the government from carrying on its business-as-usual to the exclusion of an adequate consideration of Irish grievances. But the principal aspect of obstruction was its significance for Irish politics: Biggar, Parnell and their handful of associates were engaged in a crucial political struggle for supremacy in Ireland. It is essential to recognise obstruction as a tactical counter in an Irish struggle for a democratic turn. While Butt persisted in appealing to the dress circle, Parnell, Biggar and the Fenians who backed them had

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42. Cited by David Thornley, "The Irish Conservatives & Home Rule, 1869-73", IHS, XI, (1958-9), p. 208

43. Among the gains, the most notable were the amendments to military penal law and to prison regulations. Ironically, the most important effect of obstruction was the long-overdue abandonment of the procedural rules which allowed the Irish to succeed in their efforts. Cf., the analysis by David Thornley, "The Home Rule Party & Obstruction", IHS, XII, (1960), pp. 38-57 and in Isaac Butt & Home Rule, Chaps. X-XII passim

discerned that greater popular strength might come from playing to les enfants du paradis.

The key initiative was taken by the leading IRB figures in Britain, who sought to co-ordinate and wield the relatively homogeneous and organised forces, electoral and extra-parliamentary, of the Irish working class communities across the water. The future was most sharply delineated in the contrast between the genteel and elitist Home Rule bodies in Ireland and the more plebeian Home Rule Confederation of Great Britain, which was controlled by John Barry, John Ferguson and John Denvir: Fenians all.<sup>44</sup> Parnell's original approach to them was made through a direct appeal to the broad, latent sympathy for the Fenians, when he declared in parliament that he did not believe that the three Fenians hanged in Manchester in 1867 had been murderers. Having caught the eye, and the respect, of the Fenians,<sup>45</sup> Parnell was soon strong enough to ask John Barry to organise a series of public meetings in Britain, where the battle for mass support could be pursued by promoting the "forward" policy, the guerrilla tactics of parliamentary harassment.<sup>46</sup>

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44. John Barry's account (thinly veiled as the recollections of "X") appeared in Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, pp. 120-30; cf., John Denvir, Life Story of an Old Rebel, (reprint: Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972), pp. 155, 170-98; Thornley, Isaac Butt & Home Rule, pp. 141, 157

45. Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, pp. 96-8; Lyons, Parnell, p. 54; also, the letters by J. J. O'Kelly, recommending Parnell to the attention of Devoy and the Clan na Gael (the Fenians in America), in William O'Brien & Desmond Ryan, eds., Devoy's Post Bag, (2 vols., Dublin: Fallon, 1948, 1953), i, pp. 267-70

46. Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, pp. 127-30; Lyons, Parnell, pp. 55-7

There is an ironic twist to this story of new departures, for in the summer of 1876, when the Fenian steel was visibly beginning to stiffen parliamentary spines, a new Supreme Council voted to withdraw IRB sanction from the Home Rulers.<sup>47</sup> At virtually the same time, however, the leading journal of moderate opinion declared itself in favour of the aggressive stance adopted by Biggar and Parnell. In July 1876, The Nation editorialised that "the time appears to us to be favourable for a more resolute course of action. The business of English legislation is now very much at the mercy of the Irish members . . . We therefore recommend to the consideration of the Irish members of parliament and of the Irish people this 'policy of obstruction'. What is the English parliament to us but a huge machinery of obstruction? It is obstructing our national life; obstructing our liberties, and, in short, obstructing us off the face of the earth".<sup>48</sup> In 1876, as in 1867, the Sullivans were quick to scent the shift in the prevailing winds.

The changes which were most manifest in the development of obstruction were also signified by a direct coincidence between Fenian influence in the parliamentary ranks and the beginning of a radical shift in the class origins of Irish representatives. In 1868, the general

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47. The resolutions of the Supreme Council, which were accompanied by the expulsion or resignation of the four most important "revisionists" (John Barry, Patrick Egan, Joseph Biggar and John O'Connor Power) are reprinted by Moody & Ó Broin, "IRB Supreme Council", pp. 294, 321

48. The Nation, editorials of July 8 and 15, 1876, cited by Thornley, Isaac Butt & Home Rule, pp. 288-89

election returned 105 Irish MPs, of whom three-quarters were landowners, landowners' sons and land agents; the balance was made up of rich merchants, businessmen and professionals, many of whom also owned land. In 1874, the landed interest still provided 60 per cent of the members, but the key breakthrough had been made with the election of the first two direct representatives from the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie: W. H. O'Sullivan, a wealthy publican-hotelier and strong farmer, and Nicholas Ennis, another strong farmer.<sup>49</sup> O'Sullivan was a particularly apt embodiment of the coincidence of Fenian influence and the arrival of his class, for his son had been arrested as a Fenian suspect in 1867 and he was himself under surveillance by the police. Three other Irish MPs, elected in 1872 and 1874, also embodied the link. Joseph Ronayne won a by-election in 1872 as an avowed "advanced nationalist"; although he was probably not a sworn member of the IRB, he was clearly well-respected in Fenian circles for he was deeply involved in the discussions which preceded the formation of the Home Rule League in 1873.<sup>50</sup> Joseph Gillis Biggar, a provision merchant, former city alderman and former chairman of Belfast's municipal Water Board, was an early financial

49. The class analysis of Irish representation may be found in Thornley, Isaac Butt & Home Rule, pp. 205-11; cf., Michael Hurst, "Ireland & the Ballot Act of 1872", Historical Journal, VII, (1965), pp. 326-52

50. See William O'Brien's "Personal Reminiscences", manuscript cited by Thornley, Isaac Butt & Home Rule, p. 161; the slightly different version in O'Brien, Recollections, pp. 143-45; and O'Connor, Parnell Movement, pp. 261-62. Ronayne was a civil engineer employed as clerk of the works on Cobh Cathedral, the most extravagant clerical construction project of the period: Larkin, "Economic Growth", p. 864

backer of the IRB and a co-opted member of the Supreme Council in 1875-76.<sup>51</sup> John O'Connor Power, a labourer's son, former house-painter and teacher, was elected for county Mayo in 1874 after a campaign managed by Matt Harris, Thomas Brennan and P. W. Nally, all IRB Centres, agrarian activists and future leaders of the Land League; like Biggar, O'Connor Power was a member of the Supreme Council of the IRB before the reversal of 1876.<sup>52</sup>

By appealing to Fenian sentiment and winning the support of the most influential Fenians, Parnell decisively tilted the political scales in Ireland and in Britain. On the one hand, he had won a mass base for a future democratic parliamentary programme and the nucleus of his party of the next decade; and by the same token, he had spelled the end of Whig and landlord domination of Irish politics. The link between these two aspects of the shift was most graphically symbolised by the British Home Rule Confederation's deposition of Butt in favour of Parnell as president. In other words, the new-model national bloc existed in embryo when John Devoy formally proposed the New Departure in 1878-9. The

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51. See O'Connor, Parnell Movement, pp. 242-51, 261-69; Thornley, Isaac Butt & Home Rule, pp. 300-29; Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, pp. 81-4; Roney, Irish Rebel & California Labour Leader, pp. 58-9; Moody & Ó Broin, "IRB Supreme Council", p. 329;

52. See Ryan, Fenian Memories, pp. 37-9, 44-5; O'Brien, Recollections, pp. 139-40; Moody & Ó Broin, "IRB Supreme Council", pp. 327-28; Lee, Modernisation, pp. 67-8; O'Brien & Ryan, Devoy's Post Bag, i, pp. 74-6; Leon Ó Broin, Revolutionary Underground: The Story of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, 1858-1924, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1976), pp. 11-14, 38

ways in which Parnell presided over that national bloc constitute what Davitt called, not without a grain of truth, a "counter-revolution". The how and why of Parnell's political achievements, and their limits, are the core of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie's solution of the national question.

### Parnellism: From New Departure to Concordat

Parnellism can only be understood on the basis of the recognition of the fixed axis of Irish national politics. In his maiden speech in parliament, Parnell struck the chord which would remain the major key throughout his career: "I trust that England will give to Irishmen the right they claim -- the right to self-government. Why should Ireland be treated as a geographical fragment of England . . . ? Ireland is not a geographical fragment, she is a nation".<sup>53</sup> Self-government and nationhood, the one a right inherent in the other; from first to last, Parnell always insisted on Ireland's right to national independence. Within that dominant theme there were frequent variations in tone, and even an occasional deliberate lack of clarity. In Belfast in 1879, for instance, he proposed three possible meanings for home rule: federalism, separatism or the mixed model of Grattan's parliament of

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53. Cited by Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, p. 85; Lyons, Parnell, p. 51; Thornley, Isaac Butt & Home Rule, p. 256

1782;<sup>54</sup> but it is more revealing that even when addressing land meetings at the height of the Land War, as at Galway City in 1880, Parnell was at pains to stress that his first priority was to win "the recovery of our legislative independence".<sup>55</sup> Part of the variation may be put down to the fact that Parnell was politician enough (and more) to know how to cut the cloth to suit the wearer -- and so he tended to sound a lot tougher and more explicitly separatist when he spoke to Fenian audiences.<sup>56</sup> But it would be an error of undue cynicism to suppose that Parnell simply postured to the prejudices of his immediate audiences. On the contrary, his strength lay precisely in his ability to express the various tones of the widely shared, deeply felt and amply justified national resentment of the Irish.

The grounds for resentment were elementary facts of life in the British Empire -- chauvinism, great-nation privilege, racism, and their mirror-image, the "slave mentality". Parnell's refusal to join the chorus of denunciation of the Manchester "martyrs" had been more than a grandstand play for Fenian attention; it was also a rebuke to the deferential aspects of Irish liberalism, a challenge which Parnell argued

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54. Lyons, Parnell, p. 103; cf., F. S. L. Lyons, "The Political Ideas of Parnell", Historical Journal, XVI, (1973), pp. 749-75

55. Cited by Lyons, Parnell, p. 138; Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, p. 240; cf., p. 348 supra.

56. The notorious speech in Cincinnati, where he was alleged to have said that "None of us . . . will be satisfied until we have destroyed the last link which keeps Ireland bound to England", is a case in point. See Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, pp. 201-4; and the discussion by Lyons, Parnell, pp. 111-13

most cogently in the critical debate over the value and virtues of obstructionism. He poured scorn on "the instinct of snobbery which seems to compel some Irishmen to worship at the shrine of English prejudice"; he bluntly declared that deference "will never gain anything for Ireland, and will only secure for such panderers the secret contempt of Englishmen"; and he proposed to found Irish politics upon the assumption that "England respects nothing but power".<sup>57</sup> It was no exaggeration to speak of English prejudice. One example, from the polite, parliamentary end of the spectrum, which added some ponderous class bias for spice, may be cited. The correspondent for The World informed his readers that "Mr. Biggar brings the manner of his store into this illustrious assembly, and his manner, even for a Belfast store, is very bad. When he rises to address the house . . . a whiff of salt-pork seems to float upon the gale, and the air is heavy with the odour of the kippered herring".<sup>58</sup> Abusing Biggar as a "provision merchant" or "leprechaun" was the least of the matter. As a subject nation, the Irish were treated to the full range of racist justifications for their continued subjugation. They were dirty, feckless, idle, improvident, violent -- in a word, inferior. And when Irishmen fought back, as in the

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57. Cited by Thornley, Isaac Butt & Home Rule, p. 320 [emphasis added]

58. Cited by O'Connor, Parnell Movement, p. 264. On an earlier occasion, Biggar's physical handicaps (he was short and hunch-backed) were the pretext for Disraeli's unkind but not humourless gibe -- "Is that what you call in your country a leprechaun?"; cited by Jules Abels, The Parnell Tragedy, (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 49



adoption of obstructionism, this served simply as more grist to the racist mill: since the Irish were either ungrateful for the benefits or insufficiently civilized to appreciate the glory of parliamentary imperialism, tempered by judicious doses of military coercion, they were therefore racially unfit for self-government.<sup>59</sup>

The Land League, the New Departure and the Parnellite initiative at the beginning of the 1880s posed two questions. The first was answered without hesitation. By rejecting the great-nation pretensions of the "United Kingdom" and by suggesting that it was no longer a matter of whether, but of when, Ireland would regain her independence, national self-assertion had acquired a new and legitimate structural form. But the underlying question remained unresolved. Which class would be strong enough to impose its strategic definition of national independence? The history of Parnellism is the story of the shifting balance of forces within a national united front, the gradual assertion of the hegemony of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, their conversion of economic and moral authority into political currency.

At its inception, the New Departure of 1879 envisaged, in the eyes of its Fenian sponsors, "a combination between the advocates of physical force and those who believe in constitutional agitation, such

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59. See two very important studies by L. P. Curtis, Jr., Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England, (Bridgeport, Conn.: Conference on British Studies, 1968) and Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature, (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1971)

as will leave the former free to prepare for active work while, in the meantime, giving a reasonable support to a dignified and manly demand for Self-Government on the part of the Constitutionalists".<sup>60</sup> In short, Fenians and moderates would co-operate around the demand for national independence. In a founding document of the New Departure, an open letter by John Devoy to the Freeman's Journal, he had stated that the intention was to bring "all sections of Nationalists into closer relations by giving them a common ground to work upon, a platform really broad enough for all to stand upon, demanding no sacrifices of principle, no abandonment of Ireland's rights".<sup>61</sup> Left like this, as it was in the text and in practice, the proposal begged the crucial question: who would have the power to determine the limits of the "common ground"?

