

Land struggles in Ireland:

“The land of Ireland for the people of Ireland”*

By Fergal Anderson**

Past and Present

Agriculture has always been of enormous importance in Ireland. Some of the oldest tales of the Irish mythological cycle deal directly and indirectly with the importance of cattle to the people living on the island at the time. As both a source of nourishment and wealth, the Irish tradition of animal husbandry had little in common with the industrialised production systems we see today. Archaeological traces of field systems in the North West of the country date back more than 5,500 years, making them some of the oldest in the world. Megalithic and Neolithic settlements and ritual centres have also left a lasting impact on the landscape and in the oral tradition of the people.

However, as the only historic colony of the British Empire within Europe, Ireland's modern land and peasant history needs to be understood as a product of both colonial land policy and the land struggles which eventually led to independence. These policies and struggles established, and in many cases entrenched, trends within the agricultural and rural economy which form the basis of the system which exists today.

Accession to the European Union (EU) further developed Ireland's mainly agri-export economic system and brought the Irish agricultural economy into the global sphere, leading to increased industrialisation of agricultural production and a consequent expansion of Irish agribusiness. Land speculation increased dramatically during the period of Ireland's economic boom in the 1990s and early 2000s:

What became clear during the boom years was that a very sharp increase in land prices was occurring, not just in and near urban areas but also in rural areas – agricultural land. According to Savills HOK's Irish Agricultural Land Research report in May 2007, Irish land values jumped from just under €10,000 per hectare in 1998 to over €58,400 per hectare in 2006, by far the highest price per hectare in Europe.¹

* Slogan of Irish National Land League, 1878

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Land prices have since fallen, and the current price is around €25,000 per hectare for agricultural land. This still makes access to farm land particularly difficult for new entrants to farming, concentrates land ownership and leads to the consolidation of agricultural land in the hands of fewer large farmers. This trend is exacerbated by the extremely low handover rate of farmland in Ireland – anecdotally on average once every 400 years.² In comparison, in France it is once every 70 years.

At the same time, Irish agribusinesses are stronger than ever. A minority of farmers and companies involved in the production as well as the processing industry, particularly for beef, dominate the agricultural economy. Ireland is primarily a beef and dairy exporter, with 90% of beef produced being exported, largely to Europe with 50% going to Britain. McDonalds buys a great deal of Irish beef, with some of the farming press proudly claiming that “one in five beef burgers eaten in McDonalds across Europe is made from Irish Beef”.³

The dairy sector is also dominated by agribusiness in Ireland, with a concentration of dairy companies in the South and East. The Irish Farmer’s Journal (a strong supporter of agri-industry) proudly states that “15% of the world’s infant formula (powdered milk for children) is sourced from Ireland”.⁴ Again, the big dairy companies in Ireland are hoping to increase their production with the lifting of the milk quota which will certainly lead to an increase in production on larger, more industrialised farms and a further concentration of land ownership.

Since independence from the United Kingdom in 1921, larger landholders and richer farmers primarily focused on the export market have had the ear of political parties and successive governments. The industrialisation of Irish agri-export agriculture has been supported and facilitated by Irish government policy and this has been reflected in Ireland’s negotiating positions in EU debates on trade and agriculture issues. These groups continue to support a productivist model of agriculture and further industrialisation of processing in Ireland.

However, small and medium sized farmers have become increasingly estranged from an agricultural model based on productivism and further industrialisation promoted by the national government, the large farming organisations and the agricultural press. Tensions between larger and smaller farmers on the one hand, and between the government’s policy of industrialisation and demands for agrarian reform on the other, continue to inform issues of land use in Ireland today.

Three hundred years of agri-exports

As already mentioned, Ireland’s modern land history is inextricably linked to that of the United Kingdom. For more than 250 years, the island of Ireland was treated as any other colony of a European empire: a landed elite oversaw the maximum extraction of resources with the minimum of regard for the people actually inhabiting the territory. In Ireland’s case (following the eradication of the extensive native woodlands and forests⁵) this meant primarily the promotion of beef production for export to Britain.

