Servant boys and girls in Co. Limerick

by Pat Feeley

At the outset it is important to define the subject of this essay. By servant boys and girls I mean farm workers who hired out to farmers on a nine or eleven months' contract and I differentiate between them and seasonal workers, or spalpeens, and farm labourers living with some degree of permanency in a locality. The essay is a general treatise on aspects of their way of life: wages, working conditions, sleeping accommodation, food, and their relationship with the employer, the farmer, from the end of the nineteenth century until the early nineteenth sixties when, with rising industrialization and an upsurge in sources of employment, the servant boy phenomenon finally died.

These servant boys and girls who worked for the County Limerick farmers were drawn from the small farmer and labouring class of the county itself, notably from the Mullagharreerik mountains in the west, and from adjoining parts of Counties Cork, Kerry, Clare and, to a lesser extent, County Tipperary.

In order to understand them and their situation we first have to examine the background from which they emerged. From about 1750 to 1850 the growing of corn, mainly wheat, but also oats and barley, was a major part of rural economy. There were a number of reasons for this: the restriction of foreign corn imports to Ireland and Britain, the rising industrial revolution in England and numerous wars in which Britain was engaged. For a variety of reasons the growing of corn was profitable and the farmers turned to it.

At that time agricultural work was labour intensive as what machinery there was was scarce and primitive and most of the work had to be done by hand. Indeed many farmers preferred spade digging to ploughing as it gave better tillage and a heavier crop. Consequently the number of labourers greatly increased in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. These were made up of three different types: servant boys and girls, spalpini fanacha and local labourers. The spalpeens, who were mostly Kerrymen, came to the hiring fairs at Newcastle West and Kilmallock, where they were hired to do the heavy work in the spring and autumn. Most of these returned to Kerry with their savings when the seasonal work was done. Occasionally some of them decided to settle. In the district of Athlacca there are a number of families descended from Kerry spalpeens who settled down there. At this period the servant boys and girls did the work around the farmyard and the dwelling house. The servants: were actually boys and girls, were fed and lodged by the farmer, hired on the 9 or 11-month contract and paid off at Christmas.

This changed after the Famine when the number and different types of labourer decreased due to death, emigration and a general rejection and dislike of working for farmers evidenced by W.P. O'Brien's report on a number of the Munster Unions, submitted to the Royal Commission on labour in 1893-1894. This saw the emergence of the servant boy in the county as a general farm labourer, doing both light and heavy work. But the term continued in use even though the 'boy' was frequently seen as a mark of his early 'sixties. This is of interest in that the word, 'boy', has a certain derogatory tone, as can be seen from its use in the Southern states of the U.S.A. when referring to adult negroes.

Arthur Young, who toured Ireland in the years 1776 to 1779, gives the rate for a farm labourer as between 4d and 6d a day. It is easy to see how the farmers could fairly well dictate terms to migratory spalpeens and transient servant boys and girls but not so easy to see how they could impose their will on the local labourers. But the farmer had a way of dealing with these, too, and of keeping them under his control. He did this by renting a plot of land to them which they could cultivate and where they could build a house or cabin to live in. The rent was paid in labour and the agreement was verbal. Young points out that the farmers valued 'the price of labour as low as they please and rate the land as high as they like'.

After the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, tillage became less profitable and the farmers began to change to dairy farming or cattle raising. These were less labour intensive so there was widespread unemployment amongst the farm labourers, many of whom were without knowledge or training in any other type of work. In the era of comparative prosperity the number of these labourers had increased out of proportion to the farming class. They married young and had large families. For, as Fr. Michael Fitzgerald, P.P. Askeaton, put it to the Poor Law Commissioners in 1835, it was rare to find an old maid or bachelor among the labourers but not among the farmers, because the labourers 'choose their own wives' while 'the farmers' marriages are marriages of interest'. The farmers now found that their cottier labourers were of no use to them, and they set about driving them off the potato plots and re-taking these for themselves. The parish priest of Ballingarry testifying before the Devon Commission in 1844 told them that the curate, on going to visit an old man dying in a cabin, found the land ploughed up to the very door and that the poor old man's only worry was that he would not be dead before they day on which the house was to be levelled.