The short answer is that the Fenians did not have that power. Their weakness can be graphically demonstrated in the contrast between Devoy's programmatic suggestion of a unilateral declaration of independence and Parnell's adamant refusal to countenance anything like it. The contrast was most sharply revealed in 1881. In February of that year, as it became increasingly clear that the government was about to impose yet another stern coercion measure, the Land League's central body

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60. Devoy, "Davitt's Career", v, Gaelic American, (July 7, 1906), p. 1; cf., Davitt's similar definition, Fall of Feudalism, p. 125. It should be noted, pace Moody and Lyons, that the New Departure was not intended to match Parnell's disingenuous description (given to the Special Commission of 1889): "a combination of the political with the agrarian movement"; cited by Lyons, Parnell, p. 90

61. Devoy, "Davitt's Career", vi, Gaelic American, (July 14, 1906), p. 2

resolved that "when the Coercion Act should become law the whole Irish parliamentary party should rise and leave the House of Commons in a body, cross to Ireland, and carry out the no-rent campaign".<sup>62</sup> Next day, Davitt was arrested. Led by John Dillon, the Irish MPs protested Davitt's arrest and the Speaker's closure of debate on the coercion act; thirty-six were suspended and removed from the House. Part of the argument in favour of "secession" was that the Irish could justifiably claim that "the constitutional weapon of parliamentary representation had been snatched from their hands"; if ever this was the case, "the gagging resolution" of the Speaker in February 1881 was the occasion. But, in fact, both of these phrases appeared in Parnell's direct rebuttal of the demand for withdrawal. Instead, he proposed to remain in parliament, for two purposes; one real, the other a demagogic gesture. The real aim was to continue to improve the terms of the forthcoming land legislation, while the gesture to the left-wing was the meritorious, but completely empty, proposal to effect "a junction between English democracy and Irish nationalism".<sup>63</sup> It should be said, before leaving this topic, that Devoy's plan was not intrinsically worthless; in fact, it was prescient, for it would be the strategy employed by Sinn

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62. Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 302; Lyons, Parnell, pp. 145-49; Lyons, Dillon, p. 45; Conor Cruise O'Brien, Parnell and His Party, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 59-60; Michael Hurst, Parnell and Irish Nationalism, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 73-4

63. Parnell's manifesto, published from Paris, February 13, 1881, is reprinted by Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, pp. 307-8; cf., C. C. O'Brien's comment that this was a masterful stroke by an "adept at the cape-work of the pseudo-revolutionary gesture": Parnell & his Party, p. 64

Fein after their sweep of the parliamentary seats and local councils in 1918.<sup>64</sup> The critical distinction between 1881 and 1918, and the reason for the Parnellites' refusal to adopt Devoy's plan, became clear in 1919: the only way to prove that the nation was independent, and to guarantee that independence, was by force of arms, a contingency which Parnell, most of his parliamentary supporters, the Catholic Church and, probably, the great bulk of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie rejected out of hand in the 1880s.

A less clear-cut indication of the Fenians' weakness within the national bloc was provided by Parnell's "capture" of several of the IRB's most talented leaders and rank and file activists, precisely the danger which strict-construction Fenians like Kickham had most feared during the negotiations prior to the New Departure.<sup>65</sup> By the end of the 1880s, the IRB was weaker than it had ever been, more deeply riven by internal scissions, further underground and less overtly influential.<sup>66</sup> Yet the story is not entirely ignominious -- the Fenians had made some important contributions to the development of Parnellism. As we have seen, they played a central role in the initiation and leadership of the

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64. Sinn Fein ("Ourselves Alone") was the generic name applied by the British to all separatist currents; before the merger in 1917, the name had applied, strictly speaking, only to the very small party led by Arthur Griffith. See, for instance, Phillips, Revolution in Ireland, pp. 152-54; Maire Comerford, The First Dail, (Dublin: Joe Clarke, 1969)

65. Moody, "The New Departure", pp. 326-27; Devoy, "Davitt's Career", vii-viii, Gaelic American, (21/28 July, 1906); O'Brien & Ryan, eds., Devoy's Post Bag, i, pp. 384-85; Marcus Bourke, John O'Leary: A Study in Irish Separatism, (Tralee: Anvil Books, 1967), pp. 149-61

66. Ó Broin, Revolutionary Underground, pp. 42-9

Land League. The American Fenians played a major part in organising the speaking tours of Parnell, Davitt and Dillon in 1878-80, which laid the basis for the American Land League, a source of much of the income which sustained the agrarian struggle in 1880-82. Although this money was specifically earmarked for Land League work and not for parliamentary campaigns, it would not be unfair to say that at least some of it ended up in Parnell's hands, literally as well as metaphorically. Even had not a penny of the American money been spent on any electoral activity,<sup>67</sup> the principal impact of the agrarian crisis upon the New Departure was to mesh the agrarian and political movements in the person of Parnell and thus to place these funds largely at his disposal. More directly, when the Land League was suppressed and replaced by the National League in 1882, the residue of the Land League funds, some £30,000 lodged in an American bank in Paris, was transferred to a trusteeship comprising Parnell and his two most senior parliamentary colleagues (J. G. Biggar and Justin McCarthy), rather than into the care of the new organisation.<sup>68</sup> It was probably the personal factor which was the most significant Fenian "contribution".

While William O'Brien was obviously indulging his habitual hyperbole when he wrote that "four-fifths of the best men in the Parnell movement"

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67. In fact, the Land League loaned Parnell £2000 in 1880, under the nice fiction that it was to contest "seats held by landlords in constituencies which the league policy would likely carry"; Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 234

68. O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, pp. 134-36, 268

had been Fenians,<sup>69</sup> it is certainly true that at least 15 and as many as 20 of the future Parnellite MPs were "captives" from the IRB.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the British Fenians who organised the British Home Rule Confederation provided a vital springboard for Parnell's leap to supremacy.

The relationship between Parnell and the Fenians was based on unequal exchange. They provided him with some indispensable early support, with several gifted propagandists, with an organisational network which was his first formal base, with funds, organisers and supporters -- in short, with some of the sinews of the mass nationalist party which was the highest expression of Parnellism. But on the other side of the transaction, the IRB never succeeded in gaining a serious foothold in the main leadership of the Parnell movement. Part of the failure must be ascribed to the purist intransigence of Kickham, under whose lead the Supreme Council refused to pursue the New Departure beyond offering provisional permission to individual members of the IRB to support "forward" constitutionalism. More important, however, was the narrowness of the Fenians' base within the whole national bloc, particularly in contrast with pre-eminence of constitutionalists and clerics in the heartlands of the strong farmers, across Leinster and

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69. O'Brien, Recollections, p. 122

70. See the biographical notes in O'Brien, Parnell & his Party, passim; Ryan, Fenian Memories, passim; O'Brien & Ryan, Devoy's Post Bag, passim; O'Brien, Recollections, pp. 98-141; O'Connor, Parnell Movement, pp. 219-620 passim; Bew, Land & the National Question, pp. 237-45

Munster.

If the Fenians generally tended to play the part of the Jacobin left in the Land League Revolution, there is no doubt that the Church stood firmly on the right. For twenty years, the Church had opposed the Fenians and all their works and had sought to counter the revolutionaries by assisting the efforts of the moderates. Now, in 1879, in the midst of an agricultural depression whose dimensions clearly worried the priests and bishops as well as their parishioners,<sup>71</sup> it seemed as if the farmers' grievances would drive them into the arms of a movement whose leadership looked suspiciously radical or Fenian to the clergy. A good definition of the Church's general outlook was provided by Bishop Power of Waterford, who wrote that "as long as the people have the active sympathy of the Clergy, and their reasonable cooperation in seeking by constitutional means the removal of their manifold grievances, they will retain their hereditary love of religion, and will continue attached and amenable to their Clergy. The real danger would be if the priests stood aloof from the people and allowed them to get under the control of dangerous guides".<sup>72</sup> Within a few short years, the Church became an integral part of the Parnellite structure, but it must be emphasised that habits of episcopal power which had developed since O'Connell were first challenged and then accommodated by Parnell.

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71. See the quotations from the bishops' correspondence, in Larkin, Church & State, pp. 16-18, 28-29

72. Power to Kirby (Rector of the Irish College, Rome), March 29, 1881, cited in ibid., p. 101

The Church's response to Parnellism, and his developing accommodation to the bishops, were the second key element in the construction of the national bloc. The nub of the matter was captured in Power's definition: the Church was prepared for "reasonable cooperation" within the bounds of "constitutional means"; her basic rule was to "render unto Caesar" by pursuing reforms with due regard for law, order and the rights of property. And, all theological objections to Fenianism aside, the clergy tended to be solid, sensible men of property, allied to similarly pragmatic members of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, conscious of the dangers to property lurking behind appeals to revolution. So long as reform and revolution had appeared to be mutually exclusive, the clergy's choice was ready-made. But the New Departure seemed to confound previously tidy mental and political compartments.

The Church and the Fenians, in fact, faced similar difficulties: how to respond to a mass movement which was not entirely of their making, on terrain where they were uncomfortable, and under leadership which they tended to distrust. Both Church and IRB were constrained by old habits, but neither was a completely immovable object. Parnell's political expertise was matched by the skill with which the clerical forces were marshalled by Thomas Croke, Archbishop of Cashel, the premier see in the southern heartland of the strong



farmers. In 1852, as a curate in county Cork, Croke had advocated boycotting as a deterrent to land-grabbers;<sup>73</sup> thirty years later, as a prince of the Church, he led the struggle within the Church to open up the new, post-Cullen positions. He fought, first, to win the rest of the hierarchy to the recognition that the moderate-revolutionary compact was a fait accompli to which they must respond favourably, because it represented the democratic will of most of the people and, simultaneously, a serious challenge to the Church. Secondly, he strove to preserve for the Church an Irish independence from Rome, and particularly from British intrigues at the Vatican. And finally, Croke led the episcopal campaign to forge an alliance with the Parnellites, to have the clergy recognised as political leaders in their own right and accommodated within the national movement on that independent footing.<sup>74</sup>

The Land League's rapid spread throughout Ireland, the capture of national representation by Parnell and his supporters, underlined by the election results in 1880,<sup>75</sup> the open involvement of Fenians in a quasi-revolutionary agrarian mass movement, and the underlying appetite for power among the leading cadre of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie -- these were elements in a process of rapid political change which potentially threatened the Church's accustomed authority

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73. Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, pp. 69-70

74. This paragraph is deeply indebted to Emmet Larkin's monumental study of the ecclesiastical archives: Church & State, wherein Croke's role is definitely a starring one.

75. On the development of Parnell's electoral supremacy, and its class basis, see below, pp.

and her normal definitions of "faith and morals". Some of the open, and most of the sub rosa, activities of the Land League clearly fell beyond the pale; indeed, some bishops opposed the League on the simple moral ground that its activities constituted a "sinful" infringement upon the rights of property.<sup>76</sup> It was largely due to the expert guidance of Archbishop Croke that the Church chose to join the nation rather than oppose it.

The clerical-Parnellite compact occurred in two stages. During the "heroic" period of the Land War, the clergy faced a simple choice: to commit themselves to the cause of the farmers or to lose their influence in the country. Recognition of this dilemma did not automatically clear the way, for while many priests agreed with their parishioners on the need to reform the land system, if necessary through the agency of the Land League, they often drew the line at cooperation with Fenians. This potential antagonism became actual, with violent clashes, during the 1880 election campaign. In county Wexford, Parnell's candidate was John Barry, the veteran Fenian who had masterminded Parnell's rise through the British Confederation; not only was he suspect as a revolutionist, but he was running against a Papal Chevalier, the chosen favourite of the local clergy.<sup>77</sup> In county Leitrim, Parnell

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76. See, for instance, the denunciations of "semi-communistic agitation" and "socialistic doctrines" by Bishops Moran and Woodlock, cited by Larkin, Church & State, pp. 41, 45

77. The Wexford battle was triangular, since the local hard-line Fenians also objected to Barry, on the grounds that he was a traitor to the Cause. Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, pp. 235-37; Lyons, Parnell, pp. 119-21; Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, pp. 213-14

insisted on the candidacy of Isaac Nelson, a Presbyterian minister from Belfast, over the strenuous opposition of the county clergy; and in Cork, Parnell himself ran in a direct contest with the bishops and most of the priests.<sup>78</sup> I find it curious that Professor Lyons should call Parnell's confrontation with the clergy at this election "a measure of his relative immaturity",<sup>79</sup> for there is some evidence that he knew what he was about. A year earlier, after a successful campaign to have Lysaght Finegan (another man tainted with Fenian links) elected, Parnell had said that "if Ennis had been lost I would have retired from public life, for it would have convinced me that the priests were supreme in Irish politics".<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, when the League's leaders were on trial, in 1880, on a conspiracy charge, it was suggested that the bishops be asked to testify on their behalf. To which, Parnell replied sharply, "Don't produce the bishops, they would hedge".<sup>81</sup> It would seem that, rather than immaturity, Parnell's initial challenge to clerical authority was part of a delicate balancing act, involving two distinct elements. First, the New Departure signified that the frontiers of respectable politics

78. Nelson was defeated, but both Barry and Parnell won. Davitt's is a nice account of the clerical campaign against Parnell in Cork -- "The bishop openly denounced Mr. Parnell as a stranger who was introducing himself upon a constituency that knew its own business. Altars rang with warnings against Fenianism and socialism and all the other wicked things which frighten the virtuous political vision of some politicians when a wealthy Catholic is being opposed for his spurious nationalism"; Fall of Feudalism, p. 238

79. Lyons, Parnell, p. 118

80. Cited by Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, p. 118

81. Cited by O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, p. 56n.

were being advanced; it was natural that conservatives would resist. Secondly, I think that Parnell's main project was a serious, long-term ambition, to establish a systematic secular political leadership for the Irish nation.