This trend for agri-exports started in the 1700s when, through a series of “plantations”, English landlords established themselves across the country, particularly in the South and East where the best lands were located. These landlords often sublet their land to Irish tenants or to agents who managed the land on their behalf, and were preoccupied primarily with the live export of cattle to Britain. During this period the larger farmers on better land began to establish holdings primarily dedicated to grazing and the fattening of cattle bought from smaller farms.

In order to meet rents, increasing numbers of tenant farmers in poorer areas began to produce cattle for sale (at one or two years of age) to these “graziers” who would then fatten the cattle for export.

Exports of cattle to Britain grew to such an extent that Britain banned the import of cattle in 1667 and 1681, leading to a diversification of production in Ireland and increasing commerce with mainland Europe.⁶

Pressure on land from grazier farmers into the mid 18th century also saw the occupation of previously commonly held lands by grazier farmers and the further allocation of land to graziers by landlords, resulting in the eviction of smallholders. By the time of the Irish famine, smallholder subsistence farms (of as little as half a hectare) were at odds with richer and larger grazier farmers in the South and East. In economic terms they were also beholden to these farmers as they provided their income through the purchase of cattle. The entrenchment of this relationship during the years of the famine in Ireland established the basis of the Irish agricultural economy.

The Irish famine

The story of the Irish famine - "An Gorta Mór", The Great Hunger - is well known throughout Europe and the United States, not least due to the huge numbers of Irish descendants now living overseas whose families emigrated during the 1845 – 49 period and after. Numbers are contested but it is widely accepted that in the years before 1845 the Irish population was slightly more than 8 million.⁷ This fell dramatically as a result of death and emigration to 5.1 million by 1851.⁸ In fact, the population continued to fall, eventually declining to approximately 3 million at the time of independence in 1921. The current population of approximately 4.5 million has still failed to reach the highs of the early 19th century, a situation perhaps unique compared to any other country around the world.

In 1841, 93% of the country's roughly 685,000 holdings were under 12 hectares.⁹ The classical and widely upheld narrative of the famine directly attributes the arrival of potato blight in Ireland as a trigger for successive crop failures of the staple food for the majority of the population leading to mass starvation and emigration. While factually correct, this simplistic overview fails to place the Irish famine in the broader context of the system of land tenure and colonial policy which in fact both contributed to and stood to gain from the famine.

In the eyes of the landlords, the Irish landscape was vastly overpopulated. Land that could be used for rearing cattle and sheep was being used to sustain a rural population in extreme poverty. This population was becoming increasingly difficult to manage as pressure for land reform increased and land agitation began to take hold. While the arrival of the blight was a calamity, it also provided an opportunity for a complete reorganization of the Irish landscape. A policy of clearing land was not a new idea, as the British government had demonstrated with the forced removal and displacement of people in Scotland during the Highland clearances of the 18th and 19th centuries.

In objective terms, the famine served only to accelerate the concentration of land ownership and control of the agricultural economy by larger producers and exporters, as well as clearing more land for grazing. Forced evictions (which reached their peak during the 1840s) were almost immediately followed by increased herd and flock numbers – by 1869 the number of sheep in Ireland was double the 1847 figure, while the number of cattle had increased by 50% to over 3 million.¹⁰ Ireland's agricultural economy was more than ever geared towards producing food for export to Britain.

The "Land War" in Ireland

214 In spite of the radical upheaval of the famine years, land continued to be a major political problem for the British government in London. For many it formed the basis of what was referred to as "the Irish

question". From the 1870s onwards, increasing calls from tenant farmers for the "three fs" – fixity of tenure, fair rent and freedom to sell their right of occupancy – led to various uprisings culminating in the establishment of the Irish Land League in 1879 and the subsequent "land war". Michael Davitt, founder of the Irish National Land League and one of the main labour leaders of the early independence movements, was a campaigner for land nationalisation and a broad alliance between the British working class, Irish tenant farmers and Irish labourers.