Rev. Jeremiah Halpin, P.P. Castlemahon testifying...
before the same commission gave it as its opinion, that the labourers would be better off under the protection of the landlords who could let the land to them at the same rate as they did to the "large farmers". Indeed many of the writer and commentators of the time noted that the farmers only hired the labourers worse than they themselves were treated by the landlords. The Famine decimated the farm workers and the poor. They were dependent on the potato and when the potato failed they starved. They died, went to the workhouse, and those who could took the emigrant ship. The census for the years 1841 and 1851 reveal that in the County Limerick the number of farms about 300 and they were small. The gentry, big farmers, small farmers and tradesmen increased, the number of farm labourers houses fell by almost two-thirds. Nor is there any evidence that the big farmers as a class came to the assistance of their starving labourers. And, while the one hand, the landlords have been blamed for allowing the people to die and, on the other recorded remarks such as "I'd prefer to be salting porridge for pigs than to be sugaring tay for servants", and in rhymes:-

"The Kerries they are coming, With their bellies fairly slack!

On both sides it lived on in the folk memory in mutual distrust and dislike. This came to my attention when working in the area in the early nineteen sixties where there was a searing class division with all the sequent corollaries.

The Famine and the decimation of the Irish poor caught the attention of the English public and of the parliament who felt that something should be done to help the abject rural workers. In the 1880s and 1890s a movement was passed for the building of houses for them. There was a great demand for these houses as most of the rural poor were living in the most wretched hovels. The erection of these labourers' cottages is another important turning point, in that they now had at least a roof over their heads, as long as they paid the rent. This gave them a little more independence and security and strengthened their hand to work what hours they wished. It was said that they could not get the locals to work for them and they could not save the harvest without the Kerrymen. The working day was twelve hours - 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. or 7.30 a.m. to 8.00 p.m., with time off for meals; the labourers complained that they were barely granted time to swallow their food. In 1883 to 1891 various legislation had been passed, as we have been told, for the erection of labourers' cottages. This had been brought about by the reports of various commissions on the lack or low standard of housing for the poor and the worker. In the Kilmallock Union 460 cottages had been completed and occupied and a scheme for a further 350 had been submitted. Notwithstanding the new houses, O'Brien commented on the "inferior houses of many of them labourers."

Commenting on the relations between labourers and farmers he said that, while there was no "overt hostility", the feeling mutually entertained is rather the reverse of a cordial one with the farmers complaining of the "idleness" of the labourers and the labourers of the "neglect and indifference of the farmers in supplying them with employment". He reported that there was an agricultural trade union in the area. However, in the Kanturk Union, on which O'Brien also submitted a report, the farm labourers had combined in a Labour League in the late 1870s, and in the 1880s there was a harvest strike for higher wages which was successful.

The hiring fair in Newcastle West began about 95 years ago. The fair was held on the Thursday, which was the peak market day in the town. The fairs went on from early January to late February and were held in the town square. Initially, it was only for female labour but in time it became a hiring fair for servant boys, too. The origin and expansion were allied to the advent of the railways in that part of the country, allowing labourers and farmers to travel long distances with some degree of ease and comfort.

Newcastle West is the gateway from the Sliabh Luachra plateau into the golden vale and so it was a central meeting place for the highland servants and the lowland masters. In time it began to attract business men and professional people from Limerick city who came there looking for women servants. Thereby competing with the farmers.

