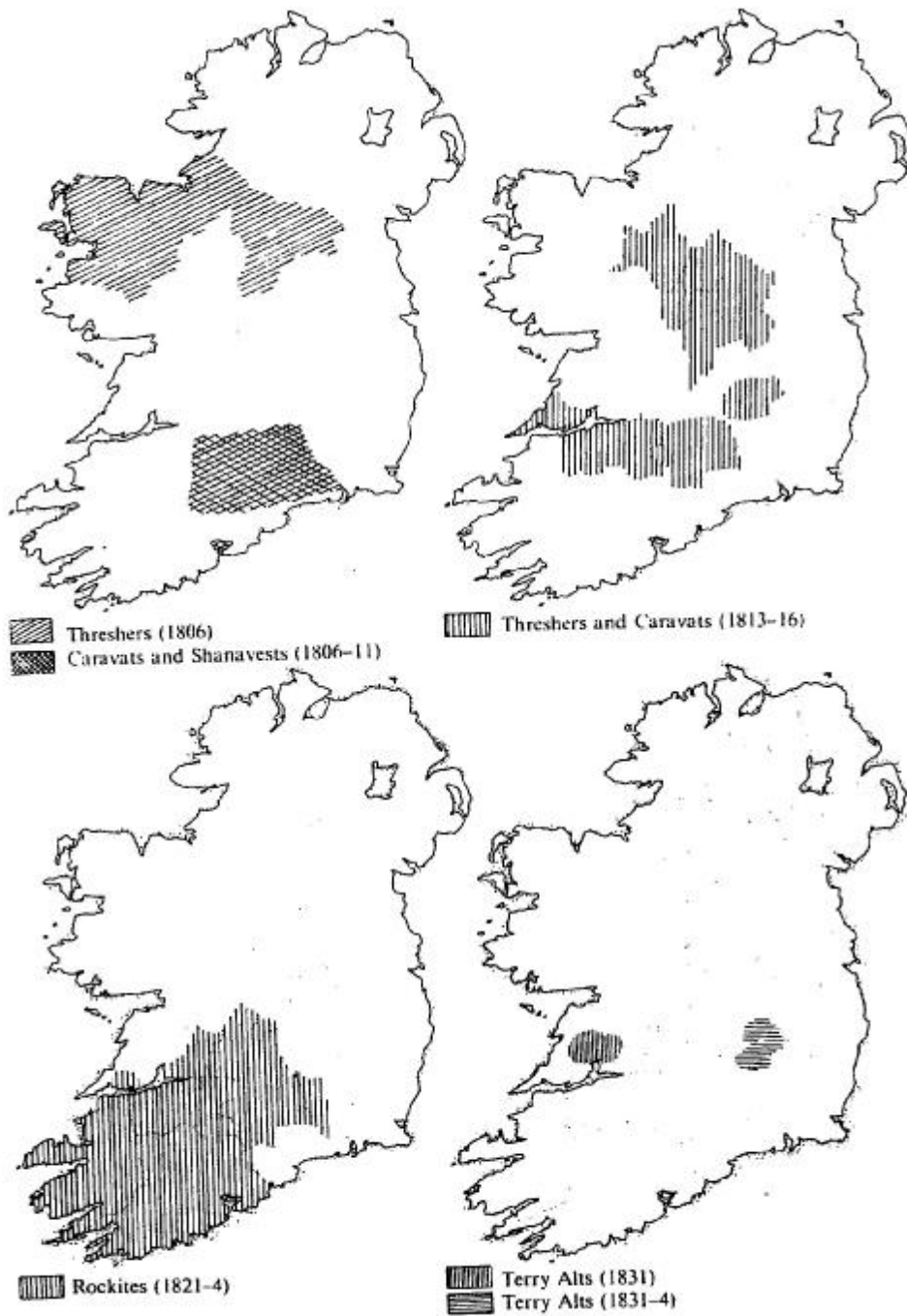


# **Rural Unrest in Ireland before the Famine**

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**Ireland**  
**Districts disturbed by agrarian societies, 1808-34**

# 1. Rural Unrest in Ireland before the Famine

## Widespread disturbances

To some contemporaries the Irish countryside seemed to be one of the most disturbed and violent areas in Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, for the first quarter of the century, parts of Ireland were dominated by movements of agrarian protest, capable of mobilising impressive numbers of followers, often armed. As the map opposite demonstrates, extensive areas were disturbed by agrarian societies, the most widespread and threatening being Rockism, which in the early 1820s had at times the appearance of nothing less than a social revolution.

