

Commercialisation in West of Ireland Agriculture in the 1890s*

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Abstract: The "sale of farm products ratio" indicator is used in this paper to establish the extent to which the agricultural economy of the West of Ireland and, in particular, the economy of the smaller landholders was commercial or subsistence oriented in the final decade of the nineteenth century. Using two separate methodologies, estimates of commercialisation ratios are provided for farms in selected Poor Law Unions in the West of Ireland. The results from the use of both methodologies show that farms in the West of Ireland, even the smaller farms of approximately £4 valuation, were by this period highly commercialised, with livestock to the fore in commodity production.

I INTRODUCTION

The debate on the subsistence or commercial character of West of Ireland agriculture in the nineteenth century began with the publication of Lynch and Vaizey's (1960) study of the role of Guinness's Brewery in the Irish economy. In their attempt to explain the regional variation in the sale of Guinness's beer, Lynch and Vaizey conceptualised the early nineteenth century economy in terms of two geographically and economically separate zones, a commercial market zone in the East and a subsistence zone in the West. This dualistic interpretation of the agrarian economy was assailed by

*The authors wish to thank the Committee for Social Science Research in Ireland for funding the research from which this paper is drawn. They also wish to thank the following for useful comments and suggestions: N. Canny, L. Kennedy, C. Ó Grada, T. O'Neill, G. Ó Tuathaigh and T. Varley, the assistance provided by Seamus McCarthy is also gratefully acknowledged. The authors alone are responsible for the content.

Lee (1971) who argued that the western subsistence zone was in fact penetrated by a cash economy. Johnson (1970) also contended that commercial influences were widespread at this period and argued that farmers in the West of Ireland derived money incomes from livestock sales, from the domestic linen industry, from the illicit distillation of whiskey, and from seasonal harvest work. The western subsistence zone was also shown to have been incorporated in both national and international markets in the growing and harvesting of corn (Crotty, 1966; Gibbon, 1975); in the supply of cheap labour (Collins, 1976; Cullen, 1967; Hay, 1947; Ó Tuathaigh, 1972) and in rural based industries, in particular the linen industry (Almquist, 1977).

A serious weakness in the Lynch and Vaizey argument and that of their opponents is a failure to provide a precise definition and measurement of their key concepts, commercial and subsistence. It is only in the work of Ó Grada (1975) that one finds any attempt to systematically use quantitative data to measure the extent to which agriculture in the West of Ireland was commercial or subsistence oriented. Following Nerlove's (1958) model which argues that farmers do not respond to all price changes but rather to those which are expected to be permanent, Ó Grada presented measures of supply elasticity during three periods, 1850-1879, 1880-1909 and 1897-1926, for six agricultural commodities, mutton, flax, barley, wheat, oats and eggs. His conclusion was that Irish agriculture in the nineteenth century was "rationally" organised. In another study, Ó Grada (1973) compared supply elasticities for the above products, and for pigs, for five modern and five "traditional" western counties over the period 1848-1878. He argued that the results indicated a "rapid and substantial response to price change and substantial uniformity [across counties] in response patterns."

Due to the fact that what actually constitutes subsistence agriculture is a source of some disagreement in the literature, Wharton (1970) systematically sets out various criteria by which the level of subsistence in agriculture may be evaluated. One of these criteria is the "sale of farm products ratio", which is the fraction of agricultural production that is sold. It is an indicator of the likely relative importance of internal and external factors in influencing decision making. The greater the dependence on "own production" for survival, the less the influence changes in market conditions will have on the farmers' decision making. If production is defined as off-farm sales plus household consumption of farm production, then a measure of subsistence/commercialisation is the ratio of off-farm sales to off-farm sales plus household consumption of "own production".

The "sale of farm products ratio" indicator is used in this paper to establish the actual extent to which the agricultural economy of the West of Ireland and in particular the economy of the smaller land holders was commercial or subsistence oriented in the final decade of the nineteenth century. Using

two separate methodologies, estimates of commercialisation ratios were derived from farms in selected Poor Law Unions^{1, 2} in the West of Ireland in 1891. These two methodologies are applied to data derived from the reports of the inspectors of the Congested Districts Board³ (hereafter referred to as Baseline Reports (1898)) and published sources, respectively. The results from the use of both methodologies are presented and they independently show that farms in the West of Ireland, even the smaller farms of approximately £4 valuation, were by this period highly commercialised, with livestock to the fore in commodity production. We contend that the manner in which the data are presented in this study represents an advance on earlier discussions of the agrarian economy in the West of Ireland in the nineteenth century, in so far as for the first time the level of commercialisation which obtained has been quantified.