The Land League established community run "Land League courts", resisted evictions and laid the foundations for the kind of community-led social organization and agitation that would grow into the independence movements of the following years.¹¹ The word "boycott" entered the English language following tactics employed by the Land League in 1880 for the "organized isolation"¹² of Charles C Boycott, the agent of an absentee landlord.

However, the land acts passed by the British government in 1881, 1885 and later in 1903 only resulted in the transfer of titling of land – allowing tenants to become owner occupiers. It made no impact on the existing agricultural economy, as larger "grazier" farms still controlled the market. As has been outlined by Conor McCabe:

After the land acts were passed, instead of renting an uneconomic farm which was often little more than a feeder for graziers, a smallholder was now securely tenured and paying a fair price for an uneconomic farm which was often little more than a feeder for graziers.

This contradiction led to a more focused campaign for agrarian reform – and to early calls against "grabberism" from smallholder farmers who saw graziers using the land reform as an opportunity to increase their holdings. However, with the arrival of independence, a more complete land reform would take place.

Land reform after independence

"We may be told that a country is rich because of its profusion of grass, but this merely gives us a wealth which cannot be diffused at present amongst our people"
- James Kelly, TD for Meath, 1932¹³

When Ireland achieved partial independence from Britain in 1921, land was immediately on the agenda of the new government. The larger farmers who continued to drive the agri-export economy were well placed to influence the development of policy in the new state. However, pressure for land reform continued to influence government policies.

A Land Commission was established in 1923 and was primarily focussed on the distribution of land and establishment of small farms from larger estates. This Land Commission existed up until the 1990s in Ireland. While it distributed land across the country, it failed to complete a real agrarian reform¹⁴:

"It is most surprising that a Land Commission which for 30 years is committed to a policy of increasing the number of small farms has never applied itself towards developing a system of farming that would give the 25 to 35 acre (10-14 ha) man a decent living"
- Irish Farmers Journal 1952¹⁵

Improving the economic prospects for small farmers was not a priority for government agricultural policy. At the same time, there was recognition in the Irish Constitution of the important role of the rural economy and the land. Article 45 of the Irish constitution of 1938 (still valid today) declares:

"That there may be established on the land in economic security as many families as in the circumstances shall be practicable." - Article 45, Section 2, Subsection 5, Directives of Social Policy, Constitution of Ireland

Ireland has historically had comparatively little small-scale processing (cheese, smoked meats, salting etc.) in rural areas, as most processing units were larger-scale and controlled by landowners, or were simply regarded as economically unviable given the extreme poverty of the population.

The new state began to re-orientate the agricultural economy further towards industrialisation, modernisation and intensification (in part encouraged by Britain, Ireland's main trading partner).¹⁶ The larger farmers broadly supported this move towards a productivist approach as they stood to gain the most. Smaller farmers on poorer lands were left to seek part time employment in order to keep their farms functioning. The two main political parties and especially "Fianna Fáil" – later architects of the "Celtic Tiger" and whom small farmers have traditionally supported - have struggled to manage the conflicting interests of a class of agribusiness landowners and numerous smaller farmers in the West and North. In 1973, on the eve of Ireland's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC), agriculture in Ireland accounted for 18% of GNP and employed around 250,000 people on approximately 228,000 farms.