## Changing patterns of unrest

A firm response by the authorities, the gradual building up of a rural police force and the advent of O'Connell's constitutional agitation all helped to change the nature of rural unrest. Organised violence on such a large scale declined, but more local movements persisted, adopting a variety of methods ranging from cattle maiming to arson, intimidation and assassination. Moreover, particularly in and around the town of Cloone in Co. Leitrim, everybody seemed to participate in violence. Outrages were the outcome not merely of the struggle of the downtrodden against their oppressors but also of the relentless but less familiar struggle of the oppressor against the insufficiently downtrodden.

**Table 1 : Crime in Ireland and Great Britain**

*Annual average committals in Ireland (1844-6) and England and Wales (1841-5)*

Category of crime	Number of Committals		Committals per 100,000 population	
	Ireland	England & Wales	Ireland	England & Wales
murders/homicide	107	281	1	2
other crimes against the person	5,140	2,194	61	13
against property with violence	1,156	1,962	14	12
against property without violence	6,289	23,849	74	146
malicious offences against property	206	214	2	1
forgery and offences against the currency	103	545	1	3
miscellaneous	5,397	1,338	64	8

### **More crime than in Britain?**

The often spectacular nature of rural unrest in Ireland led contemporaries to think that Ireland was more violent and crime-prone than the rest of the United Kingdom. A close examination of the crime figures that do exist shows that this was not the case. As Table 1 suggests, it seems that the crimes committed in Ireland were of a different sort from those elsewhere in the United Kingdom. This should not be at all surprising. After all, Ireland was different from the rest of the United Kingdom.

## 2. The Social Structure of the Irish Countryside

### **Predominantly rural**

The first and most obvious feature of the social structure of the Irish countryside was the fact that the Irish countryside contained the majority of the Irish population - probably some 86 per cent. Most, some 76 per cent, were also employed in non-industrial occupations. Those employed in industry were largely concentrated in the north-east, where a flourishing linen industry provided an alternative to agricultural work.

This was in striking contrast to Great Britain, where the trend towards industrialisation and urbanisation had already been established.

*Table 2*

	<b>Ireland</b>	<b>Britain</b>
Percentage population in towns	14	49
Percentage workforce in industry	24	75

### **Land owned by a small minority**

The second and most obvious feature of the countryside was that the land was held by a very small minority of the population. Most of the land of Ireland was held by some 10,000 people - and in the 1870s a survey showed that over half the country was owned by fewer than 1,000 landlords. There were the great leviathans who owned many thousands of acres, such as the Marquis of Downshire who owned 115,000 acres in five counties, but the typical landlord probably had about 2,000 acres.

### **The tenantry**

By contrast the holdings of Irish tenants were relatively small - on average some 40 acres, with a typical tenant having a much smaller holding. Nevertheless, the starkness of the contrast can be exaggerated.

There was a numerous class of small landlords who were important in their localities as resident gentry but who were not very different from large farmers, some of whom could be very substantial men. The latter could be substantial figures when compared with some small landlords, and one such substantial tenant who held his head high

was Edward Delany of Woodtown in Co. Meath - with 500 acres, shares in the Midland Great Western Railway and a gig.

### Landlords' bad press

The very notion of landlords in Ireland brings many nationalists and others almost to a condition of apoplexy, and it has to be admitted that Irish landlords conventionally have received a very bad press. Generally they have been represented as oppressive and uncaring - freely evicting their tenants, charging impossibly high rents and taking little interest in the well-being of their estates. For instance, the Sinn Fein writer, P.S. O'Hegarty, in his *History of Ireland under the Union* refers in the index to landlords under the following headings: 'iniquities of ...; further iniquities of...; more iniquities of..', and many commentators in the nineteenth century reckoned that it was only fear of assassination and of peasant terrorist organisations which prevented landlords from being more oppressive.

