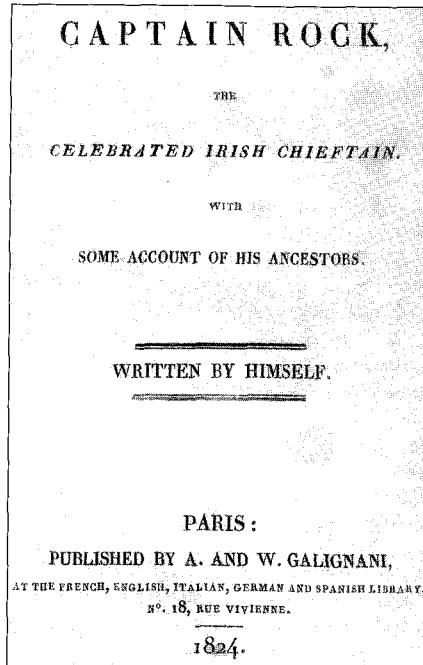


The Agricultural Labourer in County Limerick

In this paper, I propose to look in very broad outline at the position and way of life of the agricultural labourer in County Limerick from the late eighteenth century up to the Great Famine. But before we begin, we have to define the agricultural labourer. Who was he? In the Irish context this is not as easy as it might seem. In England the agricultural labourer worked on the land for a monied wage. But this was not the situation in pre-Famine Ireland. In Ireland most farm labourers were paid in land, not money. Their labour was used to pay the rent on a piece of ground, conacre, rented to them, often by a farmer, to grow potatoes, their and the ordinary peoples staple food. For the labourer a plot of ground was a necessity. Without it he starved. So he took conacre and was a landholder. This is a difficulty in distinguishing labourers from small farmers, for labourers who held small pieces of land liked to call themselves farmers. Most agricultural labourers aspired to be farmers, for farmers had standing and prestige. Even those with little potato gardens, who could not justify calling themselves farmers, described themselves as landholders in the census. Another difficulty in distinguishing labourers from farmers arises from the fact that many small farmers had to work as labourers to supplement their slender incomes from such farms. Also, many farmer's sons and other adult male relatives of farmers had to support themselves by labouring when there was not enough work for them to do on the family farm. Consequently, the natural alliance in pre-Famine times, on economic grounds, was that of the labourer and small farmer. We can define the agricultural labourer then as a man who, though he may not hold land, supports himself principally by labouring on another man's land.

One can categorise farm labourers into various types. We will divide them into three. Firstly there were the 'spalpeens' or 'spailpíne fánach,' journeymen labourers. In the Limerick context they would have come from the neighbouring counties, notably from Kerry, north and east Cork, and the hilly western corner of County Limerick itself. The 'spalpeen' travelled about the country and hired out for sowing and harvest time, returning to his home when the work was done. Secondly, there were the local labourers hired by the farmer for occasional work and for long or short periods at various times of the year, and finally there were the servant boys and girls. As the word tells us these were

by Pat Feeley



Paris edition of Thomas Moore's
Memoirs of Captain Rock, 1824
(Limerick Museum).

boys and girls whom, one presumes, did the lighter work around the farm and farmhouse. But by the latter part of the nineteenth century, the term, 'servant boy' had come to mean a general farm labourer who did the whole range of farm work and generally hired out on an eleven months contract, from the beginning of February to Christmas Eve.

The following is the structure of our paper. We will begin by looking at the labourer and his conditions through the eyes of Arthur Young, an English agriculturalist, who came to Ireland in the 1700s. We will then look at two gangs of faction fighters in the light of a recent essay. The Rockite uprising of 1821-1824 is of particular interest in that it began on the Courtenay estate in Co. Limerick, disturbing the county in a way that has never occurred since. As a result of agrarian disturbances and for other reasons, commissions were set up to enquire into the cause of dissatisfaction and to look into the state and conditions of the ordinary people. We will dip into the findings of some of these to present a picture of the farm labourer in the decades before the Great Famine. We will examine the effects that the Famine had on the labouring population. We will look at the part played by the labourers in the land

war in the early 1880s, and finally we will follow him from the 1883 Labourers' Act into the twentieth century.

In this century we have become used to rapid change and we have come to think of change as the norm. It is worth remembering that things changed very slowly in previous centuries. The system of taking land from farmers and paying the rent in labour, which Arthur Young describes as 'the common cottar system' in the 1770s continued not only throughout the nineteenth, but in some places, right into the twentieth century. A good deal of the bad feeling and hostility the labourer had for the farmer arose from this system of renting land.