Farming and the EU

Ireland's entry into the EEC led to a consistent increase in agricultural production for export, with a corresponding fall in the number of active farmers. There are 139,800 farmers in Ireland today, and approximately half of these are on holdings of less than 20 ha.¹⁷ The last 40 years have seen a decline in the overall number of farms and an increase in the average size of farms. In 1991 the average farm size was 26 ha, but by 2007 this had increased to 32.3 ha.¹⁸ As the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has evolved from production based payments to single farm payments separated from production, the larger farms have consistently benefited more. According to figures published in 2009, the average subsidy is around €10,000 per farm. However there are approximately 40,000 farmers who receive less than €5,000 per year.¹⁹

In order to compensate smaller scale and "less productive" farmers, the government established a series of rural environmental protection measures for farms in disadvantaged areas. These measures rewarded farmers for improving farm practices, but failed to engage them in making improvements to their production systems or look for alternative marketing systems for their produce. In 2006, around 42% of farmers had a second job off-farm, although this has fallen to 35% in the last number of years as Ireland has entered an economic recession.²⁰

This divide between smaller farms with farmers working part-time to supplement their income and larger, more industrialised farms is also geographical. The North and West of the country, with poorer land and smaller, more numerous farms, can be contrasted with the larger farms on the better land in the South and East.

There has consistently been a great deal of political pressure for smaller farms to receive support, largely due to Ireland's land use history.²¹ However, the tendency in government policy has been above all to facilitate the expansion of Irish agribusinesses and their overseas trade. Farmers in Ireland have always been viewed as primary producers, following the pattern of exports to Britain, with farmers themselves exerting little control over prices or other aspects of their trade. In some respects the old model of "grazier" farms occupied primarily with fattening is no longer applicable. Any farmer engaged

in beef or sheep rearing is ultimately subject to the market price defined in local markets where the animals are sold. It is in this area – post-processing and the associated agribusiness – where the greatest level of concentration has occurred.

Agribusiness industries maintain control over both prices and distribution, with only three main processors for beef and a limited number of larger dairy business cooperatives. Larger export farmers progressed from being involved in the live export trade to processing and export trans-nationally, although the majority of Irish agricultural trade continues to be with the UK and mainland Europe.

Ireland's entry into the EU allowed landed elites to strengthen their position in policy formulation and to receive government supports. When the Irish government began to embrace neoliberalism in the early 1990s and the economy expanded rapidly, agribusinesses responded enthusiastically.

The Celtic Tiger, neoliberalism, the Developers and NAMA

The last twenty years have been turbulent times for the Irish people. A rapid expansion in the economy, largely facilitated by social partnership agreements between industry, the government and unions, as well as attractive corporate tax rates which led to the establishment of Dublin as a transnational corporate software and finance hub, led to an enormous influx of money into the country.

At the same time, large builders and “developers” were engaged in a construction boom which provided both employment and led to a huge rise in house purchases by newly employed workers. These “developers” were part of Ireland's business and commercial elite, with close ties to financial institutions and government. Across the country, land was re-zoned for large-scale housing projects, as well as for one off housing in rural areas.

The boom in construction was not accompanied by an effective urban development policy by the government. In many cases, developments which would not be permitted under planning guidelines were allowed by politicians and civil servants who had close links with “developers”. The scattered nature of development in Ireland led Jacqueline McGlade, Executive Director of the European Environment Agency, to declare in 2004: “the satellite images taken over the past ten years suggest that development in Ireland has been occurring chaotically, with little or no strategic co-ordination”.²²

Unfortunately the situation around cities and towns is often even worse, with large-scale commercial developments, shopping centres and industrial estates scattered around the outskirts. During the height of the economic boom in Ireland these “greenfield” sites exchanged hands for huge sums of money, often prior to any zoning for residential development or receipt of planning permission. In 2006, 15.3 acres of agricultural zoned land was bought for €3 million to a local developer who planned to build 28 housing units.²³ The site is now worth approximately €290,000 -still a high price for around 6 hectares of land.

Agribusiness elites also began to expand their holdings overseas. A new class of “agri-entrepreneurs”, some new to farming, began to look at options for increasing their landholdings and income. A recent report highlighted the role of an Irish company – “Agricultural Capital Partners” – in large-scale land investments in Europe, including one land acquisition of 30,000 hectares in Serbia, as well as other projects in Poland, Latvia and Lithuania²⁴. Members of Agricultural Capital Partners include former government ministers and other Irish business people involved in international financial services.