**Table 3**  
**Estimates of relative size of agricultural classes, 1841 and 1881**

Agricultural Class	Estimated percentage of adult male agricultural labour force	
	1841	1881
<b>Farmers and farmers's sons</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>60</b>
Farmers: over 50 acres	9	9
Farmers: 21-50 acres	9	14
Farmers: 20 acres or less	15	17
Farmers' sons	14	20
<b>Labourers</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>38</b>
Labourer-landholders	30	12
Landless labourers	26	26
<b>Others</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Total number of adult males in agricultural labour forces	1,604,034	970,835

### **New views on landlords**

This rather harsh view of Irish landlords has recently undergone some revision. The landed estate is now sometimes seen less as an engine of automatic oppression than as a social institution with more mutual rights and obligations than former commentators had allowed.

### **A complex social structure**

The third striking feature of the Irish countryside is the variety of social groupings outside of the landlord class. As the Table 2 above illustrates, it is possible to divide the agricultural labour force in many ways

The more substantial farmers were sometime landlords as well, sub-dividing their holdings and renting it to under-tenants. The last stage in this process of sub-division was the tiny plots given to agricultural labourers. In Co. Cork, for example, according to the 1841 census, there were 145,000 labourers and farm servants as compared with fewer than 41,000 farmers.

The relationship between the farmer and his hired, or bound, labourer was essentially based on the exchange of land for work and was often characterised by distrust and acrimony, perhaps not surprisingly in view of the grossly exorbitant rents farmers charged for cabins and potato gardens.

Nevertheless, the bound labourers at least enjoyed greater security and much steadier employment than unbound or casually employed labourers. Labourers employed by the day endured a precarious existence. Whereas, for instance, bound labourers generally received half an acre of potato ground in return for giving their labour wherever it was required, casually employed labourers had no choice but to hire land on which to grow their food. This was the practice known as 'taking land in conacre', or simply as 'taking a potato garden'.

### 3. Class Divisions

#### **Problem of definition**

Historians and others have not been able to agree on what to call these different social groupings in the Irish countryside. Many commentators prefer the language of class, drawing a clear dividing line between farmers and labourers. Others are less sure, questioning how far the different groups represent separate classes and how far was there communal solidarity?

#### **Class**

For some writers, such as Sam Clark, the divisions between the various groups were so clear as to constitute separate classes. For the likes of Clark, such class distinctions have great explanatory value, explaining, for example, the geography of support for Catholic Emancipation. The most active support came from the towns and from large farmers, and that support was strongest in the more prosperous parts of the country, Ulster excepted, with committees collecting dues being busiest and most successful in Leinster and east Munster.

#### **A slippery social ladder**

Other writers, such as David Fitzpatrick, do not find such class formations very convincing. Fitzpatrick regards social relationships in the countryside as being much more fluid. He challenges Clark's assumption that at any given moment rural Irish men had a static conception of their class affiliation within rural society.

Instead Fitzpatrick reckons that social stratification constituted less of a pyramid than a very slippery ladder:

The subtle stratification of agrarian society was a ladder which one could climb up or slip down, not a pyramid, on which each man felt that he had been assigned (perhaps unfairly) his proper station.

Most labourers and uneconomic holders felt that they had a legitimate claim upon some coveted plot of land, for as one evicted tenant put it in 1836, 'I believe the landlord turned me out unjustly, as he himself has no real title to it, only he is *rich* and I am *poor*.' Not only that, but many felt that they had a reasonable chance of obtaining the coveted plot of land in view of the ill-defined customary mode of succession and the absence of primogeniture.