Those for hire began to congregate in the square early in the morning. The strong farmers made their appearance after lunch. They came from North Cork. East Kerry, the Shannon littoral and from all over County Limerick. The farmers stood at the key points to look over those for hire. The servant girls were everywhere in black shawls or veils, and the boys in dark clothes, wearing caps and hobnail boots. At noon the fair was in full swing and there was great movement and noise. There were sweet carts, balladeers, three card tricksters - all the hustle and colour of the fair.
Schoolboys on their way to and from school had a habit of chalking the girls' shawls. They never tried this on the men because they feared the consequences. Health and physique were vital factors from the farmers' point of view. The work, the living conditions and the wages were all discussed as the bargain was being made and the contract, which was verbal, was sealed with a drink or a small payment. However, this custom ceased when it was discovered that some fly boys were going from farmer to farmer hiring out to each one for the free drink. In the 1870's and 1880's the wages were very small, 50 to 75 shillings a month providing food and lodging. Certain free days were named - "holy days, fair days, and days of local race meetings". It was customary for the girls to ask if there was a "stick" in the yard. This was a slang word for the water pump, which was usually covered in timber. Drawing water a long distance from a well was regarded as drudgery by the servant girls and, accordingly, they tried to protect themselves against it. The fair ended about 6 o'clock and the Kerry boys and girls from the area normally did not begin work until the following Tuesday, during which time they would have made enquiries about the farmer that had hired them and, if the reports were bad, they didn't turn up. One farmer preferred the United Boys to the Kerry girls. This was a popular place to lodge the servant in the West Limerick mountains. In the western corner of the county, were reputed to treat their servants better. The farm was smaller and there was not the same economic division between farmer and labourer; there was no class distinction in the mountains; the worker ate with the family and drank in the pub with the master. Indeed, in bad times in the thirties and during the second World War, the smaller farmers sometimes found it difficult to pay the labourer and often had to sell turf at the end of the year to do so. Parents preferred to hire children out locally than to send them down 'the country' because they were nearer home and they could keep an eye on how they were being treated. In some families the old retainer syndrome operated with successive generations hiring out to the same family of farmers down through the years.

The mountainy men brought back at Christmas tales of harsh treatment. Bad food and rough conditions and so it came about that even today the people in the West of the county think of the East Limerick farmers as rich, mean and hard. There was another fear with regard to servant girls as illustrated in a popular saying in the Atha area: "You did what you were asked to do, went home at Christmas with 111 and a bun in the oven." The seduction of servant girls, however, seems to have been more a pastime of the gentry than of the farmers. It was in fact a class crime for a farmer or a farmer's son to father a child on or to marry a servant. Such a farmer automatically lost standing amongst his fellow farmers. Indeed great care was taken, generally by the farmer's wife and sometimes by a footman or footwoman, to see that no relationship of a sexual nature developed between the farmer's children and any of the servants. Farmers also were known to break up and discourage courtship amongst the servants on the grounds that this interfered with their work. The farmer took it on himself, too, to see that they received the sacraments regularly and attended Mass on Sunday.

The servant girl's work was, as one would expect, lighter than the man's. In the morning she lit the fire, milked the cows, separated milk, fed the calves and then had breakfast about eight o'clock. The girls ate with the men and the food was much the same; the man would normally get more to eat than the girl because he worked harder. A normal breakfast was bread and tea and a boiled egg. After breakfast the girl did the housework or yard work. Making beds, washing floors, washing clothes, cooking - all the chores of the house. The outside work would have included brushing up the yard, washing buckets and creamery tanks, cleaning out the henhouse, washing potatoes, slicing turnips or mangolds for cattle. One woman told of being compelled to wash potatoes with her bare hands in an icy water trough until the skin cracked.