Arthur Young: "If there are cabins on a farm they are the residence of the cottars: if there are none, the farmer marks out the potato gardens, and the labourers, who apply to him on his hiring the land, raise their own cabins on such spots; in some places the farmer builds: in others he only assists with the roof, etc.; a verbal compact is then made, that the new cottar shall have his potato garden at such a rent, and one or two cows kept him at the price of the neighbourhood, he finding the cows. He then works with the farmer at the rate of the place, usually sixpence halfpenny a day, a tally being kept (half by each party) and a notch cut for every days labour; at the end of six months, or a year, they reckon, and the balance is paid. The cottar works for himself as his potatoes require."¹ The stick was called a 'bata scoir' and this gave the name 'bothán scoir' to a cabin occupied under this system.

Young was sympathetic to the labouring poor and wrote about their situation in County Kerry. We can take it that their counterparts in Co. Limerick were living in similar circumstances. "The cottars on a farm cannot go from one to another, in order to find a good master, as in England, for all the country is in the same system, and no redress is to be found. Such being the case, the farmers are enabled to charge the price of labour as low as they please, and rate the land as high as they like. This is an evil that oppresses them cruelly, and certainly has its origins in the landlord, when they set their farms, setting all the cabins with them instead of keeping them tenants to themselves. The oppression is, the farmer valuing the labour on the poor at 4d or 5d a day, and paying that in land much above its value. Owing to this the poor are depressed: they live upon potatoes and sour milk, with now and then a herring. Their milk is bought, for very few cows are kept, scarce any

pigs, but a few poultry. Their circumstances are incomparably worse than they were 20 years ago.”²

Young visited Adare where he found the people kept no cows, but did have pigs and poultry. They had potato gardens, “of which half to three fourths of an acre carries a family through the year.” They lived off the garden and sold their pigs. Half an acre of ground cost £2 2s a year and a cabin with an acre of poor land £3 3s. The people were no better off than they were 20 years previous.³

One of Young’s best-known pieces is his description of the habitations of the rural working class people of the time. In the century that followed, the houses, more correctly hovels, of the labouring class continued to be the most dreadful and wretched habitations and it was not until the passage of the Labourers’ Act in 1883 that proper houses were built. This is how Young wrote of the eighteenth century cabins: “The cottages of the Irish, which are called cabins, are the most miserable looking hovels that can well be conceived: they generally consist of only one room; mud kneaded with straw is the common material of the walls; these are rarely above seven feet high, and not always above five or six; they are about two foot thick, and have only a door which lets in light instead of windows, and should let the smoke out instead of a chimney.”⁴ Young went on to say that inside the dwellings were very smoky and very poorly furnished, a pot for boiling the potatoes, a few broken stools and a bit of a table. Most had no beds; the people slept on straw scattered on the floor. The thatch on the roof could vary from straw to potato stalks to sods of earth and ‘weeds sprouting from every part, gives the appearance of a weedy dunghill.’⁵

A quaint and colourful visitor to Ireland in 1796-1797 was the Chevalier de Latocnaye, a French royalist and a refugee from the revolution. He visited Newcastle and praised Lord Courtenay’s agent, Mr. Locke. He noted that wages were low and the price of provisions high and that people were living on potatoes and water or buttermilk. The labourers knew that the work they received 6d for at home, would earn them 2/- in England and many of them had emigrated to England, where they had shown themselves to be sober and industrious. The Frenchman also went to Castleconnell, remarking that where the land was richest, the people were poorest, which he blamed on the subdividing and subletting of land.⁶ Mr. Locke was praised for introducing the manufacture of linen in the Newcastle area. It is worth remembering that in the second half of the eighteenth century large numbers of families were engaged in this industry. The spinning wheel and the loom were to be found in the cottages of many labourers and small farmers and the money derived from this source was an important part of the household income.

Faction fights in which sometimes hundreds of men, armed with sticks, stones and sometimes swords and

firearms, took part were a feature of life in County Limerick during the first half of the nineteenth century. Those who took part were primarily from the labouring class, with a sprinkling of small farmers and farmers’ sons. Some of the County Limerick factions were the Three Year Olds and the Four Year Olds, whose encounters would take place mainly in the east of the county, the Curtins and the Connors, who often fought at the Knockaderry fair, the Ambroses and the Sheahans in the Newcastle area and the Roches and the Hartnettts who fought it out at the Abbeyfeale fairs on 29 June and 24 September.