After the election, while the Land League gathered pace, "slowly, but surely and steadily", according to the Freeman's Journal, "the priests of Ireland are taking up their position in masses on the right centre of the army of agitation".<sup>82</sup> At the very beginning, thirteen priests were elected to the fifty-seven member central committee of the National Land League;<sup>83</sup> in county Mayo, Fr. John O'Malley led his parishioners in the conduct of the eponymic boycott;<sup>84</sup> and priests held office in one-third of the League branches whose correspondence has recently been examined.<sup>85</sup> Both the British authorities and the Irish revolutionaries noticed the extent of clerical authority. The Lord Lieutenant, Lord Cowper, reported to Cabinet that "the priests still exercise an extraordinary influence over the people, as has been shown lately in the most marked manner by the power they possess of controlling and pacifying the most excited crowd".<sup>86</sup> Michael Davitt, on the other hand,

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82. Cited by O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, p. 54

83. Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 173

84. Ibid., pp. 274-75; Joyce Marlow, Captain Boycott & the Irish, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1973); Palmer, Land League Crisis, pp. 195-217

85. Clark, "Political Mobilisation", p. 496

86. Cited by Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, pp. 287-88

was clearly worried about "the class of men who are now joining us", and he warned Devoy that "there is a danger, however, of this class and the Priests coalescing by and by and ousting the advanced men or gaining control of the whole thing and turning it against us".<sup>87</sup> His fears were entirely justified.

The climax of the first phase of the Church's relations with Parnell coincided, broadly, with the passage of the Land Act of 1881, and more fundamentally, with Parnell's adroit handling of the agrarian radicals during the early part of that year. In May, Croke wrote a fulsome tribute to Parnell -- "You are the chosen and trusted leader not alone of the Irish parliamentary party, but of the Irish people. I recognise you fully and faithfully as such".<sup>88</sup> It is clear from Larkin's study of the bishops' correspondence that what Croke and the other members of the hierarchy who agreed with him had discerned was the essential moderation of Parnell's position.<sup>89</sup>

The second stage on the road to rapprochement between Parnellism and the Church brings us, finally, to the year of the Irish Thermidor, 1881-82, when Parnell decisively steered Irish politics back into the constitutional channel. This movement involved a complex series of events, crammed into a short span.

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87. Davitt to Devoy, December 16, 1880, in O'Brien & Ryan, Devoy's Post Bag, ii, p. 23

88. Cited by O'Brien, Recollections, p. 314n.

89. Cf., the remarks of Bishop Moran of Ossory (Cullen's nephew), cited by Larkin, Church & State, p. 127

This short period saw the initiative pass, in large measure, to the British authorities. The tempo of events was dictated by a series of legal developments -- the parliamentary struggles over coercion and the Land Act, the proscription of the Land League, the imprisonment of the Irish leaders. It is clear that the combination of coercion (the Protection of Person and Property Act) and concession (the Land Act) were serving the main purpose, to demoralise the Land League and to suppress widespread resistance to rent. Nevertheless, the Irish leaders maintained their verbal defiance and boycotting continued into the autumn of 1881. Gladstone's patience having finally run out, on October 7 he warned Parnell that "the resources of civilization were not exhausted" and that parliamentary obstruction and agrarian violence would no longer be tolerated. Parnell's retort combined insolence and defiance, martial rhetoric and nationalist history; he scorned Gladstone, tellingly, as "this pretending champion of the rights of every other nation except those of the Irish nation" and he reiterated the fundamental national and class contradiction, "The land of Ireland has been confiscated three times over by the men whose descendants Mr. Gladstone is supporting in the enjoyment of the fruits of their plunder by his bayonets and his buckshot".<sup>90</sup> The government's reaction was inevitable. Within days, Parnell and the rest of the central leadership of the Land League were in Kilmainham

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90. This speech is most fully reprinted in Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, pp. 308-10; cf., Lyons, Parnell, pp. 167-68; Larkin, Church & State, pp. 124-25

Gaol. Once in prison, Parnell sanctioned the most characteristically cynical gesture he ever made, the release of the "No-Rent Manifesto" as an ostensible sop to the agrarian radicals. This was the general strike against rents which might well have been effective when the Land League had originally called for it, in February 1881. But in October, after nine months of coercion the organisation was in shreds and both local and national leaders were in prison. Thousands of eligible farmers were already pursuing reduced rents through the land courts. Finally, all the key forces within the national bloc were opposed to the tactic: most of Parnell's parliamentary supporters,<sup>91</sup> his staunchest friends in the Catholic hierarchy,<sup>92</sup> the leading moderate nationalist newspapers, The Nation and the Freeman's Journal. The outcome was that, instead of an orderly, disciplined League-led general strike against rents, the continued grievances of the small tenants in particular produced a winter of intensive and sporadic violence. The failure of coercion to deal with the recurrence of agrarian terrorism during the winter of 1881-82 served to persuade Gladstone that Parnell alone enjoyed the authority to impose some semblance of law and order on Ireland, that he was in fact the national leader he claimed to be. After several weeks of murky

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91. O'Brien reckons that no more than half a dozen of the thirty-odd Parnellite MPs would have been willing to campaign for the "no-rent" programme in February 1881: Parnell & His Party, p. 61

92. Larkin, Church & State, pp. 128-30

negotiations, conducted through shady intermediaries,<sup>93</sup> the two leaders reached the agreement that has come to be known as the "Kilmainham Treaty". Gladstone undertook to release the Irish leaders and to settle the arrears issue, while Parnell promised to withdraw the dead-letter No-Rent Manifesto and to commit the Irish party "to cooperate cordially for the future with the Liberal Party in forwarding Liberal principles and measures of general reform".<sup>94</sup>

In making this agreement, Parnell sought to define the limits for Irish politics -- constitutional over agrarian, parliamentary over agitational. It remained to be seen whether he enjoyed the basis of support which would allow these limits to be imposed, whether they coincided with a fundamental class interest within the Irish nation. In the practical implementation of this project there were two main aspects: the purge of the left and the creation of the party through which constitutional hegemony could be wielded.

For the first part of the operation, Parnell enjoyed both a run of luck and significant tactical advantages. In the first instance, the left

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93. Parnell's relations with Capt. Willie O'Shea, the husband of his mistress, Katharine, always contained a sordid undercurrent. O'Shea, Parnell's liaison with Chamberlain and Gladstone, was a particularly noxious opportunist, the only man to sit as a Parnellite MP without having taken the party pledge of unity. Parnell's imposition of him on the party, as his candidate for Galway in 1886, threatened to cause a revolt among his main supporters. See O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, pp. 166-84; Lyons, Parnell, pp. 312-40; T. W. Moody, "Select Documents: Parnell and the Galway Election of 1886", IHS, IX, (1954-5), pp. 319-38

94. This is Parnell's definition, from a letter to O'Shea, cited by Barry O'Brien, Parnell, i, p. 344; cf., the analysis of the "Kilmainham Treaty" by Lyons, Parnell, pp. 187-207; O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, pp. 75-9



was deeply divided: it included secret terrorist organisations like the Invincibles,<sup>95</sup> the IRB and the American Fenians (Clan na Gael),<sup>96</sup> the ex-Fenian Land Leaguers and the Ladies Land League.<sup>97</sup> The secret societies, the IRB and the Clan were all beyond Parnell's control; and to defeat them would require the development of an alternative focus of political activity. The Ladies Land League and the agrarian radicals who had forced the pace of the Land League struggle were brought to heel by a simple expedient: on Parnell's instructions, they were denied access to the funds.<sup>98</sup> The other main danger to Parnell's project was the possibility of a breach in the solidarity of the national leadership, and here fortune smiled. None of the leading "left-agrarians" (most of them ex-Fenians like Davitt, Dillon, O'Brien, Brennan and Egan) was prepared to challenge Parnell. Although the "purge" was essentially bloodless, and substantially complete before October 1882, it continued to have ramifications for several years. As Parnell's grasp on the national movement became firmer, former "leftists" like Matt Harris

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95. The Invincibles, probably a schismatic group of Dublin Fenians, assassinated Chief Secretary Lord Frederick Cavendish and Under-Secretary T. H. Burke, in Dublin's Phoenix Park on May 6, 1882, just four days after Parnell's release from gaol; cf., Ó Broin, Revolutionary Underground, pp. 24-30

96. Thomas N. Brown, Irish-American Nationalism, 1870-90, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1966); the Clan's internal affairs are aired throughout O'Brien & Ryan, eds., Devoy's Post Bag.

97. The Ladies Land League was formed, under the period of coercion, as a parallel organisation and an alternative leadership while the male leaders were interned.

98. O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, pp. 134-36, 268; Lyons, Parnell, p. 227

and Patrick Egan faced a brutally simple choice -- to follow Davitt into submission to Parnell or to opt for exile, as did Egan and several of the ex-Fenian organisers.

In September 1882, with the approval or acquiescence of his parliamentary and agrarian colleagues in hand, Parnell summoned a meeting of "representative men . . . for the purpose of discussing a programme of reform for Ireland".<sup>99</sup> The meeting established the Irish National League, which was to pursue national self-government, democratic local government, industrial development and the consolidation of the gains won under the Land Act of 1881.<sup>100</sup> Davitt was not far off when he argued that the formation of the National League was "the counter-revolution . . . the complete eclipse, by a purely parliamentary substitute, of what had been a semi-revolutionary organisation".<sup>101</sup> In order to understand Davitt's point it is necessary to recapitulate the development of the "third force", the cadre of professional politicians who manned the party machine which was installed at the apex of Irish political life through the creation of the National League.

When John Barry and the British Fenians engineered Parnell's elevation through the British Home Rule Confederation they were

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99. Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 371: the letter was issued over the signatures of Parnell, Davitt, Dillon, Brennan, Arthur O'Connor, T. M. Healy (the party's legal wizard) and Thomas Sexton (the financial expert).

100. The programme is reprinted in Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, pp. 375-77; cf., Lyons, Parnell, pp. 235-37

101. Davitt, Fall of Feudalism, p. 377

gambling on an unknown quantity: Parnell was young, relatively inexperienced, and most significantly, one of a tiny minority of perhaps half a dozen among the 100-odd Irish MPs. Butt was still the chosen leader. Even Butt's death in May 1879 did not automatically favour Parnell, for the "party" chose William Shaw to succeed Butt as their parliamentary chairman. However, Parnell was able to advance himself by joining the agrarian mass movement and by pursuing the "active" policy of aggressive parliamentary obstruction. As a result, when the Irish Home Rule MPs chose their sessional chairman in 1880, the man they selected was Parnell. But even so, the best that could be said for many of these "Home Rulers" was they knew how to trim their sails to the prevailing winds; according to O'Brien's calculation, fewer than one in four of the Irish MPs in 1880 were "definite Parnellites".<sup>102</sup>

From 1880 until the general election of 1885, the number of "Parnellites" in parliament fluctuated between a bare dozen and as many as thirty-six. Apart from the enforced absence, in prison, of several of the activist MPs, the key reason for the fluctuation was the fact that, before the creation of the National League, "Parnellism" was still a function of personality and issue rather than of party. Parnell, in other words, was chairman of an unstable parliamentary grouping of

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102. "Parnellites" were identifiable, at this time, by their connection with the agrarian agitation (their presence on platforms at land meetings or membership of the League) and by their participation in the co-ordinated bouts of obstruction which were the hallmark of "active parliamentarism": O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, pp. 25-32

individualists, but not yet master of a distinctive and disciplined political party. By the yardstick of parliamentary seats, therefore, Parnellite representation of Ireland fell far short of a monopoly before 1885. Nonetheless, the consistent Parnellite claim to speak in the true vox populi was substantially accurate. Both Gladstone and Archbishop Croke acknowledged the claim, and the electors consistently agreed by choosing Parnellites at all the Irish by-elections (except Tyrone in September 1881) between 1880 and 1885.

The turning point was the creation of the National League. From the outset, the parliamentary party dominated the League. In principle, the League was to be governed by a central council, to consist of thirty-two county representatives and sixteen members of the party; in practice, the council never came into being, since the original "organising committee" of thirty remained in power. In October 1882, this committee included 12 MPs; subsequent elections added another seven committee-men to the parliamentary complement. In short, the League was "an autocratically controlled body, ruled by a committee which it had not elected, and whose powers were undefined".<sup>103</sup> Even within this narrow circle, the practical locus of power was restricted to the central caucus of the parliamentary party, the informal group of about a dozen of Parnell's most trusted parliamentary colleagues.<sup>104</sup>

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103. O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, pp. 127-28 & n.