With the springtime and at the harvest the women were expected to pitch in and take on whatever they were asked to do. As one woman said - "You did what you were asked to do or turned your face homewards". In some cases girls of 13 and 14 were expected not only to do women's but even men's work in the busy times of the year. The girls often felt the brunt of snobbery and class distinction more than the men because they were around the home where constant reminders of "their place". They were paid money for clothes, shoes, stockings and so on during the year and this was deducted at Christmas, when the balance was paid to the girls father. The parents often secured groceries on credit during the year at a village shop, and it was a point of honour with them that the bill should be paid on Christmas Eve. The servant girl was an important link in the servant-master chain. A girl in a big family had to go out and work to
make money to feed the others. Amongst the small farmer class the girl went out to work for the big farmers to make a "fortune" so that she could marry into some small farm in her own place. After working for 9 or 10 years, she would have saved about $100. A match was then made and the dowry handed over to an unmarried sister of the groom's who, in turn, married another small farmer and the cycle continued. This outdated and primitive system of slave labour, for it was little else, continued until the pressures of change and of other economic forces brought it to a halt in all its incongruity in the mid-nineteen 'sixties.

That the servant boys and girls were an exploited, oppressed class goes without saying. Right up to the early 1960's those that were still "working out" with farmers were regarded as little more than beasts of burden. They were not seen as individuals, people with feelings and minds of their own. Nor is it correct to blame the farmers alone for this, as there were educated and intelligent observers like priests, doctors, teachers and others who did or said nothing to draw attention to the injustice. A comparison could be made between them and the American negroes, theoretically free but really regarded as less than human. Examples of this can be seen during illness when no doctor was called. They worked in rain and hail, were often poorly fed and poorly lodged and their biological and human urges were deflected or ignored. This attitude of the farmers was deep rooted which they could draw. The farm labourers could have got support from two sources - the trade unions and the clergy. Except for the Federated Workers Union, which was confined to a small number of Leinster counties, the unions ignored them. So also did the clergy who counted them amongst their congregation. In the first half of the nineteenth century there seems to have been sympathy amongst the parish clergy for the rural labourers, but in the second half the priests tended to be drawn more and more from the strong farmers. The small farmer and the labourer did not have the money to send their children to secondary school and then on to Maynooth. The priests, therefore, came to the people with the inherited prejudices of their class, which included a lively antipathy towards the farm labourers, and any alignment with them would have meant turning their faces against their own people. This they did not do.

In the Limerick Rural Survey (1958-'64) Patrick McNabb found that full-time farm workers had become an exception. Rural labourers worked for the farmers only for as long as they had to. McNabb cannot hide the facts. He showed the class division, the snobbery and the mutual hostility of farmer and labourer. He tried to explain it away. "We were slaves but in our own way we were happy", is one quotation he attributed to a farm worker. McNabb touched on the subject but failed to analyse the nature of the relationship. But then he could hardly have been expected to have done so, as the project was sponsored by one of the farmers' own organisations, Muintir na Tíre. However, the feelings of the farm labourers were made clear by their failure to join such organisations as the Irish Countrywomen's Association, Macra na Feirme and Muintir na Tíre.

The Rural Survey shows that migration in the period 1941-'51, at 33% for farm workers, was highest when compared to 17% for farmers' sons and 2% for farmers. No formal declaration was made when the labourers turned their backs on the farmers. The workers were never articulate but their rejection was massive and final. This fact is acknowledged by the survey. The Limerick farmer is said to be without hired labour, to be dependant on farm labour, and the "most striking influence for change is the revolt of the farm labourer". The workers demanded the wages and working conditions of their urban counterparts. The farmer, "more of less successfully resisted the attacks of the workers but only at the price of losing them altogether". Indeed, the Limerick Rural Survey could well be called the epitaph of the farm labourers in the county.

Once out there was no return. All the quiet pent-up bitterness is to be found in this letter from America, sent by John Costello of Caherconlish by his son near the end of the last century:

*Men here are not starved 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 dollars in a year like I made here, you couldn't walk the roads 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 Clogh. There is nothing to do there but to go to work for somebody, and sooner than I would work for a farmer in Ireland I would cut off my good right hand.*

Why should such an unjust system have continued for so long? The simple answer is that those who suffered under it were also trapped by it. For the large families of the poor it was hire out or starve. The trades were closed against them - confined to the families of traditional tradesmen. They had no union. There was little labour consciousness and few attempts were made to organise the Limerick farm workers. The emigration ship that came in the wake of the Famine remained the beacon and the escape route for many. But to emigrate you needed money, and a lot of them did manage to save up for the passage to America. Many more labourers could only dream of liberty, but the fare was beyond their wildest dreams.