For long there has been no satisfactory explanation for the cause of, and reason for, these fights that left a trail of blood, mutilation and death at fairs, races and other public gatherings throughout Munster. Explanations put forward by the authorities of the time, who had failed to penetrate the factions or make sense of the fighting, continued to be advanced for a long time afterwards. They were said to stem from the Irishman’s love of fighting or from his love of whiskey followed by a fight. One long-standing feud was said to have originated in an argument between two boys over a game of marbles. Even practiced observers of the peasantry, like Fr. Costello, parish priest of Abington in Co. Limerick, believed that the feuds originated in the “most trivial causes.”⁷

In recent times, an article by Paul E. W. Roberts on the Caravats and the Shanavests, two of the best-remembered factions, throws new light on the whole question. The feud between these two, which at one time touched eleven counties and greatly disturbed wide areas of Tipperary, Kilkenny, Limerick, Waterford and Cork, had its beginnings in the execution of Nicholas Hanley in Clonmel around the beginning of 1806 before a large crowd of strong admirers and jeering enemies. Hanley, a flamboyant, charismatic dandy and highwayman, threw his silk cravat to his supporters in a gesture of pure bravado. The leader of the hostile gang at the execution was Paudeen Géar Connors, a strong farmer, publican and milesman, and that day he had on a much-worn waistcoat. The factions took their names from the two articles of clothing, the cravat and the waistcoat. But the animosity that existed between the two factions was not based on a trifle, but on class and economics.

The Caravats were made up of labourers and small farmers, the poor whose interests they upheld. Those who followed Paudeen Géar (the Irish word means sharp or cute) were the rural middle class, comfortable farmers, yeomen and the hangers-on of these.

Caravatism was a primitive form of syndicalism that endeavoured to bring together as many of the poor as possible, so that they could exercise control over the local economy and create an alternative system. It was a product of the agri-boom of 1793-1813, when an increased demand for farm products brought higher

prices and better profits. This caused the value of land to increase and rents to climb, something that was to the advantage of the landlords and the medium to large farmers, but to the disadvantage of the labourers and small farmers. The Caravats sought to reduce food prices and rents and to increase wages by laying down minimum rates of pay. They opposed the hoarding of food in order to raise prices and sometimes forced farmers to give food to the hungry and needy. They sought to prevent the distrait of goods and punished those who bought such goods. They attacked herdsmen employed in pasture farming and dairymen on dairy farms and destroyed plantations of trees on land that would otherwise be available for conacre. They were very hostile to itinerant labourers, who were ordered to return to their own districts. Like the Whiteboys, the Caravats put forward an alternative economic system and a coherent set of laws and regulations. They opposed the idea of a free market in land, labour and farm products, and put forward a concept of a more humane, less profit-oriented system. Interestingly, they were strong on demands for the protection of small farms and on the question of labourers’ rents and tenancy terms, showing that many labourers were also landholders.

The Shanavests, on the other hand, were a rural middle class movement dominated by farmers set up to combat Caravatism. Their main aim was to take on the Caravats, whose regular targets were the comfortable farmers on whom they visited the most dreadful punishments. As well as fighting, the Shanavests engaged in searches for arms amongst the poor, vigilantism and giving information to the authorities. Some of them were former United Irishmen and the binding ideology of Shanavestism was nationalism, which at that time was found principally amongst the middle classes.

As early as 1809 the two factions were to be found in east Limerick around Pallas, Kilteely, Knocklong and Caherconlish. In some instances the new factions absorbed existing established feuds, like the one in east Limerick between the Blakes (well-known Whiteboys) and the Quaids (well-off farmers). Roberts says that feuding and fighting on class lines and on Caravat-Shanavest alignments was carried out at later times under other names. The Murranes, better known as the Ruskavallas (so-called after a townland near Newport), were Caravats and carried on a long-standing and bloody feud with the Coffeys (Shanavests). The authorities set about suppressing the faction fights in the middle of the 1830s and were largely successful in putting a stop to big organised fights. But this did not mean that they died out completely. Faction fights occurred in the Athea districts in the 1870s, in one of which three men, including a policeman, were killed. At the 29th June fairs in Abbeyfeale in the 1950s, fights arising from feuds of ancient lineage were quite common and a fair was only



Membership card of Adare branch of the Land League issued to D.W. Fyffe, 14 November 1881

(Limerick Museum)

considered a success if there were some good fights.

The Rockite uprising, so called because the name most signed to notices, letters and proclamations was Captain Rock, convulsed and disturbed the County Limerick in the early 1820s. Spearheading this insurrection were the labourers and smallholders, those with less than ten acres. It was sparked off by the activities of an Englishman, Alexander Hoskins, the newly appointed agent of the vast Courtenay estates in the county. Hoskins was a tactless man with no love of the Irish, or Ireland, and no understanding of how central the land was to the life of the peasantry. He saw it as his job to run the estate on a commercial, moneymaking basis without concession to established custom or unwritten understandings. During the Napoleonic war tillage farming was profitable. This was good for the labourers and small farmers and they were able to pay the rents, which had increased. But when the war and the boom-time ended, they were no longer able to pay the high rents. Hoskins, ignoring the changed circumstances, not only demanded the full rent and began to evict when this was not forthcoming, but called in the military to assist him. This started the disturbances.