II METHODOLOGY AND DATA

Each Baseline Report of the Congested Districts Board include a budget which is, in the view of the inspector making the report, a fair representation of the economic activity of a typical farm family in a particular class. The particular class includes only those farmers whose holdings have a rateable valuation of approximately £4.⁴ The budget and accompanying commentary enables the degree of commercialisation in the congested districts to be quantified. Since, however, there is considerable variation between reports in the type and degree of detail given (Cuddy and Curtin, 1983), it was necessary to standardise information with regard to sales off-farm and household consumption of own production. Where there were reports for one or more congested district in a union, average figures across districts were used to represent the level of commercialisation in a union.

Published data were also used to provide independent estimates of commercialisation levels in the West of Ireland in 1891. Using this method, estimates were made at Poor Law Union level for all farm sizes (including those with a rateable valuation of approximately £4). The ratio estimated

1. A Poor Law Union which was an administrative unit in 1891 became a District in 1898.
2. See Appendix I for the selection and location of Poor Law Unions.
3. "The original congested districts were Poor Law Electoral Divisions in the Counties Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway, Kerry and West Cork in which the total rateable value when divided by the number of the population gave a sum of less than one pound ten shillings for each individual." (Micks, 1925).
4. However, there is sometimes within this class what is described by the inspector as a family in "good" or "ordinary" circumstances. Where two budgets are presented by the inspector (which is rare) a judgement is made as to whether this is the majority or minority circumstance and in all cases the budget which appears to represent the majority situation is used.

for these data were net sales to net sales plus household consumption. The net sales refers only to livestock, that is total sales of livestock less livestock bought in. Since the ratio of net sales to net sales plus household consumption is mathematically less than the ratio of sales to sales plus household consumption, this latter ratio, if it could be calculated from published data, would be greater than the actual ratio calculated.

Because the data published for 1891 were insufficient in themselves to enable the commercialisation ratio to be calculated, published data extending over the period 1871 to 1908 were used to improve on, or complement, the 1891 data. The data sources were:

- (i) The official volumes of agricultural statistics for 1871, 1872, 1891, 1892, and 1908.
- (ii) The Census of 1891.
- (iii) The Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction's publication, *Agricultural Output* (1908).
- (iv) The publication, Irish Land Commission (Department of Agriculture) Prices, 1892-1894 (Volume 75).

In order to derive the basic information on net sales and consumption, several assumptions had to be made. The more important of these assumptions are discussed here. (A more detailed discussion on these assumptions can be found in Cuddy and Curtin (1981)).

Since statistics on acreage of crops by farm size are not available for 1891, the distribution of farm size was assumed to be the same as it was in 1871. A certain confidence in this assumption arises from the fact that the number of farmers in each size category remained remarkably stable over the period. Indeed, in all but one category in one union the variation is within $\pm 2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent of 1871/72 figures. The only remaining question then is with regard to whether there was a differential shift on the part of different size farmers into or away from particular crops. We assumed that there were no differential shifts.

It was assumed that 80 per cent of "grown up" poultry were layers. A laying rate as presented in the General Report on Agricultural Prices, 1908, was applied. Milk production was assumed to be 400 gallons per cow while wool production was assumed to be seven pounds per ewe per year. It was also assumed that the same quantity of home production was consumed per family in 1891 as in 1908, as calculated from *Agricultural Output*, 1908, and that the needs of the family were always met first out of domestic production, before animal needs were met.