It is possible to trace a fixed pattern: boys and girls going out to service at 13 or 14 and emigrating in their early twenties. They had seen the folly of life as a servant boy or girl. They had seen the burnt out cases - arthritic, bent from toil, penniless. In their own minds, in time, going it would also be trapped by it. For the large families of the poor it was hire out or starve. The trades were closed against them - confined to the families of traditional tradesmen. They had no union. There was little labour consciousness and few attempts were made to organise the Limerick farm workers. The emigration ship that came in the wake of the Famine remained the beacon and the escape route for many. But to emigrate you needed money, and a lot of them did manage to save up for the passage to America. Many more labourers could only dream of liberty, but the fare was beyond their wildest dreams.

It is possible to trace a fixed pattern: boys and girls going out to service at 13 or 14 and emigrating in their early twenties. They had seen the folly of life as a servant boy or girl. They had seen the burnt out cases - arthritic, bent from toil, penniless. In their own minds, in time, going it would also be trapped by it. For the large families of the poor it was hire out or starve. The trades were closed against them - confined to the families of traditional tradesmen. They had no union. There was little labour consciousness and few attempts were made to organise the Limerick farm workers. The emigration ship that came in the wake of the Famine remained the beacon and the escape route for many. But to emigrate you needed money, and a lot of them did manage to save up for the passage to America. Many more labourers could only dream of liberty, but the fare was beyond their wildest dreams.

It is possible to trace a fixed pattern: boys and girls going out to service at 13 or 14 and emigrating in their early twenties. They had seen the folly of life as a servant boy or girl. They had seen the burnt out cases - arthritic, bent from toil, penniless. In their own minds, in time, going it would also be trapped by it. For the large families of the poor it was hire out or starve. The trades were closed against them - confined to the families of traditional tradesmen. They had no union. There was little labour consciousness and few attempts were made to organise the Limerick farm workers. The emigration ship that came in the wake of the Famine remained the beacon and the escape route for many. But to emigrate you needed money, and a lot of them did manage to save up for the passage to America. Many more labourers could only dream of liberty, but the fare was beyond their wildest dreams.

It is possible to trace a fixed pattern: boys and girls going out to service at 13 or 14 and emigrating in their early twenties. They had seen the folly of life as a servant boy or girl. They had seen the burnt out cases - arthritic, bent from toil, penniless. In their own minds, in time, going it would also be trapped by it. For the large families of the poor it was hire out or starve. The trades were closed against them - confined to the families of traditional tradesmen. They had no union. There was little labour consciousness and few attempts were made to organise the Limerick farm workers. The emigration ship that came in the wake of the Famine remained the beacon and the escape route for many. But to emigrate you needed money, and a lot of them did manage to save up for the passage to America. Many more labourers could only dream of liberty, but the fare was beyond their wildest dreams.

It is possible to trace a fixed pattern: boys and girls going out to service at 13 or 14 and emigrating in their early twenties. They had seen the folly of life as a servant boy or girl. They had seen the burnt out cases - arthritic, bent from toil, penniless. In their own minds, in time, going it would also be trapped by it. For the large families of the poor it was hire out or starve. The trades were closed against them - confined to the families of traditional tradesmen. They had no union. There was little labour consciousness and few attempts were made to organise the Limerick farm workers. The emigration ship that came in the wake of the Famine remained the beacon and the escape route for many. But to emigrate you needed money, and a lot of them did manage to save up for the passage to America. Many more labourers could only dream of liberty, but the fare was beyond their wildest dreams.