This was the spark that lit the fire, but there were long-standing underlying causes. From the second half of the eighteenth century, the county had experienced a substantial growth in population and, as there was little indus-

trial employment, this meant that vast numbers of people were living off the land. There was continuous pressure and demands to divide and subdivide holdings. With each subdivision the holdings became smaller and less viable and, as the demand for land was insistent and unceasing, rents rose sharply. In County Limerick many smallholders were paying far more than they could afford. Also at this time, as a result of the contraction of tillage and a move towards pasture farming, the landlords and farmers wanted to consolidate their farms and pressure came on sub-tenants to move off holdings. Sublettings, which up to then had been ignored or tacitly encouraged, were no longer acceptable. The poor people were being squeezed from two sides at one time, to pay very high rents and to move off the land. To add to their misery, the harvest of 1821 was a bad one. There was very heavy rain during the spring and summer of that year and the crops rotted in the ground. In many instances the turf was not saved either, so that there was a shortage of fuel. Many were without the basics, potatoes and turf.

The hilly western corner of the county was the heart and centre of the insurrection. That part of the county was very densely populated at the time and, as the land was poor there was much wretchedness and deprivation. Major Richard Willcocks, a chief magistrate of police in the county, told how the people had nothing to eat but 'potatoes and salt' and how he had seen whole families

sleeping together on floors without distinction of sex, with clothes that they had on during the day thrown over them at night. The upland area at this time was a wild, uncivilized place to which the rule of law did not extend and there were places where the forces of law and order were hardly ever seen. There was no proper road system, so that the military and police found travel difficult. An army officer described it as an "excellent place for concealment to outlaws and banditti of all kinds."⁸ Two prominent desperadoes, leading figures in the rising, came from around Barnagh, just west of Newcastle, and many of the raids and crimes were planned and carried out by men from the Mullaghareirk Mountains. It was a refuge for criminals and stolen cattle were hidden there. Smugglers who had been driven off from the Kerry coast ran smuggling rings from the hills. Illicit whiskey, which fuelled many of the acts of violence, was distilled there. Marriageable daughters were abducted from their homes and taken and held there, like Honora Goold, the daughter of a Liscarrol farmer, who was carried off and held in the Tournafulla district in 1822.

The Rockites put forward their own agrarian philosophy. According to their thinking, a man had a God-given right to live off the land. It was wrong and unjust that his rent should be raised excessively. It was bad and immoral that a man should be evicted onto the road to beg, to steal or to starve. They saw society as divided into two classes, the rich and the poor, and saw

themselves as the representatives and defenders of the poor. They saw the forces of law and order, the military, the police, the magistrates and the courts, as the protectors and defenders of the rich, whose interests were in conflict with the interests of the poor. This was notably true with regard to rents, tithes and control of and access to land. Accordingly they did not feel bound by these laws of the land, which they saw as designed to maintain and strengthen the power of the establishment, whom they described as a 'tyranny'. The Rockite philosophy was accepted and supported by large numbers of the ordinary people, without whom the agrarian terrorists could not have functioned.

The insurrection spread throughout County Limerick like a fire. It was taken across the borders of the neighbouring counties by evangelists, preaching the fiery creed of Whiteboyism and swearing in the 'lower orders,' as the authorities termed them. Sometimes the swearing in was done by large gangs going through the countryside at night. It spilled into east and north Kerry, County Tipperary, and north and north-east Cork, which were as disturbed as County Limerick. It also infected parts of County Clare and faraway County Kilkenny. In pursuit of their campaign to have control over the land, to reduce rents, to increase the rates of pay to labourers, to prevent the taking of farms from which tenants had been evicted, to reduce tithes and to punish all those who ignored or disobeyed their rules and regulations, the Rockites murdered and maimed, burned and robbed. Houses were attacked and robbed of arms and money (to pay for the defence of accused Whiteboys), houses, farm buildings, barns, stacks of corn and the occasional Protestant church were burnt and some savage murders were committed. One of the worst was the brutal killing of Thomas Hoskins, the teenage son of the agent, who was shot and clubbed to death in a gravel pit near Barnagh gap in August 1821.

The insurrection was only put down when all the forces of law and order were thrown against it. The Insurrection Act was brought in, introducing a curfew and suspending the normal judicial process. Large numbers of soldiers were brought into the county, as well as the Police Protection Force and later the new constabulary. Rewards and inducements were offered for information. Leading Rockites were turned and became Crown witnesses, sowing fear and terror in the movement. They swept the Mullagareirk Mountains to flush out the insurgents. The Special Sessions were held, under the Insurrection Act, at which men were condemned to death, transportation and jail. In this way the rebellion was finally put down in 1824.

