

## *Agricultural Head Rents, Pre-Famine and Post-Famine\**

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“No country can ever be held in just estimation”, proclaimed Arthur Young in 1780, “when the rental of it is unknown”: and Young, in his *Tour in Ireland*, proceeded to estimate the rental of this country.<sup>1</sup> His was the rhetoric of the political arithmetician, but he was neither the first nor the last to embark on aggregate calculations. Several of the best-known past observers of the Irish scene, from Sir William Petty to the elder Wakefield, also left their own estimates. Some, like Wakefield’s, were carefully worked out; others, such as Dean Swift’s, were based almost totally on hearsay or speculation.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, it is difficult, if not impossible, to assess the accuracy of these estimates. Wakefield’s, for instance, seems far too high, and those of several earlier writers, like Petty and Maxwell, are often based on faulty guesses at the contemporary population level of the country.<sup>3</sup> Whether plausible estimates of the *aggregate* rental can be inferred from available estate accounts is at present unclear, though such accounts should inform us of *movements* in the rental at least. A start has been made in this work,<sup>4</sup> but it is still much too early to risk sophisticated guesses at the rental during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The present paper provides estimates, necessarily somewhat tentative, of the rental in 1845 and 1852, and discusses briefly some of their implications for the economic historian.

\*This note is based on a data-appendix to my dissertation, “Post-Famine Adjustment: Essays in Nineteenth-Century Irish Economic History” (Columbia University, unpublished, 1973). I am grateful to Professor Louis Cullen and an anonymous referee for their comments on a previous draft.

## I

Our starting point is an appendix to Raymond C. Crotty's recent work on Irish agriculture. In this appendix, Crotty has attempted to derive the aggregate rental of the country on the eve of the Famine; this is, to my knowledge, the first effort at such a calculation.<sup>5</sup> Crotty's final figure of £17 million is based on a great deal of laborious calculation and, in effect, he gives us three complementary approximations of the pre-Famine rental. The source of his results is the evidence of hundreds of witnesses who appeared before the Devon Commission of 1845; this source has been used by several scholars for a variety of purposes, and it constitutes, along with the Poor Inquiry of the 1830s and the Census of 1841, one of the very best on pre-Famine Ireland. Through the ingenious categorisation and collation of this evidence, Crotty was able to obtain his three separate estimates of the rental. Estimate I derives from evidence on rents demanded and paid. Estimates II and III are both based on evidence treating rents as a proportion of two valuation measures current at the time: the former being obtained from the Poor Law Valuation, and the latter from the Townland Valuation, then in progress. Both valuations, which were required for taxation purposes, were widely discussed and compared during those years. It is not surprising, then, to find scores of witnesses being asked by the Devon Commissioners how the rents they paid or received compared with the valuation of their holdings: and many witnesses offered the information on their own initiative. Indeed, this ease of comparability provided the Land League with a ready-made weapon some decades later. Crotty catalogued the replies county by county, and in this way calculated the rental in three different guises. Because the Townland Valuation had been completed for only twenty counties out of the thirty-two by 1845, the computation based on it is incomplete. Estimate I yields a total of over £19 million, the highest of the three, and after weighing the evidence, Crotty suggests a figure of £17 million.

While Crotty's different aggregates and county totals are broadly consistent, though autonomously derived, there are, I suggest, good grounds for rejecting all three estimates. Crotty's figure of £17 million turns out to be, on closer inspection, a good deal above the true level. The exaggeration stems not so much from the Devon Commission data themselves, as from the manner in which Crotty uses that data. The most obvious slip, which concerns Estimate I only, is the failure to adjust downwards in order to allow for the existence of unusable or unlet land. Strangely enough, Crotty does produce percentages of cultivated land as a proportion of total area for each of the thirty-two counties of Ireland, but these percentages are then left redundant.<sup>6</sup> How their use would have scaled down Crotty's result is shown in Table 1. The adjusted total of over £13 million is a more realistic one. As regards Estimates II and III, Crotty's error is due to his reliance on *total* valuation levels for each county, rather than on *land* valuation levels. Deduction of the portion attributable to non-farm property would have reduced his estimates considerably. Only in the case of Dublin county does Crotty