Much of the funding for the construction sector, developers and agribusiness projects came through close links with banking and financial institutions. As the Irish banks, particularly Anglo Irish Bank,

looked set to fail in 2008, the Irish government introduced a blanket guarantee for all bond holders in Irish banks - an unprecedented step in Europe. The banking crisis in Ireland eventually cost the state upwards of €41 billion, higher than any other country in Europe. The crisis in the property sector also led to the establishment of the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) which took the "bad" assets from the failing banks and established a holding agency for those properties.

The result of this process is that Ireland now has a semi-state asset management agency which is probably the largest landowner in the country. Already, there have been calls for vacant buildings owned by NAMA to be put to use for cultural and social events and activities, and for green field sites to be used for recreational activities.

At the same time, the Irish government agreed to an IMF-EU bank bailout which involves the privatization of state assets. This agreement foresees the privatization of the semi-state forestry company, Coillte, among other semi-state and state owned bodies. The Irish Woodland League is leading resistance to this plan, with mobilizations across the country.

Agriculture and the crisis

During the period directly following the economic and financial crisis, agriculture was widely lauded by government ministers as the success story of the economy. The government has been quick to support the idea that Ireland's agricultural output can continue to grow, and supports a broad plan for increasing production entitled "Harvest 2020". The Harvest 2020 report aims to increase agricultural exports by 42% from the 2007-2009 average in spite of the already damaging impact of Irish agriculture on the environment.

In addition, recent years have exposed the fragility of the Irish agri-export model, which in spite of Ireland's high capacity for grass-fed production, still relies on high levels of imports of concentrated feeds from overseas. Meat and dairy production generally continues to be undertaken on the richer lands of the East and South, but with cattle in feed lots as opposed to in the field. Over the winter of 2012-2013, some farmers ran out of fodder for their animals, leading to the import of fodder from overseas. This unprecedented step unmasked the very tight margins under which most farmers are working. Farmers in Ireland, particularly those involved in animal rearing, depend almost entirely on direct payments to reach an average industrial wage of just over €21,000 per year.²⁵ Smallholders in particular struggle to make ends meet.

Consistently, Irish government policy has served to support an export economy as opposed to ensuring fair livelihoods for the majority of farmers. This process has come to a head in the last year as negotiations for the new CAP have been taking place. The position taken on the reform of the CAP by the largest farming organization in the country, the Irish Farmers Association (IFA), has led to a split in the organization, with some farmers feeling that their interests are not being represented by the predominantly neoliberal and productivist leaders of the IFA.

This process has led to the re-emergence of a group called the United Farmers Association, which aims, among other things to:

"Counteract the 'Group Think' of present establishment elites whose policies are predicated on support for the large operators, the wealthy and powerful in our society to the detriment and ultimate death of low income businesses and farming, in particular rural communities."

Ireland is well placed to reorientate its farming system – particularly smaller producers – towards quality production as opposed to quantity. There is huge scope to improve accessibility to locally produced food for the population, and to help farmers develop local and cooperative based markets for their produce, while ensuring real sustainability without Ireland having to import concentrated feeds or fodder to feed its animals.

Food sovereignty is still a new term in the Irish political and social mindset, but things are changing. Increasingly, there is an understanding both among citizens of Ireland and the farmers who care for her soil and environment that Ireland is ready for a significant shift in how the agricultural economy works.

Relevance of the FAO Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure

For Ireland, the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure should give serious food for thought, in particular with Ireland's history of land exchange and exploitation, and the brief period of extreme speculation on both agricultural and residential property of the last decade.