104. Ibid., pp. 131, 145-47; C. C. O'Brien, "The Machinery of the Irish Parliamentary Party, 1880-85", IHS, V, (1946-7), pp. 64-5, 79-81

While the formal transformation was accomplished quite smoothly at the founding conference of the National League, the period between then and the general election of 1885 was devoted to perfecting "the smooth-running national electioneering machinery which had hitherto been lacking to the parliamentary party".<sup>105</sup> In political terms, this process amounted to confirming and consolidating the right-ward shift inaugurated by the Irish Thermidor of 1881-82. This move encompassed both internal, structural tightening of the party and the development of a new alliance. Within the party, the elevation of Parnell's "lieutenants" into an informal cabinet, an idea first mooted in 1880, was pursued with some vigour after 1882. This grouping became a disciplinary as well as policy-making body for the party.<sup>106</sup> The concept of pledge-bound party unity, which the Fenians especially had insisted upon during the early "new departures" with Butt, was revived in 1884. Parnell alluded to it in a speech in March; in August, T. M. Healy first applied the pledge to a candidate at the party convention for the Dungarvan by-election; thereafter, the pledge was applied to all Parnellite candidates (with the single, sordid exception of Willie O'Shea). The final version of the pledge achieved cast-iron party unity by requiring the prospective Parnellite to affirm his intention to "sit, act and vote with the Irish parliamentary party" and to resign his seat if it should be judged by a majority of the

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105. O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, p. 128

106. Ibid., pp. 144-47

party to have broken the pledge.<sup>107</sup> Finally, the National League's "organising committee" -- in practice, the party's leading caucus -- imposed centralised control over the branches. The key to this discipline was the fact that the county conventions of delegates from the branches were summoned by the central leadership to confirm policies and candidates who were, in most cases, pre-determined by the central leaders. Refractory branches could, in extremis, simply be dissolved by order of the central committee.<sup>108</sup>

The "external" development of Parnellism from 1882 was a corollary of the purge of the left. In the place of the extremist and therefore unreliable Fenians and the submerged and fractured forces of radical agrarianism, Parnell's party rediscovered the O'Connellite strategy of enrolling the clergy en bloc. From 1883, the party campaigned systematically to reassure the hierarchy of their orthodoxy in the two areas of major concern to the Church -- commitment to constitutional means and support for ecclesiastical claims in matters of education. For their part, the bishops maintained a diplomatic silence about the Roman Circular of May 1883, which denounced the "Parnell Testimonial Fund" as "tending to inflame popular passions, and to used as the means for leading men into rebellion against the laws".<sup>109</sup> The

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107. O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, pp. 140-43; Lyons, Parnell, pp. 252, 256-57

108. O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, p. 128n, cites a case of dissolution.

109. Cited by Larkin, Church & State, pp. 185-86

party attacked the Church's favourite bêtes noires, discovering a rich vein of invective against Radicalism, socialism and secularism.<sup>110</sup> In October 1884, the Catholic hierarchy, assembled in national council, finally put their official seal of approval on the Parnellite party with the passage of a resolution which entrusted the care of "the hitherto unsatisfied claims of Catholic Ireland in all branches of the educational question" to the party.<sup>111</sup>

The party responded generously to this imprimatur. At the first party convention called to select candidates for the impending general election (Wicklow), Timothy Harrington, the National League secretary, read out the rules for the conduct and composition of these meetings. They were to comprise four delegates from each League branch, plus any of the Catholic clergy who wished to attend. Indeed, the convention would meet twice -- first in private session, under the direction of an MP, usually one of the inner group, to conclude the selection of the candidate(s). The "public" session which followed consisted primarily of ritual expression of solidarity and faith in the party.<sup>112</sup> Not only were the candidates actually selected, not by the county or city conventions, but by the inner caucus of the party, but the

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110. O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, pp. 88-9; Larkin, Church & State, p. 242; O'Brien, William O'Brien & Irish Politics, p. 24; Alan O'Day, The English Face of Irish Nationalism: Parnellite Involvement in British Politics, 1880-86, (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1976), pp. 79-82, 85

111. Larkin, Church & State, p. 244; O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, p. 89n.

112. O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, pp. 128-30; Lyons, Parnell, pp. 256-57

clerical role in these proceedings was formally and visibly greater than it had ever been since O'Connell's emancipation campaign. Most surely, the priests had a much more important part in the National League than in the agrarian struggle conducted by the Land League, a bare five years earlier. Priests were now recruited and recognised on foot of a single criterion -- their priesthood. Archbishop Walsh of Dublin was most blunt about the matter; on the eve of the Wicklow convention, he instructed his clergy to ensure the selection of "sound" candidates or else to block the proceedings by adjournment or withdrawal.<sup>113</sup>

The concordat between Church and party was sealed after the general election of 1885, with the hierarchy's announcement, in February 1886, that "as regards self-government or Home Rule, it is our firm conviction . . . that it alone can satisfy the 'wants and wishes of the Irish people'".<sup>114</sup> As to the reasons for the Church's adhesion to the Parnellite bloc, a simple opportunist sense for the locus of power should not be overlooked. But there was a more fundamental, conservative inclination within the Church; the fears that several of the bishops had voiced in 1879-80 still agitated Archbishop MacEvilly of Tuam in 1885. "I am greatly afraid", he wrote to Rome, "of the wild revolutionists, from whom the Irish Party, if well supported, will save us".<sup>115</sup> In the

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113. Three weeks later, on October 7, 1885, the national episcopal council adopted Walsh's diocesan line for the whole Church: Larkin, Church & State, pp. 334-35; O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, p. 129

114. Cited by Larkin, Church & State, p. 363; cf., O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, p. 184

115. Cited by Larkin, Church & State, p. 339



weeks on the eve of the election in 1885, the party made a special effort to allay ecclesiastical fears and convince the Church of their willingness to act as a bulwark against "wild revolutionism". J. J. O'Kelly, who was reputed to be the most extreme man in the party and who was certainly the closest remaining link between Parnell and the Fenians,<sup>116</sup> and Parnell himself both argued that support for their conception of "home rule" was the best guarantee against extremism. Parnell's explanation was made in a speech at Wicklow in October 1885 -- "give our people the power to legislate on all their domestic concerns and you may depend on one thing, that the desire for separation, the means of separation, at least, will not be increased or intensified".<sup>117</sup>

By the end of 1885, the Parnellite national united front had been erected. It comprised, essentially, an alliance between the parliamentary party and the Catholic clergy. Its fundamental goals were to achieve Home Rule and democratic reforms; its means were to be "advanced" constitutional ones. Dangerous notions of agrarian class war were to be contained,<sup>118</sup> and the Fenian project of complete separation

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116. See Archbishop Walsh's comments on O'Kelly, cited by Larkin, Church & State, p. 334; and O'Kelly's continued correspondence with Devoy, in O'Brien & Ryan, Devoy's Post Bag, ii, pp. 116-23, 140-46, 155-57, 172-80, 264-67. The last letter in this series is particularly revealing, for it contains an adroit attempt by O'Kelly to blame Parnell's accommodation with the bishops on the sectarianism of the IRB!

117. Cited by Lyons, Parnell, p. 296; Larkin, Church & State, pp. 279-80

118. This is not to suggest that agrarian problems or struggles could be entirely suppressed. But it was an essential characteristic of the Plan of Campaign in 1886-90 that the struggle was limited, by central decision, to selected target estates.

and secular republicanism, through armed revolution, was suppressed. While the Orange claims that Terror had been the condition of Ireland under the sway of the Land League in 1880-81 were undoubtedly overblown, Thermidor was certainly the order of the day from 1882 onwards. The issue posed by this transformation is the crucial one of the class basis of Parnellism, for that alone will allow an assessment of the achievements (and limitations) of the Parnellite solution to the national question.

#### Nation, Class and Party

Violence is the only way of securing a hearing for moderation.<sup>119</sup>

This statement, ascribed to William O'Brien, editor of the weekly Parnellite journal, United Ireland, could well serve as the key motif in the development and underlying sense of Parnellism. The best vantage point from which to assess that movement is at the moment of triumph. It can justly be claimed that "1885 was the climax of Parnell's career" -- it was certainly the pinnacle of development of the constitutional movement for Irish independence. It was, therefore, the year in which the essential features of that movement were most clearly

119. Cited by O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, p. 69. O'Brien himself described United Ireland as "an insurrection in print"; and on reading the first issue, the Viceroy was said to have exclaimed, "Who is this new madman?"

revealed.

At the general election of 1885, Parnell's Irish Party won a massive victory. They swept every seat in Catholic Ireland, plus the Catholic Irish constituency of Scotland Road in Liverpool. Moreover, the eighty-six Irish MPs held the balance of power between the two English parties at Westminster. The winter and spring of 1885-86 were a period of high Irish hopes. The electoral voice of Catholic Ireland was unanimous; their representatives seemed to have the power to determine any parliamentary outcome; and one of the great English parties appeared to have been converted to the cause of Home Rule.<sup>120</sup> Independence, if only in the limited legislative form advocated by the party, seemed to be no further away than a couple of parliamentary divisions. In the event, on June 8, 1886, Gladstone's first Home Rule bill was defeated on second reading by a Commons majority of 341 to 311.<sup>121</sup>

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120. The Liberal adoption of Home Rule was the result of a long, complex series of developments. The discussions between Parnell and Chamberlain, resulting in the latter's proposal of a "central board" or devolved Irish legislature with strictly limited powers, are analysed by C. H. D. Howard, "Joseph Chamberlain, Parnell & the 'Central Board' Scheme", and "Select Documents relating to the 'Central Board' Scheme", *IHS*, VIII, (1953), pp. 237-53, 324-61; cf., Lyons, *Parnell*, pp. 268-72. Then, in the summer of 1885, the Tory Viceroy, Carnarvon, informed the Cabinet and Parnell of his own conversion to a measure of Home Rule short of repeal of the Union: cf., Curtis, *Coercion & Conciliation*, pp. 49-52; Lyons, *Parnell*, pp. 282-87; Larkin, *Church & State*, pp. 345-49. The critical turning point was Gladstone's decision to opt for Home Rule: Lyons, *Parnell*, pp. 308-9, 344-52; John Morley, *The Life of Gladstone*, (popular edition: London: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.), pp. 449-55

121. A second attempt was defeated in 1893. The third and final version was passed in 1914 and immediately deferred for the duration of the war. The Easter Rising in 1916 "changed, changed utterly" the situation, and the third Home Rule bill simply vanished into the archives.

There is an apparent anomaly in this story of high hopes quickly dashed. The electoral sweep by the Parnellites in 1885 was not a fluke. Its significance lasted for well over thirty years, for 1885 established a pattern which would remain unbroken down through the Sinn Fein sweep in 1918-20, in both national and local elections.<sup>122</sup> Why did the Irish remain loyal to a strategy and an underlying political perspective which signally failed to achieve their purpose?

For three years, since the establishment of the National League in 1882, Parnell and his party had bent all their efforts towards one over-riding goal -- to establish, on impeccably constitutional grounds, the legitimacy of their claim to represent a national majority in favour of self-government for Ireland. The creation of the National League, the consolidation of the party machine, the purge of the left, the neutralisation of the agrarian radicals, and the construction of the alliance with the Church had all been directed towards that end. The electoral sweep in 1885 testified to Parnell's tactical mastery and Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule seemed to confirm the wisdom of the strategy inaugurated by the "Kilmainham Treaty". At the heart of tactic and strategy stood a central proposition: that once the Irish nation,

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122. See the indispensable analysis of Irish election results in F. S. L. Lyons, The Irish Parliamentary Party, 1890-1910, (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), esp. pp. 130-35; and the argument which suggests that the "Parnellite" pattern actually continued after Independence, in E. Rumpf & A. C. Hepburn, Nationalism & Socialism in Twentieth Century Ireland, (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 1977); but cf., the analysis by David Fitzpatrick, "The Geography of Irish Nationalism, 1910-21", Past & Present, 78, (1978), pp. 112-37

now taken to be coterminous with Parnell's electoral base, had affirmed its support for the demand for Home Rule, nothing could stand in the way of its passage. England, said this argument, implicitly if not in so many words, would be morally obliged to grant self-government. The fact that England experienced no such moral compunction, that moral obligation fell far below military and material considerations on England's political agenda,<sup>123</sup> exposed the fatal dislocation between the Parnellite goal and Parnellite strategy.

It must be remarked, in Parnell's defence, that the problem he faced in 1886 was not unique. In somewhat different circumstances, it had already led to O'Connell's ignominious capitulation at the climax of the Repeal campaign in 1843; and in 1918, Parnell's successor, John Redmond, would see his political career collapse in the face of Orange-Tory intransigence and the rise of the revolutionary Sinn Fein movement. O'Connell, Parnell and Redmond shared a conviction of parliamentary supremacy, a not ignoble vision of a peaceful resolution of centuries of Anglo-Irish conflict, and an unswerving renunciation of the resort to arms (which they normally couched in terms of Ireland's military inferiority). They were, therefore, defeated. They achieved neither the restricted legislative independence which they advocated nor the

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123. In 1920, as in 1798-1800 (during the debates over Union), Ireland's strategic significance as a naval boom between England and the rest of the world was still a factor to be cited by Lloyd George in opposition to independence. See the passage quoted by Nan Milton, ed., John Maclean: In the Rapids of the Revolution, (London: Allison & Busby, 1978), p. 144

increasingly sovereign conception of nationhood which was dictated by the constant elevation of Irish demands. It may be argued that the key defect in their vision was the failure or refusal to recognise that, in the realm of international relations, moral force alone, without the ultimate authority of armed force, will not suffice. In the case of Parnell and Redmond, in particular, their understanding of the national question under the conditions of imperialism was inadequate. It was a little naive, to put it kindly, to anticipate that the premier imperialist power would give up her first colony without a fight.

An alternative approach to this issue may be made through a reprise of the Terror-Thermidor theme, in the form of Davitt's claim that there was a clear-cut contrast between the "semi-revolutionary" Land League struggle and the "counter-revolution" inaugurated by the formation of the National League. This argument rested on indisputable facts of Irish political life, but their interpretation as a retrogressive step, which prevented a revolution which would otherwise have occurred, involves more wishful thinking than concrete analysis of the real balance of class forces. First and foremost, revolutions requires a revolutionary class which has been prepared ideologically, politically and organisationally to take power. Where was this class in Ireland in the 1880s?