### **Imperatives of a peasant society**

There is much to be said for Fitzpatrick's argument. Irish social relationships cannot adequately be explained in class terms or other forms of communal solidarity. A happier model than a class model, would be the peasant model. After all, Ireland can be defined as a peasant society and responding to the imperatives of the family holding, family and kinship ties and tradition, and being resistant to the demands of the wider world. As Patrick Kavanagh put it rather starkly,

Although the literal idea of the peasant is of a farm working person, in fact a peasant is all that mass of mankind that lives below a certain level of consciousness. They live in the dark cave of the unconscious and they scream when they see the light.

### **Expanding the farm**

From this perspective, communal solidarity came a poor second to the pursuit of the interest of individual holdings and families. The imperative was to expand the holding, even at the cost to one's neighbour if one can get away with it. Lofty appeals to common justice and communal solidarity often merely masked the ambition to elbow out a rival.

## **4. Up and Down the Slippery Ladder**

### **Opportunities for loss and gain**

The economic and demographic circumstances of early nineteenth century Ireland make Fitzpatrick's notion of a slippery ladder rather than an pyramid particularly compelling: population growth and economic change.

### **Population explosion**

From the late eighteenth century the population of Ireland expanded at a phenomenal rate. In 1801 the population of Ireland was 5.2m; by 1841 it was some 8.1m. In other words, there was increasing competition for limited resources in what was becoming a teeming Irish countryside.

### **Economic change**

At the same time, there were the opportunities for profit and loss created by economic change:

- the high prices of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars;
- the collapse of prices after the war and later slumps in the early 1820s;  
and
- longer-term changes in the market which encouraged a swing from tillage to pasture, reducing the opportunities for rural employment.

### **Competition tinged with optimism**

The combination of population growth at a time of economic change not only created a good deal of competition for limited resources in the countryside, but it also meant that it was competition with a tinge of optimism.

### **Regional variations**

The conventional picture of pre-famine Ireland as one of abject poverty and unrelieved misery is not borne out by the evidence. Poverty had strong regional and class components, and the island as a whole was less starvation-prone, less sickly and less illiterate than often depicted.

For instance, the wartime agricultural boom of 1793-1813, with the increase in food prices and land and rent values, was a period of relative prosperity for the larger farmers, shopkeepers and others. On the other hand, for the smallholder, without the security of long leases, for those renting potato land, and or the labourers, times were much more difficult, and the consequences of economic competitiveness were much more critical.

### **Relationship between economic change and rural unrest**

The fierceness and consequences of such competition varied from area to area, depending upon the timing of exposure to change and the availability of resources. For example, in Co. Cork it was easier for labourers and cottiers to obtain adequate potato gardens at reasonable rents than in the neighbouring grazing county of Tipperary.

This fact helps to explain why agrarian disturbances were rare in Cork in contrast to Tipperary. In 1844, for example, there were no fewer than 254 agrarian outrages reportedly perpetrated in Tipperary - slightly more than one-fourth of the total committed in that year throughout Ireland - as compared with only 32 in far more populous Cork.

## 5. Explanations of Rural Unrest

### **A scholarly industry**

The study of rural unrest has been one of the growth areas of modern Irish historical scholarship. Rural unrest has long been considered a key indicator of social alignments and tensions in nineteenth century Ireland, and recently scholars have been making a determined effort to unravel the class and factional interests underlying Irish rural unrest. Much more work remains to be done, but local and other studies do help in the evaluation of possible explanations for rural unrest, including the political and the economic.

### **Political explanations of rural unrest**

For a long time the political explanation of unrest held sway, particularly under the influence of the nationalist interpretation of Irish history. This view presents peasant outrage as a form of primitive nationalism in which impoverished Irish Catholic peasant attacked rack-renting, English Protestant landlord.

In this view, patriotic motives carried as much weight as economic ones. For instance, under the influence of Ribbonism, Rockism appeared at times to have a nationalist veneer.

### **Limitations of the political explanation**

Such an interpretation hardly accords with the facts. That nationalism was only a veneer can be seen by the merest glance at the issues underlying most disturbances and at the individual victims of outrage.

