

# 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 nineteen 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 Mullaghareirk 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, *spailpini fanacha* and local labourers. The spalpeens, who were mostly Kerry men, 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 Athlaccia 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 a man in 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



From the Keogh Collection, National Library  
of Ireland.

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 his 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 writers and commentators of the time noted that the farmers treated their labourers a lot worse than they themselves were treated by the landlords.

The Famine decimated the farm workers and the poor. They were dependant 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 while the number of houses of all other classes - 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 hand, excused on the grounds of ignorance and absenteeism, the role of the farmers during the Famine has been passed over.

Nor can they be excused on the grounds of either ignorance of absenteeism, for they were neither. For the farm workers the Famine was a watershed, or more correctly, a tombstone. They learned, as hunger and disease stalked the hovels and as the corpses were dumped into mass graves, that no one cared about them. They were without money, property or job security - chaff in the winds of adversity. Those of them that could escaped from the country and from the farmers. Those that stayed behind nursed bitterness and anger for those who stood idly by as their friends and relations starved and died. That there was a close hatred between the farmers and the labourers is a fact. It is mostly silent and unexpressed, since the oppressed class were so poverty-stricken and so desperate that they could not organize to take action or articulate their suffering.

However it is found in some of the songs they wrote "The Galbally Farmer", "The Rocks of Bawn", "The Spailpin Fanach" and others. On the farmer's side it is found in 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 as a teacher in the East Limerick - West Tipperary border 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 legislation 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 stipulated rent, and were no longer dependant on the farmers to house them. This gave them a little more independence and security and strengthened their hand when bargaining with the farmer. In the wake of the Famine and the national catastrophe, the government were undoubtedly concerned with the possibility of agrarian unrest, as can be seen from the manner in which the agricultural commissioners framed their reports on the position of the agricultural labourer in Ireland in the early eighteen nineties.

In 1893 W.P. O'Brien reported to the Royal Commission on Labour on the agricultural labourer in the Poor Law Union of Kilmallock. He reported that due to emigration the supply of labourers was entirely insufficient. The far-

mers alleged that the workers who were industrious and willing "to accept reasonable wages need seldom be idle". The labourers asserted that the farmers only wanted them for the busy months and the odd days. An independent witness confirmed this saying that the farmers only hired them when absolutely necessary. The farmers were dependant on immigrant labour from East Kerry and the adjoining districts of West Cork. The immigrants both young men and women with a predominance of the latter arrived in Kilmallock by train on certain days in March, notably the 17th and 20th of the month. He estimated the annual number of these arrivals as about 300 and they received between £11 and £14 for the nine-month period with board and lodgings. They received an "excellent diet", he stated, bacon three times a week and bread and tea twice daily. The girls milked the cows, fed the pigs and made themselves generally useful while the men took on the heavier work. The local labourers claimed that the immigrants got preference to them because the farmers could get them 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 Kerry men. 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 seen, 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 the 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 no 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 1870's, and in the 1880's 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 a Thursday, which was the produce 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 their black shawls covered from head to foot. The servant 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 bustle 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 the 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 1870s and 1880s the wages were very small, £8 to £10 for the 11-month period, with food and lodgings. 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 who had been hired went off with the farmers. Many of the farmers preferred to hire the outsiders, knowing that they would begin work the following day. The boys and girls from the area normally would 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 for work. For this reason the farmer preferred to hire the Kerries. The hiring fair in Newcastle West was at its peak in the 'twenties when as many as three hundred could be seen on a day offering themselves for hire. After the second World War the fair began to decline and finally died in the late forties.

Paddy Roche of Mountcollins, Co. Limerick, could be considered a fairly representative servant boy of the period. Now in his early seventies he is a quiet, soft-spoken, gentle soul. He told me he was 'in service' for ten years and that he started with an annual wage of £16, which had risen to £32 after the ten years. He worked in the districts of Kilmeedy, Feenagh, Broadford, Glenquin and Tournafulla. In some houses he was treated fairly well, in others not so good. The year began on the 1st February and ended on Christmas Eve. Sometimes the food was good up to St. Patrick's Day but after that the standard dropped; this was because the hiring fairs in Newcastle West ended in mid-March and the servants were considered booked for the year. Of those he worked for, he said, only one of them treated him right. In one house he was given a bed in a loft over a stable and found sleep difficult with the pounding of horses through the night. This was a popular place to lodge the servant in the belief that the heat from the horses kept him warm. In another house he slept in a settle bed in the kitchen. This meant that he could not go to bed before the family had retired for the night; if visitors came he had to remain in an outhouse until they had left. In the morning he had to be dressed and out of the house before the farmer's wife came to light the fire, and on Sundays he had to dress for Mass in one of the outhouses. In some of the houses there were fleas and vermin in the beds. He brought with him his own soap, towel and razor.

The food was bad - watery potatoes, green cabbage and a mug of water often constituted dinner. Supper was bread and milk without butter. Around 2 o'clock there was tea and a few slices of bread.

The farmer could fire the servant for standing under a tree from a shower; if the servant wanted to leave he had to give a month's notice otherwise the farmer could refuse to pay him. He remembers the wettings and the wet clothes. The labourer was not allowed to sit at the farmer's fire and the only hope of drying out clothes was at a labourer's cottage. He claims that if he didn't strike up a friendship with one of the cottiers, he wouldn't sit at a fire from February to Christmas Eve. He worked until three o'clock on Christmas Eve, walked to Newcastle

(the farmer wouldn't give a drive to the servant) and then walked, or if he was lucky got a lift home, a distance of about nine miles from the town. It is worth noting that Paddy Roche worked only in West Limerick. There are in fact two traditions in the county, the East Limerick and the West Limerick one. The farmers in the Mullaghareirk 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 Athea area: 'She came home at Christmas with £11 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, 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.

In 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 house all day and, got 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



An old agricultural labourer in Limerick.  
(Drawn by John O'Sullivan).

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 - the farmer did not expect them to get sick and if they did 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 in time, going back well before the Famine when hundreds of thousands of landless, unskilled poor formed a great labour pool from 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 Tire. However, the feelings of the farm labourers were made clear by their failure to join such organizations as the Irish Countrywomen's Association, Macra na Feirme and Muintir na Tire.

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 family 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 or 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 Croagh. 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. Then in the fifties employment prospects increased and some of them were able to get jobs and live in their own place, often in a county council cottage. But many of those who went through the experience carried with them the scars - inferiority complexes, social maladjustment, bad health and bad memories.

Lastly we come to the farmers. The Limerick big farmer respects a man with land. A man without land is a man of straw. They have a strong sense of class. In the