The answer, of course, is that the only class which had the economic power and social authority to play this role was the agrarian

petty-bourgeoisie. It was this very class which Parnellism trained, organised, disciplined, represented and led, not towards revolution but through a series of cumulative reforms. The 1880s were the decade when this class came of age. The achievements and limitations of Parnellism were fundamentally conditioned by the outlook of this class. While Matt Harris was unduly harsh when he said that their outlook extended no further than the boundaries of their farms, the central fact remained that most farmers and rural businessmen were simply not interested in revolution. They wanted the land, and they were prepared to fight for it, but in their own, mainly legalistic and reformist ways. They were indifferent or openly hostile to Davitt's schemes for land nationalisation and they never flocked to join the IRB. James Daly was not far wrong when he commented that "if you give facilities to create peasant proprietorship, you would make the peasants more conservative than the Conservatives".<sup>124</sup> The bedrock of Parnell's "counter-revolution" was the advancing power and self-confidence of the leading rural class. The main features of the right-ward shift ran with -- not counter to -- the most significant tendencies in the post-Famine development of class relations. The most substantive legacy of Parnellism was the body of reforms in land law which confirmed and reinforced the economic and social powers of the strong farmers, and,

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124. Cited by Lee, Modernisation, p. 69. Cf., the more formal version of this idea, in Montifort Longfield's comment to W. H. Smith that "every property in land enlists, pro tanto, its proprietor in the cause of law and order against anarchy and tumult"; cited by Pomfret, Struggle for Land, p. 222

by extension, those of their class cousins and allies.

The main political expressions of these strengths were less dramatic but no less significant. The consolidation of the Parnellite national bloc between 1882 and 1885 represented major accretions in the power of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. Their gains were measured in their conquest of national representation, in significant advances in Irish local government, and in the importance of the Parnellite movement itself. When all the constraints and stumbling blocks in their way are taken into account, these advances by the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie come out in striking relief. The most important of these constraints was the systematic, historical condition of national oppression: political power and representation had long been a jealously guarded preserve of the landowning Ascendancy. The Parnell movement organised the first victorious nation-wide revolt against the Ascendancy's "right" to speak for and to rule Ireland.<sup>125</sup> It is not necessary to overstate the problem of "deference" in order to measure the gains of the 1880s, but it is undoubtedly true that this decade was the period when the Ascendancy became unalterably alien, the Garrison.<sup>126</sup> National oppression took what may also be called domestic forms. One material constraint on

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125. O'Connell, of course, had organised the first significant challenge to the Ascendancy, but it was neither nation-wide nor victorious. The electoral sweep of 1885 was clearly a qualitatively different phenomenon to the victories at Waterford and Clare in 1828-29.

126. The most recent version of the deference argument may be found in Lee, Modernisation, pp. 89-94; and for an excellent literary account of the very real changes in Irish consciousness during this period, see George Birmingham, The Bad Times, (New York: Doran, 1914)



the direct rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie was very simple. The number of strong farmers or country shopkeepers who could afford the financial burden of parliamentary attendance was inevitably limited. Moreover, the striking Parnellite innovation of subsidising needier members was tempered, especially from 1885, by a preference for self-sufficient or, better still, wealthy candidates.<sup>127</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the difficulties, the first two tenant farmers in the parliamentary party (W. H. O'Sullivan and Nicholas Ennis) were joined by two more in 1880 and by another half-dozen in 1885. Between 1892 and 1910, the number of farmers in the Irish party rose from eight to fifteen.<sup>128</sup> Bearing in mind the snobbish remarks about Biggar's commercial background, it is hardly surprising that hostility to the Irish party was expressed in comments on the "lowering tone" of the representation.<sup>129</sup> It was not simply that farmers were appearing at Westminster, but that a major class shift was underway. These Irishmen were definitely not the aristocrats who had held sway for so long, and indeed there was some question as to whether they were all that a gentleman should be.

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Several of the leading Parnellites were perfect embodiments

127. O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, p. 269

128. Ibid., pp. 11-35, 150-58; Lyons, Irish Parliamentary Party, pp. 158-81

129. See, for instance, the comments by Frank Hugh O'Donnell and Sir Henry Lucy, cited by O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, pp. 19, 34, 115. Thus, O'Donnell referred scathingly to "out-of-works from a dozen modest professions" occupying seats formerly held by Ascendancy figures: History of the Irish Parliamentary Party, i, p. 467

of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. W. H. O'Sullivan, Joseph Biggar, and Matthew Harris, for instance, all had direct links with the agricultural economy. As the 1880s progressed, more men like them joined the Parnellite ranks in parliament: cattle-dealers, farmers, publicans and shopkeepers. But it would be unrealistic to expect that the revolution in Irish representation would, in a single step, replace the landowners with farmers. Instead, while the economic core of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie supplied about one-quarter of the Irish MPs by 1886, the bulk of the rest of the party was drawn from men whose class background was similarly modest. What distinguished them was their common commitment to the Parnellite definition of the national cause, and thus, in practice, to the fortunes of the predominant class. Doctors, lawyers and nationalist journalists ("penny-a-liners" in the dismissive phrase used by O'Donnell) figured largely in the party's ranks. The rising importance of lawyers, who comprised 25 per cent of the party between 1892 and 1910, was not unconnected with the orgy of litigation which accompanied the land legislation from 1881 onwards. This combination of farmers, merchants and professional middle-class politicians was a stable force; from the sweep of 1885, they provided three-quarters of all the Nationalist MPs.<sup>130</sup>

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130. See Thornley, Isaac Butt & Home Rule, pp. 205-11; O'Brien, Parnell & His Party, pp. 13-21, 150-58; Lyons, Irish Parliamentary Party, pp. 169-72. One of the nicest descriptions of the Irish nationalist politician, statistically unsound of course, a little sarcastic but not unsympathetic, can be found in Birmingham, Irishmen All, pp. 79-95

The Members of Parliament were the tip of the Parnellite iceberg. The other nine-tenths consisted of the extensive Parnellite party organisation, which was perfected between 1882 and 1885, and the wide range of social, literary, athletic, economic and political expressions of nationalism which came, more or less,<sup>131</sup> under the aegis of the predominant nationalist force. The party organisation universally linked the local branches of the National League, the county delegate conventions, tenant-farmers' clubs, associations of townsmen and the clergy into one representative and hegemonic system. The resilience of this over-arching class organisation was demonstrated after Parnell's fall from grace in 1890-91, when the various factional disputes within the Irish nationalist movement, and especially within the parliamentary party, always reproduced the essential organisational model which had been elaborated between 1882 and 1885. Even more striking evidence of the basic strengths of the machine, and its class base, was the fact that in 1917-18 virtually the whole Parnellite network simply transferred its allegiance from the gerontocratic parliamentary leadership offered by Redmond to the rising authority of the Sinn Fein bloc under Griffith, de Valera and Collins. The crucial outcome of that

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131. This qualification is essential if only because the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Ancient Order of Hibernians, for instance, were worlds apart; the one a part of the linguistic revival movement and a seedbed for a new generation of Fenians, the other a patronage and vote-delivery machine. To the indisputable extent that Parnell's definition of Home Rule held the field in nationalist political discourse from 1885 to 1916, it was the benchmark for all other movements.

switch was made manifest in 1922, when it became clear that the principal victors in the Irish national revolution would still be the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

At this stage it should almost go without saying, though it must be emphasised, that the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie was eminently pragmatic. One of the crucial distinctions between Parnellism and Fenianism was the latter's apocalyptic tendencies. Thus although the central goal of all the political activity from 1882 onwards was self-government, the programme of the National League had clearly stated the nation's intention to press for reforms pending the achievement of that goal. Not the least of the reforms which were demanded was the long overdue renovation of Irish local government. One of the driving forces behind the growth of the Parnellite movement was the abiding consciousness of the Irish that they were excluded from or under-represented in positions of power within their own society. The 1880s organised that awareness and gave it the self-confidence for victory, through a series of challenges to the hitherto apparently impregnable powers of the Protestant Ascendancy. The most manifest of these was, of course, the struggle over the land. In the important domain of local government, which had virtually been a monopoly of the landowning class, the decisive assault was launched during the Land War and pursued by the Parnellite movement. Thus, against the traditional view that Irish

local government did not succumb to the advances of democracy until the wholesale reform of 1898, the recent analysis of the Boards of Guardians who managed the Poor Law system, by William Feingold, has demonstrated that the strong farmers and merchants made significant inroads in the landowners' powers on those bodies in the early 1880s. Thus, in 1877 no fewer than 87 per cent of the executive offices in the boards were held by landowners and justices of the peace (who were, if not landowners themselves, chosen for their respect for the rights of property and often for their kinship ties to the leading local landowner); in 1886, after a strenuous decade of political contest, the rural petty-bourgeoisie had captured half of the executive positions.<sup>132</sup> Similarly, the local organisations of the Parnellite movement were the springboard from which many other members of this class enhanced their access to political power in the 1880s: the hundreds of farmers, merchants and priests who served as town commissioners, members of various boards, directors of co-operatives, and national school managers. The underlying significance of this development was that when the country, rural and urban district councils were established on a democratic basis in 1898, there already existed "a plentiful supply of experienced administrators and politicians among the tenantry".<sup>133</sup>

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132. W. L. Feingold, "The Tenants' Movement to Capture the Irish Poor Law Boards, 1877-86", *Albion*, VII, (1975), pp. 216-31

133. *Ibid.*, pp. 224, 226, 231

In closing, it must be recalled that there is a third front in the class struggle. Clearly, the economic and political advances registered by the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie during the Parnellite decade were paramount, but it would be a serious error to underestimate Parnell's contribution to the ideological development of the Irish nation. It was, perhaps, in this relatively intangible realm that his impact was greatest. Even in defeat and death, after he had been overthrown as national leader, Parnell's national stature was virtually unassailable. He was elevated into the national pantheon, whence his memory echoed through the literary (and political) renaissance from the 1890s onwards. Yeats, Joyce and O'Casey all employed Parnell, in their distinctive fashion, as an icon of independent nationhood. Lyons' short epitaph is nicely under-stated -- "He gave his people back their self-respect".<sup>134</sup> I think, however, that it misses a crucial element of Parnell's significance, for which we must return full circle to the heart of his politics. This was, without doubt, the demand for national independence, and though Parnell himself clearly preferred a restricted version of Home Rule, those of his words which are engraved on his monument in Dublin best express the crucial point -- "no man has the right to fix the boundary to the march of a nation. No man has the right to say to his country, 'Thus far shalt thou go and no further', and we have never

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134. Lyons, Parnell, p. 616

attempted to fix the ne plus ultra to the progress of Ireland's nationhood, and we never shall". In short, Parnell made the demand for national self-determination not only respectable but irrevocable.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONCLUSIONS: UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT & THE BOURGEOIS REVOLUTION IN IRELAND

#### Framework: Famine to Land War

The rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie was framed by two massive social upheavals. The Great Famine of 1845-50 opened the way for them and the Land War of 1879-82 confirmed their hold on the means of production. The third quarter of the nineteenth century was the critical stage in the development of the distinctive ruling class which assumed power in Catholic Ireland in 1921-23. At first glance, the decision to break off the story in the mid-1880s would appear to leave the issue strangely truncated, since another forty years would intervene before independence was finally achieved. My intention was not, however, to provide a global analysis of the struggle for Irish freedom, but to examine the crucial formative period, from genesis to maturity, when the fundamental patterns of Irish national economic and political development were laid down. The victory of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie in 1921-23 rested upon the foundations established between the Famine and the Land War. The class struggles which were fought out within the national revolutionary period, down to the Civil War of 1922-23, and the specific social and economic policies pursued by the



Irish Free State (Saorstát Éireann) can only be adequately understood on the basis of a prior analysis of the main structural developments of Catholic agrarian capitalism. It is essential, therefore, to begin with a brief resume of the principal aspects of those determinant structural changes.

The first point is to emphasise, once more, that the Famine was a true watershed, a crucial moment of transformation. The central significance of the Famine was that it wrought a massive and rapid alteration in the relations of production, a change which was inevitably reflected in the organisation of the productive forces. The key changes -- in demographic patterns, in agricultural production and in the distribution of land-holdings -- all shared an indelible class character. They tended to confirm and reinforce the predominance of the strong farmers in the basic sphere of economic production. This issue may also be posed by way of a brief contrast between pre- and post-Famine agriculture. The tillage system, down to 1845, may be characterised as tending towards the "proletarianisation" of Irish society; the post-Famine decades witnessed a broad and quite rapid movement towards "capitalisation", particularly in the dominant pastoral sector.

Let us be more specific. Before the Famine, rapid population growth, extensive subdivision, and intensive potato cultivation, based on primitive agricultural technique, fuelled a heavily labour-intensive tillage economy, within which the principal commercial crop

was corn. The main peculiarity of this system was the "potato-nexus", whose principal feature was the growing dependence of the most rapidly expanding and poorest strata of the rural population upon a single, unreliable crop. Even at the best of times, many of the cottier-proletarians who relied upon the potato faced longer or shorter periods of unemployment and hunger. The potato-nexus served two main functions in the tillage economy. On the one hand, it underpinned the relations of exploitation between the rural proletariat of cottiers and landless labourers and their employers, the landowners and the farmers. On a more systematic level, access to potato-ground was a safety valve. By supplementing the meagre cash earnings of the agricultural working class, the potato-nexus tended to depress wages and thus to retard the capitalisation of agriculture (and, in Ulster, of the linen industry) by holding down the primary cost of production.

The most immediate impact of the Famine was massive population loss -- at least two million people either died of starvation or disease or emigrated during those awful years. Since dependence upon the potato was overwhelmingly concentrated in the ranks of the rural proletariat, the Famine's first direct effect upon the economy was a steep reduction in the size of the agricultural labour force. The proximate result was a sharp increase in the basic cost of labour-power during the 1850s. This was, no doubt, an incentive for the most significant post-Famine change in the organisation of agricultural

production -- the shift from arable to pastoral output, as farmers reduced the acreage devoted to tillage crops in favour of pasture for beef and dairy cattle, sheep and pigs.