### *Victims*

As far as individuals were concerned the right religion and politics were no guarantee of survival in an agrarian dispute. William Lloyd a Tipperary rackrenter was a Roman Catholic and a liberal in politics, but he was murdered as a rack renter. According to the *Tipperary Vindicator*, Lloyd had always been at variance with his own tenants who 'are exceedingly poor ... and having let land, under fine at a rack rent, to a miserably impoverished lot of persons, he found it difficult to get rent from them at any time.' Another Tipperary victim was James Scully who was not only a Catholic and a Repealer but also a personal friend of O'Connell.

Interestingly enough, such victims had achieved landlord status relatively recently, sometimes coming from a mercantile background and all shared an improving commercial attitude towards their land.

### *Issues*

Again, the issues underlying the major agitations seems to be predominantly economic. The grievances of the Rockites generally related to rents, collection of tithes, quarrels over conacre, grazing and food prices. In particular, putting land on the market when leases were up and renting it to the highest bidder was the source of much trouble. At such times, the dues paid to the Catholic Church were just as likely to be questioned as the tithes owing to the Church of Ireland, as indeed occurred during the Thresher movement in 1806.

### **Economic explanations of rural unrest**

Modern scholarship eschews the patriotic motives and emphasises more material considerations of economic self-improvement and survival. In so doing they have tended to favour class explanations: the peasantry against the landlord; and the labourer and cottier against the farmer.

### **Tenants *versus* landlords**

Michael Beames is a strong champion of the former explanation, particularly on the basis of his study of peasant assassination in Tipperary between 1837 and 1847. In that period there were 27 rural assassinations associated with agrarian disputes, and the 10 assassinated landlords were the largest category.

The assassinated landlords all appear to have been enterprising landlords and innovators, trying to alter traditional patterns of estate management in response to the pressures of the markets. Their assassins came from the predominantly lower strata of the peasant community - small tenants, rural artisans and 'labourers', bound together by a complex web of social, economic and psychological relationships. As Beames has put it, 'Their community recognises them as those who risk their lives "for the good of the people and die in the cause". They perceive their victims ... "as the oppressors of the poor".'

### **Farmers *versus* labourers**

On the other hand, Joe Lee maintains that the driving force is class conflict between

farmers and labourers. Accepting the relative immunity of landlords from attack, Lee argues that the main conflict in the countryside occurred between farmers on the one side and labourers on the other, over conacre rents, the price of potatoes, and rates of wages.

Lee's main evidence relates to a relatively compact bloc of counties in 1846 - Limerick, Clare, Tipperary, Roscommon, Longford and Leitrim. Those counties had about 18 per cent of the country's population, but accounted for 60 per cent of the specified agrarian outrages. Roscommon headed this particular league table and the largest single category of agrarian crime (67 cases) related to conacre and the next largest category (36 cases) concerned the employment and wages of agricultural labourers. According to Lee,

It was generally in areas with a significant number of bigger farms, with relatively high proportions of labourers and farm servants, where market forces were influential but not yet triumphant, where soil and market conditions permitted relatively rapid adjustments between tillage and pasture, and where population pressure was most acute, that the main tensions between farmers and labourers occurred in the pre-Famine period.

## 6. Family Values

### **Anachronistic values**

These class interpretations have been challenged by Fitzpatrick. He dislikes forcing anachronistic values on the people of early nineteenth century Ireland. Finding the division between classes artificial, he emphasises the importance of family relationships in shaping agrarian combination and conflict.

### **Importance of neighbourhood and kinship ties**

Fitzpatrick maintains that neighbourhood and kinship ties formed the basis for 'primary' groups in pre-famine Ireland and explains much of rural unrest. Obviously in all societies disputes within families account for a great proportion of criminal activity, since the closer the relationship between criminal and victim, the greater the potentiality for inflicting injury or seeking vengeance.

Nevertheless, it may be that in nineteenth century Ireland intra-family conflict was unusually prevalent, owing to extensive kinship networks, scarcity of resources and lack of clear criteria for disposing of property. Intra-family disputes about land and its management rather than class conflict could thus explain much about rural violence in nineteenth century Ireland.