It was at least partly as a result of the uprising that work began on a scheme to lay roads through the mountainous part of west Limerick and the border areas of the three counties, Limerick, Cork, and Kerry. The laying of the new roads actually began

during the disturbances and in the years that followed a number of roads were built. These were the road from Castleisland through Abbeyfeale and Newcastle, a road from Abbeyfeale to Newmarket, one from Charleville via Newmarket to Castleisland and two short roads, one from Abbeyfeale to Glin and the other from Listowel to Ardagh, County Limerick. Griffith found the people of the upland country initially mistrustful, wanting to be employed only by the day and to do the least amount of work possible. However when they found him to be fair and honest, their attitude changed. He employed them on piecework, paid them by measurement and gave work to men in the immediate district through which the road was being built. He also appointed the gangers from amongst them. He had no problem getting workers, the area being so populous, and he paid better than the farmers. Those laying the road from Newcastle to Castleisland were paid 8d to 1s a day. Griffith developed a good relationship with the people and was in good standing with them. During the height of the insurrection, he rode alone and unarmed through the most disturbed places and the doors of his house in Mallow, where his wife was regularly on her own, were frequently not bolted, even when the countryside round about was lit up with the flames of burning buildings and ricks of corn. But then of course Griffith was providing employment. He also had something of a soft spot for the hill people and wrote about them as follows: "On the whole, I must say, that when we treated with steadiness and justice, no people were more easily managed than these mountaineers. They are naturally a fine people; but they have frequently been oppressed by their immediate landlords. They are grossly ignorant and strongly prejudiced; if educated and employed, they would soon be good and peaceable subjects."⁹

The Rockite insurrection undoubtedly threw a scare into the authorities and the farmers. It caused them to be slow in taking on the labouring class and ensured that there were no wholesale clearances. But other than that, there was no improvement in their lives. The labourers around Croagh and Ardagh were often idle in the 1830s except at harvest time. They lived off the produce of their gardens, mostly the potato, on which they also fed the pig. The potatoes grown by the poor in pre-famine Ireland were variously described as lumpers, cattle potatoes and white potatoes. They were good in quantity but poor in quality. Sir Richard Bourke of Lisnagry said that they were 'little better than turnips' and that a man living on them was incapable of doing a hard days work. During the nineteenth century there were regular failures of the potato crop, followed by hunger and famine. The state of the poor in the country at this period was encapsulated in the story of the big farmer in the Adare area who built a sentry box and put a guard in it, to keep a watch on his turnips.

Houses too had improved little since the days of Arthur Young. The average cabin in the country in the 1830s was around 20 feet long by 12 ft. wide by 7 ft. high and comprised one room, or a kitchen and small bedroom. It cost £4 to £5 to erect and the better ones were thatched with rushes or straw. Some had chimneys of sticks and mud, others just a hole in the room to let out smoke. Many lacked a proper door or window or roof. The better ones had 20 inch square glazed windows and doors hanging on iron hinges, with a wooden bolt and a hasp for a padlock outside. In the west, turf was plentiful and cheap. Around Abbeyfeale a year's supply cost £3 to £4. In the east of the county, the poor were often without fuel and had to resort to cutting down trees and pulling down fences.

Multiple occupation of houses was common. In the districts of Mahoonagh and Feoghanagh, 80 cases were reported. There was a similar number in the parish of Abbeyfeale and 60 cases respectively in the parishes of Stonehall and Cappagh. The parish of Rathronan had a number of cases of multiple occupancy; in one cabin 15 ft. by 14 ft. lived a couple with eight children, another family of three, a pig and a goat.

The relationship between farmer and labourer had changed little either. Fr. Coll, parish priest of Newcastle, in evidence to the poor laws commissioners, said: "The farmers in letting land to labourers set the highest possible value on the land and the lowest possible value on the work."¹⁰ Rev. William Stone Ash, Church of Ireland rector in the parish of Rathronan, also believed the labourers "rents were very inflated." He has ascertained the rent paid by farmers for a farm and compared that to what the labourer was paying for his potato garden and he had no hesitation in saying that "in most instances the labourer pays five, ten, nay even thirty fold as much as the farmer pays the head landlord."¹¹ The worst thing that a labourer could do was to improve his property for this excited the greed of the farmer, who then set about taking it back.