There can be no question, however, that the primary motive force behind the growth of the pastoral sector must be sought in the economic rationality of the Irish farmers. All tenants -- graziers, ranchers, dairy farmers and smallholders alike -- adjusted their output according to the price-levels in the markets. Animal products consistently realised higher prices than grains; and in periods of downturn, animal prices fell more slowly and recovered more rapidly. The farming classes, generally, therefore switched from corn to cattle.

While the development of Irish agriculture recorded a significant volte-face at mid-century, with large scale post-Famine capital investment in the national cattle herd, the most striking continuity across the span of the nineteenth century was the failure of Irish industry. After the first flush of an industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century, Ireland became, truly, "only an agricultural district of England".<sup>1</sup> With the significant exception of the restricted area of Belfast's hinterland in the Lagan valley,<sup>2</sup> industrialisation was

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1. Marx, Capital, i, p. 657

2. Clearly, the distinctive formation of an industrial economy in the north-east is a crucial issue of uneven development. In the final section of this chapter, I shall advance some tentative arguments concerning the national-political significance of this material grounding for Partition.

not a feature of Irish economic development in the nineteenth century. It is not necessary to enter into the polemic over whether English commercial policy was directed, consciously or not, towards the retardation or "underdevelopment" of the Irish economy.<sup>3</sup> It should be stressed, instead, that Ireland was victimised by the normal operations of the laws of capitalism. Competition, economies of scale, regional division of labour and uneven development were the root causes of Ireland's industrial under-development.

These processes did, of course, have Irish agents. The predominant investment patterns in nineteenth century Ireland tended to focus on the British centre of gravity in the London money market, and to the safer, gilt-edged government securities offered therein. This was true of large institutional investors like the Catholic Church, of the substantial individual investors, such as the landowners and the Guinness family, and of the much more modest investments of the rising agrarian and professional middle classes. Risk capital, then, was in short supply in Ireland. But capital there was in plenty -- it was employed either in agricultural production or in the circulation process. The crucial result was that industrial activity was restricted, primarily

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3. This polemic was opened, for the modern period, by Alice Murray's extended gloss upon the Report of the parliamentary inquiry into the financial relations between Britain and Ireland -- Commercial and Financial Relations Between Britain & Ireland from the Period of the Restoration (1903); cf., Cullen, "Irish Economic History: Fact & Myth", in Cullen, ed., Formation of the Irish Economy, pp. 113-24

to the handful of enterprises which were historically grounded in the tillage system and subsequently re-oriented to the export market -- brewing, distilling and milling.

This broad pattern of industrial decline and concentration was not the whole story. The post-Famine expansion of the pastoral sector of the agrarian economy fuelled significant infrastructural growth. Retail and wholesale trade, road and rail transport networks, and retail banking facilities spread rapidly throughout post-Famine rural Ireland. The main significance of this form of economic growth, with the exception of the railways, lay in the fact that the predominance of commercial or "merchant's" over industrial capital reflected and reinforced the cycle of uneven development. This distinction between capitals is, indeed, the key which unlocks the mystery of the early efflorescence of industry in the late eighteenth century and its subsequent, rapid collapse from the 1820s onwards. Those industries which were established before the Act of Union were mainly facilitated by merchant's capital. So long as they remained on that basis, the political integration of Ireland and England merely served to accelerate a process which was inevitable. Early Irish industry was doomed to succumb once industrial capital, particularly in the English textile trades, assumed primacy in the realm of production.<sup>4</sup>

The continued importance of merchant's capital in post-

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4. Marx, "Historical Facts about Merchant's Capital", Capital, iii, pp. 323-36

Famine Ireland was, therefore, a symptom of the relative backwardness into which the colony had been cast. Nevertheless, the very real extent of the growth which occurred must be underlined. The development of the distributive sector mirrored the expansion of the pastoral basis of the economy -- both were substantial and sustained throughout the late nineteenth century. More critically, the pastoral and distributive sectors were intimately linked. Cattle dealers and butter brokers bought and sold the output from the farms; the farmers' profits supported the growing trading network. In addition, the ties of material self-interest were often reinforced by bonds of kinship. By the eve of the Land War, much of the economic landscape in rural Ireland had been radically transformed. The heart of the transformation was the elaboration and extension of the economic powers of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, the strengthening of its hold on the productive and distributive core of the agricultural economy.

This transformation of the agrarian economy during the third quarter of the nineteenth century was the fundamental economic basis for the decisive class struggle launched by the Land League against the powers of the Protestant Ascendancy. The economic re-adjustment necessarily entailed significant changes in the class structure in the Irish countryside. The shifting balance in the rappor  
des forces within the rural class structure was the main determinant of the forms taken by the overlapping "revolutions" in consciousness,

in political organisation, and in the system of land-tenure which, cumulatively, constituted the most important aspects of the bourgeois revolution in nineteenth century Ireland. It is to the expressions of these changes in the shifting patterns of class struggle that we must now turn.

Class Struggles and the Land

It is axiomatic that the cutting-edge of the class struggles which characterised Anglo-Irish relations was the fight for access to and control over the land. The most elementary class contradiction pitted the owners of the land against those who worked on it. The fundamental conflict, in short, revolved around the means of production in the agrarian economy.

One problematic which arose from this undeniable fact was the "quirk of semantic alchemy", the confusion of "farmer" and "peasant", which enabled nationalist historiography to create "a satisfying but spurious sense of historical continuity in the struggle for land throughout the nineteenth century".<sup>5</sup> The poles of this nationalist version of the land question were the rack-renting, tyrannical landowners versus the largely undifferentiated mass of the exploited "peasantry". There was, in fact, one very real element of continuity in the ownership of the land by the seven to eight thousand members of the Protestant Ascendancy. The agrarian petty-bourgeoisie's exploitation of this fact, their brilliant propaganda victories, lay behind the nationalist history. They won the practical-economic battle for control over the land, at least in part, because they were themselves convinced and because they persuaded

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5. Lee, "Ribbonmen", in Williams, ed., Secret Societies, pp. 34-5



significant sections of British opinion (not the least of whom included J. S. Mill and W. E. Gladstone) that the ownership of the land by the Ascendancy was nothing less than outright spoliation.

The outstanding merit of the body of modern "revisionist" writing on Irish history has been to question the portraits of both the landowners and the "peasants". The landowners were not, by and large, rack-renting tyrants; the tenants were not an homogeneous mass of suffering and exploitation. In one respect, at least, this finding is little more than an historical curiosity, since the issue was not Truth or Fair Play, but the much nastier business of power. This aspect must be stressed because the present study is designed to set these findings within a distinctive theoretical framework which will account for the gap between the nationalist portraiture and the reality identified by the modern revisionists.

The economic and political victories of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie depended as much upon their ideological triumphs as upon their more evident material gains. The crux of the matter is the focus upon the class struggles, fought on several fronts, through which they accomplished their rise to power. The portrayal of the landowners as ogres, and of themselves as helpless victims, was part and parcel of their advance.

Although the predominant aspect of the land question was the struggle between the landowners and the tenants, the more important

issue was the process of class differentiation within the ranks of the latter. The principal form of the internal class divisions among the tenantry was the contrast between styles, strategies and goals of agrarian class struggle. Two distinctive traditions may be identified. On the one hand, there was a long tradition of agrarian terrorism, founded on the syndicalist perspectives of the cottier-proletariat and the smallest farmers. On the other, the central stratum of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, the strong farmers, pursued a progressively more coherent and legalistic set of political initiatives.

It should come as no surprise that during the climactic struggles marshalled by the Land League these two traditions appeared to converge. In part, this convergence was a matter of appropriation -- the strong farmers were prepared to adopt, or at least to tolerate, some aspects of the terrorist tradition for their own cause. But there was more involved than simple opportunism on the part of the strong farmers.

First of all, the central characteristic of the Land War, which distinguished that struggle from its predecessors, was the extent to which it rested upon the temporary unity of the different strata in the farming classes. The provisional convergence of strong-farmer activism and agrarian terrorism represented a significant class alliance, a pinnacle of united front work. Under the banner of "the land for the people", the real and potential conflicts between the strong farmers, smallholders and agricultural labourers were temporarily submerged.

The significance of the re-organisation of the national united front, from 1882 onwards, was that it represented the reassertion of the powers and interests of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie over their erstwhile allies.

The second element in the development of this national bloc was more complex, more political. There was, in addition to the land question, a national question at stake between England and Ireland. The Land War was not simply an economic struggle; it was the realisation of Fintan Lalor's prescription for hitching the national train to the agrarian locomotive. I have argued that the Fenians played a crucial role in that process, because they were the Jacobins of the Irish revolution, the most radical bourgeois force, who brought to the land and national struggles "a plebeian way of dealing with the enemies of the bourgeoisie".<sup>6</sup> Despite the real problems afflicting Fenianism -- the monomaniac call for armed revolution, the reluctance to adopt a social programme, the ill-defined republicanism -- it was a mass movement whose base lay in the classes which were necessary to complete the national bloc. Within Ireland, the Fenians were mainly recruited from "the farmers' sons, the mechanics, the artisans, the labourers and the small shopkeepers",<sup>7</sup> and there is some evidence that they also made

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6. Marx, "The Bourgeoisie and the Counter-Revolution", in Articles from the Neue Rheinische Zeitung, 1848-49, (Moscow: Progress, 1972), p. 183

7. James Stephens, quoted by Ryan, Fenian Chief, p. 327

inroads, in the late 1860s and 1870s, among the small farmers and cottiers who had retained, under the rubric of Ribbonism, the tradition of agrarian terrorism. Moreover, in America and Britain, the Fenians were the main political leadership in the large communities of working class exiles.

In order to understand the apparent convergence of these distinctive class forces, under the dual banners of the agrarian movement and the political leadership of Parnell, it is essential to retrace our steps through the ways in which the Famine had effected fundamental changes in the rapport des forces in the class structure in rural Ireland. Inevitably, those changes had re-organised the nature and direction of the class struggles on the land. They therefore provide the critical underpinning for an understanding of the specific form of the national struggle too.

The most significant change was the devastation in the ranks of the cottier-proletariat. The pre-Famine rural working class, which included both landless labourers and the poorest of the smallholders, took its distinctive flavour from the cottier, the man whose hold on the land was most tenuous. The Famine clearances affected a broad range of the population, reaching up even into the ranks of the farmers who fell into arrears on their rent, but the principal victims were the cottiers. When the potato-harvest failed almost completely, as it did in 1846,

1848 and 1849, the potato-nexus which underpinned the relations of production in the pre-Famine tillage system gave way. The cottier, unable to feed himself or his family, could not work. Without even a handful of seed-potatoes to gamble on another year's crop, he had no need for the patch of land taken in conacre. The Famine clearances, whose main expressions were death and emigration, proceeded "voluntarily" as thousands of cottiers quit their tiny plots in search of relief, and by compulsion, as landowners and farmers took advantage of the quarter-acre clause in the Poor Law amendments of 1847 to consolidate land-holdings and to relieve themselves of an additional tax burden. While it is clear that many of the emigrants who escaped during the worst months of the Famine were small or middling farmers, it must be emphasised that the brunt of the disease and death brought by the blight was borne by the cottier class. And once the main impact of the Famine had receded, from 1854 onwards, the majority of the emigrants were drawn from the unemployed rural working class.

A key indication of the extent of the depletions in the ranks of the cottier-proletariat was the decline in the incidence of agrarian terrorism after the Famine. During the period down to the Famine, with the major exception of the Tithe War, the predominant form of rural class struggle had been the widespread and persistent activity of the agrarian secret societies. These protean trades unions existed primarily to defend the interests of the cottier-proletarians - to raise

wages, to reduce conacre-rents, to release more land for potato-ground, and to restrict the competition for employment by barring "strangers". More significantly, the agrarian secret societies most commonly posed these demands to, and directed their fire against, the farmers. The Famine was, willy-nilly, a major boon to many farmers. By depleting the ranks of the cottiers, it eased some of the tension in the competition for land, enabled the farmers and landowners to reverse the tendency towards subdivision, and relieved the pressures which had found expression in agrarian terrorism.

Changes in production and the class structure, clearly, went hand in hand. The farmers' switch to a capital-intensive pastoral economy was encouraged by the steady rise in prices for animal products, and the expansion of the pastoral acreage was facilitated by the reduction in the number of cottiers clamouring for a piece of potato-ground. Moreover, this immediate impact of the Famine was the start of a self-reproducing cycle, for the falling demand for labour in the pastoral sector and the continuing failure of the Irish economy to provide alternative industrial employment maintained a steady flow of emigration as the rural working classes sought a better life in Britain and America.

The rural proletariat which remained in Ireland was altered in at least two ways. The end of the potato-nexus entailed changes in both the composition and living standards of the rural workers. On the one hand, the steep decline in the cottier system meant that many rural

workers lost their hold on the land. Farmers were unwilling to subdivide, and they now enjoyed a greater capacity to enforce their will. It must be suggested that the principal form of the change was that most agricultural labourers gradually assumed a more "normal" proletarian status, having no property but their labour power. Without the supplementary "income" represented by the patch of conacre potato-ground, wages for agricultural labour rose steeply in the 1850s and continued to increase, more gradually, thereafter. This change was reflected in the post-Famine dietary, which now centred on corn-meal rather than the potato. The rural worker's food was increasingly the result of cash transactions, bought in the country store.

The other aspect of the changes in the structure of the rural working class also flowed from the Famine. The reversal of subdivision, the curtailment of conacre and the shrinking supply of landless labour resulted in the expansion, in size and importance, of the "semi-proletarian" stratum composed of the tied labour-power of the farmers' children. The latter's "landed" status and prospects clearly placed them a notch above the landless labourer, but the prolonged adolescence and sexual repression involved in the need to maintain the consolidated holding cannot be said to have made their lot enviable. Indeed, there is some evidence to allow of the tentative suggestion that the frustrations of the lives of these farmers' sons provided a fertile ground for recruitment into the ranks of both Ribbonism and Fenianism.