Table 1: Commercialisation ratios for farms of approximately £4 valuation in selected Poor Law Unions in 1891

	<i>Boyle</i>	<i>Carrick- on Shannon</i>	<i>Castlebar</i>	<i>Dingle</i>	<i>Donegal</i>	<i>Glenamaddy</i>	<i>Kenmare</i>	<i>Millford</i>
(a)	0.65	0.64	0.68	0.72	0.49	0.62	0.69	0.52
(b)	0.86	0.81	0.77	0.81	0.85	0.71	0.84	0.79
	(15-30) ¹	(5-15)	(15-30)	(30-15)	(15-30)	(5-15)	(15-30)	(15-30)
	<i>Mohill</i>	<i>Skibbereen</i>	<i>Skull</i>	<i>Sligo</i>	<i>Strokestown</i>	<i>Tubbercurry</i>	<i>Tuam</i>	<i>Westport</i>
(a)	0.54	0.75	0.70	0.72	0.68	0.62	0.65	0.76
(b)	0.77	0.87	0.84	0.84	0.78	0.82	0.73	0.81
	(5-15)	(15-30)	(15-30)	(5-15)	(5-15)	(15-30)	(5-15)	(15-30)

(a) Derived from Baseline Reports.

(b) Derived from published data.

1. Size of farm with approximately £4 valuation (farms classified by valuation were mapped into farms classified by size for this purpose).

III RESULTS

The picture which emerges is that if one takes 0.50 as being the level of commercialisation at which, according to Wharton, farm households move from being subsistence to being commercial, then, in all but one of the sixteen Unions chosen, farms of approximately £4 valuation had clearly become commercialised by the 1890s (Table 1). The ratios derived from the Baseline Reports are in all cases less than those derived from published data. This is not surprising since the Baseline Reports include only farms in congested districts, whereas the published data refer to all farms of £4 valuation.

The high commercialisation ratios were, in general, strongly influenced by the extent to which farmers were engaged in livestock production (Table 2). The high ratios in Cork and Kerry were influenced to a large extent by butter sales. The low ratios derived from the Baseline Reports in both Donegal Unions are possibly explained by the fact that farmers in the congested districts in these Unions were engaged also in non-agricultural activities. These included home crafts, fishing and migratory labour. The actual farm activities of these households were then more directed towards meeting the household food needs than in other Unions. The high ratios for these Unions using the published data would suggest that these non-agricultural activities were confined mainly to the poorer districts of Donegal.

The commercialisation ratios derived from published data supported the results obtained from using the Baseline Reports. Indeed, apart from the 1-5 acre size category in a few Unions, the ratios for all other size categories show that a very high level of commercialisation had been reached in all farm sizes in all Unions (Table 3). The published data also indicate that the larger the farm size the higher the level of commercialisation attained.

IV SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this paper the level of commercialisation of West of Ireland agriculture in the 1890s was estimated by applying Wharton's "sale of farm products ratio" to sets of data derived from the Baseline Reports and published sources. The Baseline Reports enabled the calculation of commercialisation ratios for farms of approximately £4 valuation in the congested districts of 16 Poor Law Unions. The results show that these farms, although constituting the poorer segment of the community were highly commercialised. The published data allowed us to broaden the investigation to all farms in each Union. These results confirm those already found using the Baseline Reports for the farms of £4 valuation. In addition, it was found that all farms, apart from the 1-5 acre category, were in fact quite highly commercialised and that the larger the farm the greater the degree of commercialisation.

Table 2: *Livestock sales as % of total sales on farms of approximately £4 valuation in 1891*

<i>Boyle</i>	<i>Carrick-on-Shannon</i>	<i>Castlebar</i>	<i>Dingle</i>	<i>Donegal</i>	<i>Glenamaddy</i>	<i>Kenmare</i>	<i>Millford</i>
.58	.66	.61	.52	.44	.51	.56	.36
<i>Mohill</i>	<i>Skibbereen</i>	<i>Skull</i>	<i>Sligo</i>	<i>Strokestown</i>	<i>Tubbercurry</i>	<i>Tuam</i>	<i>Westport</i>
.80	.36	.48	.54	.60	.56	.46	.58

Source: Baseline Reports.

Table 3: Commercialisation ratios for different farm sizes in selected Poor Law Unions in 1891

<i>Farm size</i>	<i>Boyle</i>	<i>Carrick- on-Shannon</i>	<i>Castlebar</i>	<i>Dingle</i>	<i>Donegal</i>	<i>Glenamaddy</i>	<i>Kenmare</i>	<i>Millford</i>
1-5	0.63	0.71	0.52	0.67	0.48	0.57	0.27	0.51
5-15	0.72	0.80	0.67	0.82	0.72	0.71	0.68	0.72
15-30	0.86	0.87	0.77	0.81	0.85	0.82	0.84	0.79
30-50	0.93	0.92	0.87	0.83	0.87	0.91	0.87	0.88
>50	0.96	0.97	0.93	0.91	0.91	0.95	0.91	0.94