The policy of consolidating farms by evicting smallholders and not releasing leases continued right up to the famine and after. The parish priest in Ballingarry, Co. Limerick, told this story to the Devon Commission in 1844: "My curate went to attend to a poor man dying in a cabin, and the land was ploughed up to the very house, and they had a rough sort of avenue to the place the poor man's anxiety was lest he should not be dead by a certain date, on which day it was appointed that the house should be levelled." And he went on to say: "The agricultural hireling in Ireland is a miserable slave, toiling and starving on 6d or 8d the day and with no prospect (after enduring the wet and cold of winter, when rheumatism and old age set in) but to close his days in the workhouse. The landlord farmer, I honestly confess, appears to me one of the worst enemies of the poor here in Ireland."¹² Fr. Jeremiah

Halpin, parish priest of Castlemahon, was of a similar mind, saying: "If the landlords took the labourers under their own protection and let the land at the same rate as to the large farmers, their (the labourers) situation would be much better." Whenever a farm changed hands, the new tenant was bound by the agreements made by the previous occupant with the labourer and could force the labourer to go if he so wished. In many instances the labourers did not have proper legal agreements, so they could not appeal to the courts and the eviction took place quietly. There were many more labourers evicted by farmers than by landlords, and the farmers treated the labourers much worse than the landlords treated the farmers.

The Great Famine of 1846-1848 did for the farmers and the landlords what they failed to do themselves: it cleared the smallholders and labourers off the land. This was done by death through starvation and fever and by the mighty wave of emigration that followed. The poor constituted the vast majority of those that died in the Famine and large numbers of them took ship for America and Britain. (In the 1830s in the southwest there had been a good deal of emigration amongst the better-off farmers). In 1835 around 300 large and medium farmers from the County Limerick baronies of Shanid and Lower Connello emigrated. Sir Richard Bourke told the Devon Commission in 1845 that he had facilitated the emigration of several families to New South Wales by paying their passage and by providing them with cash and letters of introduction.

But after the Famine, it was the poor that left in large numbers.

From 1841 to 1911 the number of farmers in the country declined by over a quarter, but the number of labourers, including farmers' sons and assisting relatives who worked as labourers, halved in the same period and quartered in many parts of Connaught. From 1841 to 1881, the percentage of labourers in the adult work force fell from 68% to 56%, while the percentage of farmers and farmers' sons rose from 40% in 1841 to 60% in 1881. In County Limerick, the number of labourers fell from 54,365 in the 1841 census to 5,097 in the 1911 census, and in the same period the number of farmers increased from 10,056 to 10,811. In 40 years, the composition of Irish rural society changed from a majority labourer population to a majority farmer one.¹³

What happened to the labourers who remained? There are two views on this. David Fitzpatrick, historian of Trinity College, Dublin, says that large numbers of them retained an interest in land after the Famine, held on to it and in time were absorbed into the lower section of the farming class. Fitzpatrick says that this process was to be found especially in Connaught and southeast Ulster.¹⁴

Samuel Clark, a Canadian professor and the author of a study of the Irish Land War,¹⁵ says that what occurred after the famine was the proletarianization of the farm labourer, in other words, that he became purely a wage worker. He maintains that landholding by labourers declined during and after the famine and that farmers, from the 1870s on, preferred

to employ labourers on a casual basis when required and not to rent plots of land to them. This would seem to be closer to what happened in County Limerick. Where the labourers were subsumed into the farming class they, of course, adopted the farmers values and their way of looking at things. Where this did not take place, different, often opposing, agrarian philosophies and attitudes were to be found on either side. One thing is certain: the alliance of labourer and small farmer that was a feature of pre-Famine times did not carry over into the post-Famine period. In the period between the famine and the Land War, two distinct classes with opposing interests emerged - the commercial farmers and the waged labourers.

There was no noticeable improvement in the condition of labourers in the years after the Famine. The three evils of unemployment or under-employment, bad housing and low wages continued to dog them. The contraction of tillage and the change to pasture and livestock farming were not beneficial to the labourers. Neither was the introduction of agricultural machinery in the 1850s or the replacement of the sickle by the scythe. Opposition to these changes was evidenced in the destruction of haymaking machines in a number of counties in 1858.

It was not until the 1860s and 1870s that there were real improvements in labourers' conditions. In the 1860s the price of farm produce improved, the pool of labour had become smaller and many labourers were migrating to Britain, where wages were better for seasonal work. Between the 1840s and the 1860s, wages

→ Objects + of + the + League. *←

The Irish National Land League was formed for the following objects :—

FIRST—To put an end to Rack-renting, Eviction, and Landlord Oppression.

SECOND—To effect such a radical change in the Land System of Ireland as will put it in the power of every Irish Farmer to become the owner, on fair terms, of the land he tills.

The means proposed to effect these objects are :—

(1) Organization amongst the people and Tenant Farmers for the purpose of self-defence, and inculcating the absolute necessity of their refusing to take any Farm from which another may be evicted, or from purchasing any Cattle or Goods which may be seized on for non-payment of impossible rent.

(2) The cultivation of public opinion by persistent exposure, in the Press and by Public Meetings, of the monstrous injustice of the present system, and of its ruinous results.