If the rural proletariat, especially in the pre-Famine period, found themselves thrown up against the farmers in their struggle to maintain or improve their living conditions, the class struggle in the countryside was complicated by the quite distinctive conflicts which pitted the farmers against the landowners. The latter's possession of the great bulk of the land, and thereby of the full panoply of the judicial and political powers of the state, constituted the central continuity and the over-riding contradiction at the heart of the land question. The Protestant Ascendancy, that class of landed magnates and petty gentry which owned most of the land, was the ruling class throughout most of the nineteenth century. The erosion of their powers did not seriously commence until the Land War. The landowners were variously portrayed as spendthrift drunkards, irresponsible absentees or despotic exploiters of a rack-rented tenantry. While there were, certainly, landowners who matched one or all of these charges, I have indicated that the modern evidence suggests that, generally speaking, the landowning class's defects were of a different, more systematic order. They tended to be heavily encumbered with debts, sometimes to the tune of many times the rental value of their property. They were slow to adopt the habits of good management which might have averted the Famine and which would have certainly shored up their increasingly precarious financial position. They were, in essence, a pre-industrial class, largely incapable of guiding capital investment into alternatives to agriculture. Moreover,



the landowners' powers over his landed property were consistently challenged and hedged about with a series of customary usages.

Underlying all of the manifest economic aspects of the contradiction between the landowners and the tenantry was the essential element. The landowners were the Protestant Ascendancy, the remnants of an obsolete aristocracy in the age of democracy, and the descendants of expropriating conquerors on the eve of the modern era of national liberation. Although there were some evident qualifications to this overall picture - Protestant landowners, such as Parnell, who espoused the Irish cause, and even some Catholic landowners - the landowning class remained unalterably "foreign". Indeed, their alienation from Ireland increased as the nineteenth century proceeded. They were the "Garrison",<sup>8</sup> the living embodiment of the injustices which inhered in Ireland's colonial subjugation since Cromwell. Finally, during the post-Famine period, the Protestant Ascendancy was the principal class enemy of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie, the main obstacle barring the way to the complete emancipation of the farmers.

The key which unlocks this contradiction is production. The landowners were generally content to collect their rental tribute and to play a relatively minor role in primary agricultural production. The

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8. The "left-Jacobins" in the Young Ireland groups, especially Fintan Lalor and John Mitchel, coined the most striking phrases of this idea. P. S. O'Hegarty, a member of the IRB Supreme Council between 1917 and 1921, opened his History of Ireland Under the Union with a definitive restatement of the theme of the "Garrison Nation".

essential productive force on the land was the occupying tenant farmers. Many of them, especially the stronger ones in the productive heartland counties in Leinster and Munster, emerged unscathed from the Famine, and even strengthened by the effects of the clearances. The economic foundations of their advances from 1850 onwards were twofold. On the one hand, they kept a close weather-eye on market-prices and adjusted their production accordingly. On the other hand, the Famine cleared the margins of their lands, enabled them to expand and consolidate their holdings and increase their output of the crucial animal products. Although the entire agrarian economy experienced considerable difficulties during the depression of 1859-63, the overall expansionist trend which characterised output and prices during the third quarter of the nineteenth century established the strong farmers in a dominant position in the agrarian economy of Catholic Ireland.

While the farmers gained during the Famine and the following decades, some of their urban cousins positively raced ahead. At least some of the latter did well enough out of grain-hoarding, shady dealing and price gouging during the hungry years to earn a dubious reputation, but the development of this commercial stratum of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie was more than a matter of questionable practices. The expansion of commercial agriculture and the series of transactions which moved livestock from west to east, the growth of the transport networks and the monetarisation of relations between farmers and their

labourers all called forth a large stratum of dealers, traders, brokers, merchants, shopkeepers to buy and sell both means of production and consumer goods. Western towns which had housed perhaps one miserable shop before the Famine became bustling centres of commerce in the thirty years from 1850. The larger towns in the main areas of strength of the agrarian economy accommodated several large shops, dozens of pubs, several bank branches, one or two hotels and possibly a branch of one of the bigger Dublin retail-wholesale houses. These towns also housed the offices of the cattle and grain dealers and the butter brokers who bought and sold the agricultural produce, and the banks and post-office branches which received the growing volume of savings being accumulated in the countryside.

The commercial and blood relations between the farmers and merchants were cemented by a long series of political and organisational initiatives which prefigured the Land and National Leagues. The political alliance of the farmers, merchants and priests, in its first appearance during the Tithe War, was largely a continuation and development of the campaign which O'Connell had led during the previous decade for Catholic emancipation. Between the Emancipation campaign and the Tithe War there was this subtle distinction: the prize in the latter case was in the direct, material interests of the farmers. The struggle for elementary bourgeois rights in the emancipation campaign and the struggle for financial relief from

tithes planted the seeds for the post-Famine development of the political rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

The achievement of the political maturity of the farmers, measured in terms of the extent to which their demands and their organisations adequately represented their class interests, should be dated from the formation of the tenant-right societies and farmers' clubs across Munster and Leinster in 1849-50. In essence, these bodies were collective bargaining agencies for the stronger farmers, seeking to confirm, in the form of tenant-right, their economic control over the land, the powers which they had established in the marketplace and through customary usage. It must be added that the co-ordination of these bodies into the Tenant League and the linkage of that League and the parliamentary representatives, while necessary, predictable and probably inevitable, was still premature, since the tenants' organisations were not yet strong enough to impose their will upon the parliamentarians. Nevertheless, the lamentable story of the Independent Irish Party of the 1850s did not, and could not, put an end to the organisation of the farmers nor to their advocacy of the demand for tenant-right. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, "Independent Clubs", "Farmers' Clubs" & "Tenants' Defence Associations" existed across the strong-farmer belt in southern and central Ireland. These organisations were debating societies, agitational forums and embryonic party branches. In their ranks, they united strong farmers, rural

businessmen and priests, in the pursuit of the demand for tenant-right, in the attempt to control the selection of parliamentary candidates, and in the drive to express the class will of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie on matters of national importance. The critical significance of this development was that, when Parnell presided over the formation of the Irish National Land League in October 1879, there already existed a network of self-taught political leaders of and for the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

The Land War which resulted from the combination of economic crisis, political initiative and mass organisation was a truly remarkable effort. It brought together the whole farming population, provisionally bridging the gap between the strong farmers and the smallholders. The essence of the Land War was the struggle to defend, consolidate and advance the material gains which the farmers had made during the boom years between the Famine and the late 1870s. The key aspects, however, were those which underlined the pre-eminence within the class alliance of the strong farmers and their immediate allies. In the first place, the fact that the Land League's fire was unequivocally directed against the landowners symbolised the distance travelled since the Famine. Demands which might have broken the unity of the struggle -- for redistribution of the land of the ranchers and graziers, or for substantial gains for the agricultural labourers -- played a clearly subordinate part in the Land War. Secondly, the legalistic and

constitutional emphasis of the Land War tended to confirm the authority of the strong farmers. This was particularly true of the appeal to the Griffith Valuation, which called for percentage reductions in rents, and therefore were of greater benefit to the larger farmers than to the smallholders. Given the existence of these contradictory tendencies within the united movement of tenants against landlords, the crucial factor was to discover a cement which could hold them together. The significance of the Parnellite decade was the delicacy with which the equilibrium was maintained, by shifting the emphasis from agrarian to national issues.

Moral Authority, Ideological Supremacy, Political Hegemony

The happy circumstance of a rising market for animal products and the less joyful solution to the problems of rural overpopulation and unemployment were indispensable conditions for the post-Famine development of agrarian capitalism in Catholic Ireland. In themselves, however, they did not necessarily signify that the strong farmers and rural businessmen would become a ruling class. The step from a secure position in production and distribution to complete emancipation, to the acquisition of political power, is a qualitative leap. The organising focus of the second half of this study was the attempt to identify and analyse the three crucial axes along which that leap was effected. The moral, economic and political organisation of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie were the mainsprings of the bourgeois revolution in Ireland. The advances towards emancipation may be described as a series of steps on an ascending spiral. In each instance, the main claim was founded upon an assertion of fundamental rights -- to religious freedom, to economic security and to control the political destiny of the nation. The balance of mythology, tendentious history, outright invention and factual analysis in the various claims is of secondary importance. What is at issue is the recognition that the leap was made, and that the critical steps may only be identified and understood by maintaining a

sharp focus upon the class which stood at the absolute centre of the bourgeois revolution.

Since this was above all a national revolution, the critical elements which must be emphasised are the badges of national identity, the cement which could over-ride the contradictions and bind the nation together. The most obvious was the shared religion. Irish Catholicism has been many things -- a faith, a political stance, a moral order, an autonomous corporate interest, a body of social-welfare institutions, and a particular fraction of the class powers of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. When all of these came together, as they clearly did under the leadership of Archbishops Croke and Walsh in the mid-1880s, the Church was a power in the land. When the Orangemen declared that "Home Rule was Rome Rule" the main content of their slogan was not whether Ireland would actually be governed from the Vatican; it was rather a correct identification of the principal confessional boundaries of the Irish nation. But the Orange slogan did not penetrate to the material basis of those boundaries, nor to the more essential fact that while explicitly Catholic ideology played an important formal part in the structure of Irish nationalism, it was not the fundamental content of the national existence.

The Catholicity of the Irish nation rested upon the development of a remarkably tensile tradition of cooperation and conflict between Church and people. During the period bounded by the careers of



O'Connell and Parnell, that relationship underwent considerable strain. The crucial outcome was the establishment of manifold relations of mutual dependence between the clergy and the rising class. In essence, the priests and the farmers and rural businessmen were bound together by generally shared class interests and by personal, financial and ideological links. It seems plausible, though the necessary evidence has not yet been gathered, that the bulk of the personnel recruited to man the rapidly growing ecclesiastical establishment was drawn from the farming community. While the folkloric evidence suggests that it was the ambition of the small farming family in particular to raise a son to the priesthood, the broader composite portrait which emerges from the literary sources indicates a broader base of recruitment, including both the strong farmers and the urban middle class.

Secondly, it has been argued that the strong farmers were the main economic basis for the post-Famine growth of the Church, the principal subscribers to the voluntary taxation which paid for the splendid new cathedrals and episcopal palaces. In return, the Church organised, maintained and staffed the most important secondary educational institutions, and managed the primary level, for the rapid expansion of literacy in the Irish countryside after the Famine.

The densest, most problematic intersection between priest and farmer was the moral ground where sexuality and property met. Though the parallel must not be taken too literally, it was not entirely fortuitous

that the Irish bourgeois revolution was accompanied by a distinctly Puritan turn within Irish Catholicism. The role of the Irish priest as a moral policeman, enforcing a strict Pauline code of sexual repression, was not an arbitrary choice. The main lesson imposed by the Famine was the folly of early and prolific marriages subsisting on tiny plots; the outstanding pupils were those who had most to lose from subdivision and most to gain from consolidation. The farmer's hold on his land was safeguarded by the demographic decision to defer marriage; his labour requirements were ensured by retaining one or more of his children in a condition of prolonged adolescence, living at home in hopes of eventually succeeding to the family farm. Demographic choice and family structure were sanctified by the moral code elaborated by the clergy, and often enforced by the priest's direct intervention. The priest's powers, it must be insisted, were not an extrinsic imposition; the extraordinary "devotional revolution" of the latter part of the nineteenth century testified to the existence of the deep-seated confessional congruence between priests and people. There is an ineffable quality to the heart of this matter. It may perhaps be stated best by way of analogy. Pietism and sexual repression were the inner-life's equivalents of the material, external forces for land-consolidation and hoarding money. The Catholic moral order, Irish-style, was an arm of the farming wing of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie.

Catholicism also coincided much more directly with the class

and national interests of the rising class. A major part of the complaint raised during the Tithe War, and repeated throughout the 1850s and 1860s, was that Irish payments to the support of the Established (Anglican) Church of Ireland represented an unjust tax upon the productivity of the farmers and an affront to their religious-national identification. The Church's most brilliant successes, as a separate corporate entity, were won in the educational field. The secular political leadership of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie did not adopt the clerical cause for opportunist reasons alone, but rather because the Catholic demand for Catholic education was widely believed to be just and in the national interest, an expression of a long-developing national identity.

It must be stressed, in addition, however, that Catholicism was not the only component of the national identity. The structural foundations of the agrarian economy certainly gave (and gives) Irish society a distinctive tone. During the Land War, this tone appeared as Janus-faced, at once radical and conservative. In relation to the landowners, the farmers' demands certainly went to the roots -- "land to the people" amounted to expropriation of the expropriators. But for the full practical realisation of that end, many farmers were cautious and fully prepared to wait for the best possible terms. Moreover, it must be suggested that an important contribution to their caution was the recognition that theirs were not the only grievances in the country-

side, and that too-radical an assault upon the landowners might well encourage the development of other struggles which would threaten the farmers' own gains. A similar contrast might be derived from the juxtaposition, within the framework of the Land War, of the activities of "Captain Moonlight" and the guerrilla gestures of Parnell's parliamentary band.

The third and final element in the national ensemble was provided by the most vigorous opponents of clerical power, the Fenians. The role of the Fenians in the development and rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie involves an evident paradox, given their oft-stated disdain for the selfish material concerns of the "men of bullocks". In the main, this problem can only be clarified indirectly. The Fenians' principal contributions were two contradictory elements. In the first place, they were a vanguard force to the extent that their singleminded refusal to budge from the demand for complete independence forced the pace in national politics and extended the limits of respectability. But this position of strength was also their Achilles heel, since in the absence of a coherent transitional programme they were easily outflanked by the non-revolutionary political leaders, secular and clerical, whose finger was more firmly attached to the agrarian pulse.