### **Cloone, County Clare**

Much more work needs to be done on this subject, but, according to Fitzpatrick, in pre-Famine Cloone, kinship, whether among struggling peasants, substantial farmers or landlords, was as often the origin of antipathy as of fraternity.

In all this debate much depends upon the part of Ireland under study, but also one's view about the nature of social loyalties and assessment of the primary social alignments of rural Irishmen. Conflicts apparently between classes may often be re-interpreted as struggles within families and *vice-versa*.

### **The Gannon case**

This certainly seems to have been so in the case of the eviction of Patrick Gannon in 1838 and the burning of his cottage, a scene watched not only by the local police but also by a crowd of boys 'who appeared quite delighted and kept shouting and

hallooing as if they were at a bonfire'.

Patrick Gannon was described by the Cloone police as 'a decrepid beggarman' and was thrown out of his cottage by a combination of priest and landlord. The priest had denounced Gannon's daughter as a woman of bad character, latterly kept by a quack doctor, and Gannon's landlord had taken advantage of this turn of events to be rid of his tenants. According to the police the landlord had 'either connived at or was actually the author of the outrage.'

Clearly, conditions of chronic shortage of land and employment produced not only frustration among those deprived of these benefits, but also determination to remove unprofitable tenants and labourers among those controlling access to land and employment. 'Landlord-inspired arson was the illicit counterpart to ejection and eviction.'

The Gannon case seems then an obvious case of class conflict - until it is realised that Patrick Gannon's landlord was his kinsman, Owen, who may have wanted to prevent his less fortunate relative from maintaining dormant claims to family property.

## Appendix

# Some Questions and Reading

**1. How far did Irish landlords in the nineteenth century regard their estates as mere sources of income to sustain a life of conspicuous consumption? How far did they see their estates as social institutions, involving mutual duties and obligations between landlord and tenant?**

- D. Large                   `The wealth of the great Irish landowners', *Irish Historical Studies*, XV (1966-7), 21-47
- W.A. Maguire            *The Downshire estates in Ireland*, Oxford 1972
- W. S. Trench *Realities of Irish life*, London 1869
- W.E. Vaughan            *Landlords and tenants in Ireland 1848-1904*, Dublin 1984

**2. How efficiently and effectively did Irish landlords exploit the economic potential of their estates in the nineteenth century?**

- J.R. Donnelly            *The land and the people of nineteenth century Cork*, London 1975
- B. Solow                 *Land question and the Irish economy 1870-1903*, Cambridge, Mass. 1971
- W.E. Vaughan            `An assessment of the economic performance of Irish landlords, 1851-81', *Ireland under the union: varieties of tension. Essays in honour of T.W. Moody*, Oxford 1980, 173-99

**3. In what ways and to what extent did economic change promote rural unrest in pre-famine Ireland? Why was there a higher incidence of rural unrest in some parts of Ireland than in others?**

- J. Lee                    `Patterns of rural unrest in nineteenth century Ireland: a preliminary survey', *Ireland and France 17th-20th centuries. Towards a comparative study of rural history*, Ann Arbor/Paris 1980, 223-37
- D. McCartney            *The dawning of democracy 1800-1870*, Dublin 1987
- P. Roberts                `Caravats and Shanvests: Whiteboyism and faction fighting in east Munster, 1802-11', *Irish peasants: violence and political unrest 1780-1914*, Manchester 1983, 64-101

**4. How far does the evidence suggest that disputes between farmer and landlord were the major occasion for homicide in outbreaks of rural unrest, rather than disputes between labourer and farmer or disputes among labourers? How convincing do you find class explanations of unrest in the pre-famine Irish countryside?**

- M.R. Beames            `Rural conflict in pre-famine Ireland: peasant assassinations in Tipperary 1837-1847', *Past and Present*, 81 (1978), 75-91
- D. Fitzpatrick            `Class, family and rural unrest in nineteenth century Ireland', *Ireland: land, politics and people*, ed. P.J. Drudy, Cambridge 1982, 37-75

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