	<i>Mohill</i>	<i>Skibbereen</i>	<i>Skull</i>	<i>Sligo</i>	<i>Strokestown</i>	<i>Tubbercurry</i>	<i>Tuam</i>	<i>Westport</i>
1-5	0.39	0.53	0.56	0.66	0.73	0.43	0.83	0.61
5-15	0.77	0.74	0.71	0.84	0.78	0.72	0.73	0.78
15-30	0.86	0.87	0.84	0.87	0.85	0.82	0.79	0.81
30-50	0.92	0.90	0.89	0.89	0.91	0.85	0.89	0.76
>50	0.96	0.94	0.94	0.96	0.97	0.93	0.96	0.91

Source: Derived from published data.

The results presented in this paper can bring some light to bear on the extent to which a peasant model can usefully be used to describe and conceptualise the West of Ireland agrarian economy in the 1890s. Hannan (1979) has argued that what he terms "a deviant peasant type system" existed in the West of Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s. Among the economic and social structural aspects of the peasant model is the feature that "the family farm produces mainly for its own needs and only to a limited and circumscribed extent produces for exchange. Production is geared to meeting 'use values' rather than maximising exchange values." (Hannan 1979, p. 29). This facet of the peasant model seems not to apply in the West of Ireland of the 1890s where most farm households were involved primarily in maximising exchange values. The process of destruction of the "natural economy" by the penetration of commodity relations was well under way, aided by the expansion of world markets, improvements in communication, expansion of credit facilities and the government land reform and rural development policies. The reproduction of farm households in the 1890s greatly depended on relations of commodity production and exchange.

Equally, it would not be accurate to refer to these same households as specialised commodity producers. Elsewhere, household producers of wheat at this period were according to Friedman (1978) as specialised in their production as were capitalised producers. As Table 2 indicates, the extent of specialisation in a single commodity, in this case livestock, was not so great. Irish households were dependent on markets rather than a market. Also, except for the larger farms, the majority of households continued to produce "use values", agricultural and non-agricultural products for immediate consumption alongside their production of commodities.

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APPENDIX 1

SELECTED POOR UNIONS

The Baseline Reports provide information on 84 congested districts in eight western counties. The published data, primarily agricultural statistics, are available at Poor Law Union level. However, because of the extent of the work involved in making the necessary calculations only two Unions are chosen from each of the eight counties.

Three criteria are used in choosing unions:

- (i) Unions must contain one or more congested district as listed by the Congested Districts Board.
Congested districts very often straddle two Unions. In this case the Union which had at least another congested district within its boundary is chosen since not all Unions had a congested district.
- (ii) Subject to (i), Unions within a county are chosen in such a way as to reasonably represent the county, i.e., as far as possible Unions side by side are not chosen.
- (iii) Some reports contain more detailed and refined information than others. A bias is shown towards those Unions whose congested districts have the most detailed reports.

The data derived from the Baseline Reports are used to estimate commercialisation ratios for farms of approximately £4 valuation in the congested districts of the selected Unions. Data derived from published sources are used to estimate commercialisation ratios for different farm sizes (including those of approximately £4 valuation) in each of the selected Unions. (The selected Unions and associated congested districts are given in Figure A1.1 and their geographical location in Figure A1.2).

Figure A.1.1: *The Congested District in each of the selected Unions by County*

<i>County</i>	<i>Union</i>	<i>Congested District</i>
Cork	Skibbereen Skull	Bealanageary, Baltimore Skull
Donegal	Donegal Millford	Inver, Lough Eask Fanad, Rosguill, Garten
Galway	Tuam Glenamaddy	Lavally, Dunmore Glenamaddy, Castlereagh
Kerry	Dingle Kenmare	Castlegregory, Brandon Kenmare, Sneem
Leitrim	Mohill Carrick-on-Shannon	Mohill Kilturbrid, Tumna
Mayo	Westport Castlebar	Ballycroy, Achill, Newport, Islandeady, Clare Island, Louisburgh, Aghagower Pontoon, Partry
Roscommon	Boyle Strokestown	Boyle, Ballaghadereen Rooskey
Sligo	Sligo Tubbercurry	Grange Tubbercurry