(3) A resolute demand for the reduction of the excessive rents which have brought the Irish People to a state of starvation.

(4) Temperate but firm resistance to oppression and injustice.



The Bothán Scóir, poor labourer's house, at Bunratty Folk Park (SFADCO)

in most areas increased by about 50% and doubled in some parts of the country, including Limerick. Before the Famine, a labourer's daily wage was from 4d to 8d; in the 1860s it rose to 1/- and 1/7 per day. These increases were not the result of a change of heart by farmers, but came from increased competition for and demands by the labourers.

In December 1869, Philip Francis Johnson, a small hotelier in Kanturk, County Cork, formed the Kanturk Labour Club and issued a manifesto in which, amongst other things, attention was drawn to legislation that regulated the wages and hours of the mechanic and gave him assistance when he was unemployed. Thousands turned up to a meeting in 1870. Joseph Arch of the National Labourers Union came from England to assist and the Irish Agricultural Labourers Union was set up. This was active for a number of years, and created quite a stir in that part of the country, where those involved were called "the reds of Duhallow" by the farmers. In January 1890, the Irish Democratic Labour Federation was formed in Cork with Michael Davitt's assistance. This established branches in a number of southern towns, but ceased to function after its secretary, Michael Austin, became an MP in the late 1890s. Again in Cork, in November 1894, the Irish Land and Labour Association was founded after an earlier meeting at Limerick Junction. Delegates from this and from the Knights of the Plough, a similar small organisation, attended

meetings of the Irish Trade Union Congress, which was established in 1894. These organisations, while their actual achievements were often not very substantial, had the effect of highlighting the labourers grievances and of showing the employers that the labourers were capable of organising.

They also would have helped to direct the attention of political movements to the question. James Stephens, the leader of the Fenians, was sympathetic to the plight of labourers, but he had to play this down to get and to hold the support of the farmers. The Fenians wanted to win all classes to nationalism and they saw national independence as the solution to a whole range of problems and they were not keen in becoming involved in social questions.

The relationship between the labourers and the Land League is more complex and interesting. The Land League was founded in 1879 to secure the three F's, freedom of sale, fixity of tenure and a fair rent. Two of these were of interest to farm labourers. But from the beginning, it was clear that the Land League was a farmers' organisation set up to take on the landlords. The vast majority of labourers had no direct dealing with landlords and their only complaints against them were general ones: that they did not create enough employment and that they opposed subletting. There was more hostility between the labourer and farmer than between the labourer and landlord. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that their involvement

in the Land War was less than enthusiastic. They played a passive rather than an active role. When they were called on to withdraw their labour, like for instance in the Boycott case, they did so. But they, as a class, stopped short of active support. Only a very small percentage, 4.2%, were arrested for offences under the Act of 1881, passed as a response to the Land League Campaign, for the protection of life and property. In some instances, the labourers denounced the farmers as 'tyrants' and said that they had no more right to the land than the labourers who worked it. Whenever the labourers made hostile noises, the League responded with placatory overtures. In one instance they assured them that no settlement of the land question would be complete that did not include the demands of the labourers. In 1882 they changed the name of the organisation from the Land League to the Irish National Land League and Labour and Industrial Movement. They feared what the labourers would do if they offended them and they realised that their support strengthened the campaign. But, as many of them had foreseen, the labourers derived no real benefits from the activities of the Land League.

But what did bring considerable benefit to them was the passage of the Labourers Act in 1883. In 1881, there were still 40,000 one-roomed cabins in the country inhabited by 41,000 families. Many of these were in the poorer western parts of the country, but some were also to be found in the fertile counties. A select

committee was told in 1884 that 5,000 farm workers in Limerick poor law union lived in one-roomed cottages. It was this question of poor housing that was tackled under the 1883 Act. Under this Act, houses with two bedrooms and a kitchen, on half an acre of ground, later increased to an acre, of non-perishable materials were to be built for labourers and given to them at a subsidized rent. By 1900, 16,000 had either been authorised or built. Under the Local Government Act of 1898, labourers were enabled to vote for the new rural district councils, which were to take over from the boards of guardians responsibility of the provision of cottages. These new councils almost doubled the rate of construction. By 1921, 54,000 cottages had been erected or authorized at a cost of £9,000,000. It is noteworthy that counties where there were local organisations like Cork, Limerick, Tipperary and Wexford, had the greatest number built and most quickly.

The building of the cottages was a real turning point in the history of the farm labourer. In the new century, real wages rose. Cheap clothes came on the market. Diet became more varied - bread, tea, eggs and milk, Indian 'yella' meal and 'lad' (American salted bacon). At last hunger ceased to be common to the family of the agricultural labourer in wintertime.

