

Rural Change in Ireland

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John Davis, Head of Agricultural and Food Economics at the Queen's University of Belfast and Director of Economic Research in the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland, is the editor of this collection of essays on Irish historical and contemporary rural affairs. The chapters cover the period from the formation of the Queen's Colleges in 1845 until the end of the 20th century, varying from traditional historical analysis to detailed evaluations of contemporary European rural policies. The underlying theme is economic and social change in rural Ireland.

The centrality of rural affairs in Irish history justifies the reunion of these essays which aim at tackling major Irish themes having "the land" as a point of departure. Indeed, the so-called "Irish question" in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century British politics was in many ways an "Irish *land* question". From the Great Famine of 1845 and 1846 to the prominence of the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland today, the land has played a major role in defining patterns in Irish history and imagination. It comes as no surprise, then, that the best essays in this collection are those which explore the interrelatedness of land questions and cultural life in Ireland.

This is the case of Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh's "Ireland's Land Question: A Historical Perspective", which shows how the understanding of the land question in Irish history is crucial to the understanding of the country's major cultural configurations. The problem of political disaffection and the menace of Irish nationalism were the legacy of the conquest, confiscations and land settlements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The cultural split that lives on today emerged precisely from this early rural society "over which presided a culturally alienated Protestant landlord class, and below them, a large Catholic sub-landlord community of occupying tenant-farmers and their labourers" (17). Departing from these historical grounds, the author shows how recent Irish scholars have viewed the land as "a site of belonging", as "the repository of an historical consciousness, and as key site of the imagination" (23). The importance that *the sense of place* has for the literary imagination of Irish writers is well documented — for the more ardent members of Yeats's Celtic literary circle, for example, the land was a privileged site of spiritual value. The act of describing the Irish land question, then, raises a series of interrelated issues deeply embedded in the consciousness and imagination of the Irish people.

This premise might inform all the other essays from the collection but unfortunately this is not the case. Tom Boylan's "The Founding of the Queen's Colleges: Context and Origins" aims at providing a brief contextual account of the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the Queen's Colleges. The author indulges in long descriptions of the dynamics of Irish rural economy and society, including the failures of the potato crop which led to the Great Famine of 1845 and again in 1846, but fails to connect the founding of the

Colleges to this specific background. The author's excessive concern with nineteenth-century Irish rural affairs may justify the inclusion of his essay in this volume, but what emerges from his own account is that the decision to establish the Queen's Colleges in 1845 was part of a policy of conciliation to counteract Daniel O'Connell's campaign for repeal of the Union between Great Britain and Ireland. This decision was the result of the understanding that in Ireland at that time there existed an inadequate provision of higher education, which had a long history that involved issues of education as well as of politics, religion and economics. The author himself shows that nineteenth-century Irish agricultural economy — particularly the Great Famine — is too narrow a background against which to place the founding of the Colleges.

Leslie Clarkson's "The Modernization of Irish Diet, 1740-1920", Tony Varley's and Chris Curtin's "Defending Rural Interests Against Nationalists in Twentieth-Century Ireland: A Tale of Three Movements", and Carla King's "Co-operation and Rural Development: Plunkett's Approach" are informative essays, interesting to read. Clarkson shows how the potato period, which lasted for little more than a century, retreated after the Great Famine. After 1848 the population started a "tendency to be fed via the ports rather than the farm gate" (38). The result was an increasing modernization of the Irish diet, which started to include larger amounts of meat, butter and flour. Varley and Curtin study the rural movements that appeared in the post-independence period. It is interesting to note how after the independence some thought that the dominant nationalist political establishment was not serving rural interests well. The result was the emergence of three movements: Muintir na Tíre [People of the Land] and Clann na Talmhan [Family of the Land] in the 1930s, and the "Save the West" of the 1960s. The fact that none of the three succeeded in their attempts is evidence that the powerful organizing political forces lay beyond the efforts of these social actors' capacity to control them. King investigates the role played by Horace Curzon Plunkett (1854-1932) in organizing agricultural co-operative movements in Ireland. Plunkett's efforts were instrumental in introducing innovations in traditional societies that were to be carried out on a group basis rather than on an individual one. He was also one of the first persons to recognize how the comfort of people's surroundings affects "not only how people feel about themselves but also their effectiveness at work" (55).

Vincent Tucker and Liam Kennedy, on the other hand, are able to push their historical findings into the development of further theoretical considerations. In "Images of Development and Underdevelopment in Glencolumbkille, County Donegal, 1830-1970", Tucker shows how "dichotomising categories such as developed/underdeveloped, modern/traditional, periphery/core and even urban/rural" are not self-evident "but are constituted through class and power" (113). In his studies of Glencolumbkille, a rural community in south-west Donegal, Tucker shows how the region had long been integrated into the global economy through extensive sea trade. The area was no periphery and it was precisely the colonial state that "severed Glencolumbkille's links with the wider world and restructured it as peripheral part of the British Empire" (113). In "Farm Succession in Modern Ireland: Elements of a Theory of Inheritance", Kennedy, like Tucker, uses the evidences of his investigations to challenge traditional socio-historical notions and categories. The author explores the role of inheritance in preserving family farm economy in Ireland. The system "insulates heirs from the full play of market forces" and "has acted as a breakwater against market pressures and the triumph of agro-capitalism" (136). Both Tucker's and Kennedy's researches succeed in refining our understanding of Irish history as they propose new categories of understanding which challenge larger theoretical systems.

The last three chapters of *Rural Change in Ireland* concern themselves with aspects of contemporary Irish rural society as well as with present-day public policies. Taken as a group, Mary Cawley's and Michael J. Keane's "Current Issues in Rural Development", John Greer's and Michael Murray's "Changing Patterns of Rural Planning and Development in Northern Ireland", and John Davis's and Shortall's "Towards a Brave Liberal World? Living with European Rural Policies" seem to indicate that a lot still needs to be done in order to bring well-being to rural Ireland. Whether studying the impact of rural planning in the Republic of Ireland or the role of DANI (Department of Agriculture) in bringing about rural development in Northern Ireland, the authors of the three chapters seem to agree that many adjustments are needed. The "brave liberal world" of Davis's and Shortall's last essay still awaits exploration in Ireland's rural communities. The excitement of the people of Ireland to what lies ahead in the new millenium (in rural affairs as elsewhere) should echo Miranda's excitement in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* when she uttered her famous words. The implication here, as the authors borrow Miranda's speech, is the determination to look ahead, to what is to come, and the hope that this collection of essays may provide some answers to the challenges of the future in rural Ireland.