This problem of the Fenians may be posed in more systematic, class terms. The proposition that they represented the Jacobin wing of the bourgeois revolution conducted by and through the agrarian

petty-bourgeoisie rests on two points. First, their mass base among the Irish working classes (in Ireland and abroad) and the lower ranks of the petty-bourgeoisie (small farmers, small shopkeepers) tended to be reflected in the more thorough-going demands advanced by men like Davitt and Harris, for land nationalisation, for redistribution of the grazing lands among the smallholders, and for more militant tactical advances during the Land War. The second point is, necessarily, more inferential. The Fenians signally failed to win control of the national movement, and indeed largely retired from it after the re-organisation in 1882. The reason for this failure might be described, in shorthand terms, as vacillation -- by failing to pursue the logic of their successes among the working classes, in programmatic terms, they inevitably gave away the game into the hands of the class which was both stronger and more coherent. Since the strong farmers and their class allies knew what they wanted, in the immediate term, the Fenians' reply of "revolution" for some time in the future, was off the point. But to the extent that the Land War and its aftermath in the Parnellite decade was a national movement, the Fenians were committed, willy-nilly, to play their part; they could not stand idly by, but they were relegated to a subordinate position. Finally, the Fenian insistence upon the intrinsic merits of armed struggle, as the essential means of achieving Irish independence, was an important and valuable contribution. Its significance can be judged from the frequency with which the constitutional political leaders

felt obliged to rebut the calls to arms and deny their own intention to resort to arms.

The Parnellite triumph in the 1880s consisted primarily of the co-ordination of the three essential components of the national ideal within an overarching hegemonic framework. The Land War yoked together a powerful but potentially explosive class alliance. Parnell's "counter-revolution" of 1882 was a resolution of the class struggles which inevitably went on within the national united front. Although Parnell's supremacy can be described with Marvell's tag about Cromwell -- "if these be the times, this be the man" -- the issue was clearly more than a personal matter. The extraordinarily rich and tangled development of Irish national politics during the 1880s can only properly be understood by returning to the foundations. The essential factor was the predominance of the strong farmers, merchants and priests in Irish Catholic rural society. They occupied the critical political, economic and ideological leading positions within the nation, and once their leadership was co-ordinated within a coherent framework, which explicitly subordinated "divisive" class issues to the prior achievement of national freedom, the social weight of the leading class entailed the subordination of the other classes which might have challenged their leadership. The economic strength which the farmers and merchants had established during the boom years since the 1850s, the moral authority which the priests had elaborated around the interests of the

farmers, and the political leadership which the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie had been studying since its first essay with O'Connell -- these were all confirmed during the 1880s.

The Parnellite decade, then, must be defined as another triumph in the advancing class struggles of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. If they had been the principal beneficiaries of the Famine, the Land War was much more clearly their gain. Moreover, the second gain was more significant than the first, because it was a conscious step and because it focussed the class and national issues on a single target. The agrarian petty-bourgeoisie succeeded, during the 1880s, in defeating their major enemy, the landowners, and in subordinating their rivals. The specific crowning glory of Parnell's career was to match the maturity of the rising class with its political organisation. The Irish Parliamentary Party and its machinery were the definitive form within which the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie would continue to exercise their national hegemony, down to and through the national revolutionary period and the Civil War, forty years later.

Coda: Uneven Development and Imperialism

Once upon a time, in the misty past, Queen Maedb of Connacht lay awake considering her possessions. They were the finest in all Ireland, all save one. Her white bull was not the best bull in the land. So Maedb summoned the chieftains and warriors of Connacht, Munster and Leinster to make war on the men of Ulster for possession of the Brown Bull of Cooley, an Tain Bo Cuailnge. To assure her victory, Maedb's wizards cast a spell on the men of Ulster, subjecting them to the pangs of childbirth for a week. But Ulster's champion was Cuchulainn, grandson of Lugh the sun-god, and he was immune from the curse. Maedb was defeated. Cuchulainn led the men of Ulster to victory.<sup>9</sup>

Centuries later, in 1916, Irishmen fought and died in two very different wars, for radically different goals. At Easter, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizens Army rose in an insurrection in Dublin, for the express purpose of overthrowing the colonial powers of the British administration at Dublin Castle and to establish the Irish

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9. The best modern version of this saga, which fully captures the archaic qualities of both the text and the story, is the translation by Thomas Kinsella, The Tain, (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1970). See also, the earlier version, which reflected the concerns of the Gaelic cultural and linguistic revival at the turn of the century, by Lady Gregory, Cuchulainn of Muirthemne, (re-issue: London: Oxford University Press, 1970), and the musical interpretation, blending rock music and Irish traditional themes, recorded by Horslips, The Tain, (RCA, 1973)



Republic. On July 1, 1916, the Orangemen who had joined the Ulster Volunteer Force "to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland", transmuted into the 36th (Ulster) Division of the British Army, led the assault through Thiepval Wood to open the Battle of the Somme. They wore their Orange sashes, they yelled "No Surrender" and "Remember the Boyne", and they were slaughtered. Of the 700 men in the Shankill Battalion, from working class West Belfast, only seventy survived.<sup>10</sup>

Although it has been suggested, not entirely frivolously, that the distinction between Ulster and the rest of Ireland is truly as old as the mythical cattle-raids of the pre-Christian era,<sup>11</sup> the real demarcation line is spelled out by the radical discontinuity between the streets of Dublin and the mud of the Somme. The one was an uprising against national oppression under imperialism; the other was a contribution to the defence of that very Empire. The roots of the distinction, then as now, lay in the particular characteristics of uneven development, the specific forms of British imperialism in Ireland.

It is clear, of course, that the entire Ulster question has been left aside in the present study, in order to focus upon the class struggles which characterised the internal development of the Catholic

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10. A. T. Q. Stewart, The Ulster Crisis, (London: Faber & Faber, 1967): the quotation is from the Solemn Covenant of 1912, cited at p. 62, and the account of the battle of the Somme occurs at pp. 237-43

11. By Hugh Shearman, Not an Inch: A Study of Northern Ireland & Lord Craigavon, (London: Faber & Faber, 1942), pp. 15-16

nation. Nor is it possible to attempt to recover that lost ground at this point. But it is necessary to identify the most important points of contrast which characterised the distinctive development of the north-east.

In other words, we must return, briefly, to Peadar O'Donnell's definition of the source of Partition. The "Ulster question" was, and remains, the focal point of Irish uneven development because the situation in the north-east was, in Althusser's word, "over-determined".<sup>12</sup> More specifically, Unionist and Orange Ulster, between the mid-1880s and 1920, was the time and place where the three determinant contradictions finally coalesced.

From the 1850s onwards, while the Catholic agrarian petty-bourgeoisie in the southern counties was laying the economic foundations for its own rise to power, an entirely different process was underway in the Lagan valley. Belfast became the centre of an extensive industrial economy, founded upon linen-manufacturing, ship-building, rope and tobacco making. This industrial zone was closely integrated within the north British heavy engineering triangle (Belfast-Glasgow-Liverpool). In two main senses, this linkage between Belfast and Britain was explicitly imperialist.

Manifestly, the economic well-being of the shipyards and engineering works was directly tied to the fortunes of the Empire.

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12. Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination", in For Marx, pp. 89-128

The Ulstermen who fought for the Empire in 1916 seemed to have good reasons for their choice -- they were defending their livelihood. But, in fact, there was more to it. Behind the material reason, there lay a whole complex of privilege and chauvinism. Even though, to the outsider, the privileges upon which Orange chauvinism and defence of the Empire were based may appear to be slight enough, they were and are crucial. The Orangemen fought for their jobs, their preferential treatment in social questions and in housing, their higher wages and their control of the best agricultural land, but they also fought for their commitment to their own racial superiority over the "mere Irish". In 1920, the Imperial Parliament rewarded their ideological loyalty with the Northern Ireland statelet, which codified all the privileges which they had fought to preserve.

By direct contrast, of course, the Irish who fought in the Easter Rising and the Black and Tan War did so because the same Empire represented, for them, oppression, discrimination and continued national subjugation. The origins of this distinction lay in the different structures of colonial domination which were established in the seventeenth century. Ireland was a colony, but Ulster was colonised. The north-east was settled by immigrants from Britain, and the native Irish population was expelled as well as dispossessed. The colonial settlement of Ulster inaugurated a second, overdetermining layer of national contradiction.

The pre-eminent form of this extra level of contradiction was the religious divide. But it would be an error to think that the conflict between Catholic and Protestant has ever really concerned the exegesis of holy scripture. In fact, the real key to the "religious" question can best be seen by recalling the multi-faceted significance of Catholicism in the rise of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie. Among its most important aspects was the fact that it was a badge of servility and national identity. This sharp political significance was, perhaps, most clearly revealed during the assault on the powers of the landowners. It was the great strength, and the ultimate weakness, of the Parnellite resolution of the internal questions of the national movement that the main enemy facing the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie was the Protestant Ascendancy. The struggle against the landowners could therefore be waged within the bounds of moral right. To their economic and political powers, the rising class was able to bring the additional, moral authority of their faith. Unfortunately, this solution proved to be wholly inadequate when the boundaries of class, confession and nation no longer coincided so neatly.

The critical coincidence was Ulster, where the religious form of the national question rested on the most fundamental material grounding of uneven development, where all the elements took on the starkest form. One of the principal outcomes, and without doubt the most glaring failure, of the Parnellite national movement was the

inadequacy of the agrarian petty-bourgeoisie's response to the Ulster Orange-Unionist resistance to Home Rule, in the 1880s and again in the 1910s.

One final, ironic note, which captures the combination of ignorance and disbelief which characterised the mainstream of Catholic Irish responses to Ulster, must be offered. At the precise moment when the "men of Ulster" were arming to resist Ireland, Padraig Pearse, President of the insurrectionary Republic of Easter 1916, self-consciously adopted Cuchulainn as his model of martial virtue and selfless devotion to Ireland's cause. In 1920, of course, neither side was armed with magic or supernatural ancestry, but there was a deus ex machina, the final source of Partition, the permanent bane of Irish development, British imperialism. Partition was, in truth, the result of uneven development, but that uneven development was the result of imperialism.

STATISTICAL APPENDIX

LAND-HOLDINGS, 1845-1901 (Number & Percentage)

	less than 1 acre	above 1/ below 5 acres	above 5/ below 15 acres	above 15/ below 30 acres	above 30 acres	Total holdings
1845	135,314 14.9	181,950 20.1	311,133 34.5	276,618 <sup>a</sup> 30.6		905,015
1847	73,016 9.1	139,041 17.4	269,534 33.7	164,337 20.7	147,671 <sup>b</sup> 18.6	793,599 <sup>b</sup>
1851	37,728 6.2	88,083 14.4	191,854 31.8	141,311 23.2	149,090 24.5	608,066
1861	41,561 6.8	85,469 13.9	183,931 30.5	141,251 23.2	157,833 25.8	610,045
1871	48,448 8.0	74,809 12.6	171,383 29.0	138,647 23.4	159,303 27.2	592,590
1881	50,996 8.8	67,071 11.6	164,045 28.4	135,793 23.5	159,834 27.7	577,739
1891	55,638 <sup>c</sup> 9.7	63,464 11.1	156,661 27.3	133,947 23.3	162,940 28.6	572,640
1901	74,328 <sup>c</sup> 12.6	62,855 10.7	154,418 26.3	134,091 22.7	164,483 27.9	590,175
% change	-45.1	-60.5	-50.4	(-18.4) <sup>a</sup>	+11.4 <sup>d</sup>	

NOTES: a. It was impossible to re-classify the Poor Law Returns for large holdings (cf., Bourke, "Agricultural Statistics, 1841", p. 380) -- the figure for 1845, therefore, includes all holdings of more than 15 acres, and the percentage change in this column measures the movement from 1847, that is, from a date when the changes in land-holdings brought on by the Famine were already underway.

b. Austin Bourke has demonstrated that the original returns in 1847 for the larger farm-sizes were over-stated by about 6 per cent; I have, accordingly, subtracted this proportion from the more usual figures; (Bourke, "Uncertainties in Farm Size", p. 23)

c. The increases in the number of smallest holdings towards the end of the century are mainly illusory; they derive from discrepancies and "difference of interpretation" among the official enumerators, in particular with regard to the definition of "agricultural holdings" in urban

areas -- in other words, small gardens and allotments. Cf., Agricultural Statistics, Ireland, 1910, 1911, (Cd.5964), c, pp. 566-67n.

d. Once again, the shift within this category is under-stated by starting from 1847; cf., notes a, b, supra.

SOURCES: 1845: Poor Law Returns, reprinted in the Devon Report, 1845, (672), xxii, Appendix 94, pp. 280-89, as standardised to the normal categories by Bourke, "Agricultural Statistics, 1841", p. 380

1847: Returns of Agricultural Produce in Ireland, 1847-8, (1000), lvii, Part II, p. 15; once again, corrected by Bourke, "Agricultural Statistics, 1841", p. 380 and "Uncertainties in Farm Size", p. 23

1851-1901: Agricultural Statistics, Ireland, 1910, 1911, (Cd.5964), c, p. 570, Table N

The full series of land-distribution figures, uncorrected, may also be found in the invaluable compilation published by the Irish Government: John Hooper, ed., Agricultural Statistics, 1847-1926, (Dublin: Department of Industry & Commerce, 1930); and in Crotty, Irish Agricultural Production, Appendix Tables 1A, 1B, pp. 351-52

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