However anyone who imagines that the labourers have now at last reached their Jerusalem has only to be reminded of the hiring fairs. These hiring fairs, an attempt to centralise the business of hiring farm servants, took place in two centres in County Limerick, at Kilmallock and Newcastle West. The one in Newcastle began about a hundred years ago, coinciding with the coming of the railroad. It was held on Thursdays, the market day, from early January to the end of February or the beginning of March. Those for hire, men and women, came from different parts of Co. Limerick and from the surrounding counties and stood about to be eyed for their physique and health and bargained with by farmers. Sometimes three hundred milled about the square: the girls in their long, black shawls, the men and boys in dark suits and hobnailed boots. They were hired on a verbal eleven-month contract, from 1 February to Christmas Eve and, in the case of men, the agreement was often sealed with a drink. The fair was at its height in the 1920s and died out in the 1940s when there was plenty of employment in Britain, in the building trade and elsewhere.

A farm labourer whom I interviewed some years ago said that he had been hired at Newcastle and worked as a servant boy in the county for ten years, in west Limerick. He was in his seventies when I spoke to him and told me that his annual wage in his first year was £16 and that this had doubled by the tenth year. He had been treated fairly well in some houses but not so well in others and in his opinion only one farmer treated him properly. In one place he was given a bed in a loft over a stable and the pounding of

the horses kept him awake. (This was a popular place to house servants in the belief that the heat from the horses kept them warm). In another house he was given a settle bed in the kitchen. This meant that he could not go to bed until the family had gone, he had to be up and dressed before the farmers' wife came down in the morning and had to stay in an outhouse if there were any visitors in the house. He maintained that in some of the places he worked, he would not have seen a fire for eleven months if he had not made friends with the local cottiers.¹⁶ By way of explanation, but not of a justification of the farmers treatment of their servants and labourers, it can be advanced that there was a good deal of brutishness and harshness in rural life and that some of the farmers were rough, uncouth men who had preconceived, inherited views of the place of farm workers and how they should be treated.

Parents in the west Limerick hills often did not like to see their children, especially if it was a young boy or girl, hiring out to east Limerick farmers. They preferred to see them going to work for a farmer in the Hill Country whom they knew. Some of the smaller farmers treated their servants well: they slept under the same roof as their employers, ate the same food at the same table and were not overworked. Young boys and girls were given the light work around the yard and house and not the heavy work of the fields. Generally speaking the gulf that divided the farmer and labourer in the east, a chasm of class distinction, was not to be found in the west of the county.

Amongst the farmers in the rich lands of County Limerick, it was a class crime for a farmer to marry a servant girl and the farmer that did so lost his standing in the community. The east Limerick farmers frequently housed their servants in the farm buildings, fed them in separate rooms from themselves, often on poor food, and worked them from dawn to sunset. Some physically abused their young servant boys and girls, kicking and beating them if they displeased them for one reason or another. A farmer was often judged on the food he provided. The good farmer gave his workers plenty of bacon and potatoes. The mean ones fed them on watery potatoes, bread without butter, and as little meat as they could get away with. There was a special fear in regard to servant girls. This is captured in something overheard in the Athea district: "She came home at Christmas with £11 and a bun in the oven."

As the 1950s progressed, fewer young people were willing to hire out to farmers. The intelligent, the adventurous and the ambitious emigrated. Those who opted for farm labouring tended to be the less ambitious and those of low self-esteem. By this time the farmers were coming to the labourers houses to get servants, rather than the labourers going to them. In a situation where the labour pool was continually shrinking, wages and conditions had to improve, but these would still

have fallen far short of wages and conditions in industrial employment, in England for instance.

The Limerick Rural Survey of 1958-1964 is almost like a postscript to the story of the labourer. The author of the survey, Patrick McNabb, says that by that time the fulltime farm workers were an exception. Of those who emigrated from the county in the period 1941 to 1951, 2% were farmers, 17% were farmers' sons and 33% farm workers. The Limerick farmer had become dependent on his family for labour by 'the revolt of the farm labourer.' But the labourer did not strike for higher wages, or issue a manifesto, or declaration: he simply turned his back on the farmer and emigrated. McNabb puts it another way; the farmer 'more or less successfully resisted the attacks of the workers but only at the price of losing them altogether'.

A County Limerick labourer's hostility and scorn for the farmer is to be found in a letter written to John Costello of Cahercorish by his son in America towards the end of the nineteenth century. He wrote: "Men are not dying with the hunger like half the gentlemen's men are at home. There are no gentlemen here. If a farmer in Ireland made 3 or 4 thousand dollar a year like I made here, you couldn't walk the road with them. You would have to go inside the fence or they would ride over you. I would like to know what the boys want to be wasting their time around Croagh. There is nothing to do there but to go to work for somebody, and sooner that I would work for a farmer in Ireland I would cut off my good right hand".

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