In order to better implement the FAO guidelines, the following issues need to be addressed:

- Urban planning and spatial policy urgently needs to be reviewed. Strategic plans for ensuring food production in Ireland's urban and peri-urban areas should be implemented.
- Irish companies and individuals should not be involved in 'land grabbing' overseas. Ireland has a moral and political obligation, considering its unique history, to take a stand against 'land grabbing', and recognize people's rights to food sovereignty and social justice instead of agribusiness expansion and exploitation.
- Ireland has no national mechanism for ensuring the *"equitable tenure rights and access to land, fisheries and forests for all, women and men, youth and vulnerable and traditionally marginalized people, within the national context"* (Guideline 3B3 on Equity and Justice). The absence of such a mechanism and Ireland's history of land reform has made it extremely difficult for young people who do not have familial access to land to enter farming and develop agricultural projects.
- Policies which encourage an increase in farm size should be discouraged. This means a reassessment of the Irish Harvest 2020 report, which envisages greater increases in production and will inevitably generate greater pressure on land use. The reforms to the CAP based on payments per hectare will also increase pressure on land.
- With more than half of all farmers 55 years old or older,²⁶ there is a need for a state structure which can manage agricultural land that comes on the market and ensure that existing farms can be passed to new farmers or entrants in agriculture instead of being separated and sold to neighbouring farmers.

Endnotes

1. <http://irelandafternama.wordpress.com/tag/land-prices/>
2. Irish Times, "Getting land is the biggest challenge for young farmers" April 15 2013
3. Farmers Journal December 2012, Supplement, AGRICULTURE 2013 "An industry built on exports"
4. Farmers Journal December 2012, Supplement, AGRICULTURE 2013, "Strong growth expected for range of Dairy products"
5. The World's Landscapes, 4 Ireland, A.R. Orme p. 127
6. Sins of the Father, Conor McCabe, p.62
7. Killen, Richard (2003), *A Short History of Modern Ireland*, Gill and Macmillan Ltd
8. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_population_analysis
9. The Worlds Landscapes, 4 Ireland, A.R Orme p.174
10. Sins of the Father, Conor McCabe, p.64
11. The Revolution in Ireland 1879-1923, D.G. Boyce ed, Philip Bull p29
12. Boycott was threatening to evict tenants from his land. The "organized isolation" meant that Boycott was unable to find workers to harvest his crops, work in his stables, or perform other tasks. Local shops would not trade with him and the postman stopped delivering mail. People would "cross the street to avoid him"
13. Dail Debates, Vol.41, 11vMay 1932, paragraph 1,463
14. State-led land reform was also undertaken in other countries during this period; after World War II many countries carried out land reforms. Some of them were successful as in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China and Cuba. Others were big failures, generally when "reforms" gave only poor quality land to poor families and failed to support them with favourable policies.
15. Sins of the Father, Conor McCabe, p.80
16. Sins of the Father, Conor McCabe, p.81
17. Irish Agricultural Census 2010, www.cso.ie
18. Brendan Kearney, "The Past, Present and Future of Irish Agriculture", Institute of International and European Affairs
19. The Irish Times, "CAP deal is as divisive as ever for farm groups", April 15th, 2013
20. Brendan Kearney, "The Past, Present and Future of Irish Agriculture", Institute of International and European Affairs
21. The failure to manage these interests led to the emergence Clann na Talmhan (Family of the Land) in 1939, which was a political party specifically aimed at representing small farmers. Clann na Talmhan formed part of the government in the late 1940s but by the mid-60s had failed to grow into a strong political force.
22. <http://www.eea.europa.eu/>
23. <http://www.businesspost.ie/#!story/Home/News/%E2%82%AC3+million+Wexford+site+now+worth+%E2%82%AC290%2C000/id/19410615-5218-4fbc-ed0c-d620f4956310>
24. <http://www.agriinvestments.ie/investments/>
25. <http://www.ifa.ie/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=vwneATluct8%3D&tabid=586>.
26. Irish Agricultural Census 2010, www.cso.ie