TABLE I. *Crotty's Estimate I Amended (£,000)*

<i>County</i>	<i>Estimate I</i>	<i>Crops and Pasture as a percentage of total area</i>	<i>Column 2 x Column 3</i>
Antrim	619	70	433·3
Armagh	349	86	300·1
Carlow	221	77	170·2
Cavan	417	82	341·9
Clare	828	65	538·2
Cork	1,730	70	1,211·0
Donegal	820	33	270·6
Down	565	89	502·9
Dublin	466	74	344·8
Fermanagh	357	58	207·1
Galway	1,370	52	712·4
Kerry	889	44	391·2
Kildare	405	81	325·6
Kilkenny	574	85	487·9
Laois	398	76	302·5
Leitrim	294	69	202·9
Limerick	1,021	89	908·7
Derry	441	70	308·7
Longford	294	81	238·1
Mayo	1,020	42	428·4
Monaghan	300	87	261·0
Offaly	494	68	335·9
Roscommon	532	77	409·6
Sligo	390	66	257·4
Tipperary	1,195	80	956·0
Tyrone	605	65	393·3
Waterford	526	69	362·9
Westmeath	396	83	328·7
Wexford	505	84	424·2
Wicklow	438	48	210·2
Louth	241	84	202·4
Meath	653	94	614·8
<i>Total</i>	19,253	—	13,383

*Source: Crotty, op. cit., pp. 303-304.*

apply any reduction whatever, and there it is purely arbitrary. Instead of attempting to salvage Crotty's totals, alternative figures are suggested below.

## II

After much controversy and discussion, an Irish Poor Law broadly based on the English model was introduced in 1838.<sup>7</sup> Ireland was divided into new administrative units called Poor Law Unions, and a valuation system similar to

Britain's was put into operation. This required a special valuation, which was completed in 1842. In the course of the work of the Select Committee on Townland Valuation of 1844, the question of the Poor Law Valuation's comparability with the current rental levels arose. One witness, an Assistant Commissioner in the poor law administration, thought that, with reference to his own district, "it would be, taking the whole, probably from five to fifteen per cent below the actual letting value".<sup>8</sup> But he was rather vague: there were some unions very near the letting value, he thought, and one or two had valuations exceeding the rental. Luckily, more precise information is available. In one of the appendices to the Committee's report, the percentage difference between the valuation and the letting value is given for over seventy unions, and the results may be tabulated as follows:

Valuation equals letting value	19
Letting value 0- 5 per cent greater than valuation	5
"    "    5-10    "    "    "    "    "	14
"    "    10-15    "    "    "    "    "	18
"    "    15-20    "    "    "    "    "	6
"    "    more than 20 per cent greater than valuation	13

Sir Josiah Stamp combined these figures with the best possible estimate for each union where only general statements were made,<sup>9</sup> and obtained an average divergence of 11.7 per cent. Since the unions on which the result is based were well distributed, this figure is taken to be satisfactory for our purposes. Data which distinguish between those parts of the valuation attributable to land and to non-farm property are unavailable for 1845, so the percentage obtaining in 1852 has been used. Taking Crotty's valuation figure, the aggregate land rental can then be calculated as follows:

$$£13,187,421 \times 0.79 \times 1.12 = £11.7 \text{ million}$$

Here, £13,187,421 is the estimated Poor Law Valuation for the whole country in 1845; this is multiplied by 0.79, the percentage of the total accounted for by landed property.<sup>10</sup> The principles on which the Griffith Townland Valuation, which Crotty refers to as the Government Valuation, were founded, were rather different from those used for poor law purposes. Most important, perhaps, a scale of fixed prices was used by the Griffith valuers, whereas the poor-law work was based more directly on tenement letting value. In evidence to the 1844 committee, Griffith expressed the view that his valuation, in aggregate, would amount to two-thirds of the Poor Law Valuation, while Purdon, one of Griffith's subordinates in the midlands, mentioned a figure of four-fifths. If we take the latter figure as the more relevant—we are concerned with the rural element in both valuations—and also allow for the judgement that the incomplete Townland Valuation was 5s. or 6s. in the £1 under letting value, the total rental calculated would be of the order of:

$$£13,187,421 \times 0.79 \times 0.8 \times 4/3 = £11.1 \text{ million}$$

Since both calculations provide very similar results, not too different to the amended Crotty Estimate I, a round figure of £12 million is adopted as the size of the head landlord rental on the eve of the Famine. This total does not account for all rental payments made for land, however. As is well known,<sup>11</sup> several thousand acres were relet by farmers to smaller tenants on a conacre (or quarter ground) basis; rather arbitrarily, it is assumed here that the rent element in conacre payments reached £3 million in the early 1840s.

#### IV

Landlord incomes declined sharply during the Great Famine. Rent delinquency and abatements alike were widespread, and by November 1846, the *Nation* newspaper was publishing lists of landlords who had reduced their rents. The landlords as a class were hardly generous, but, as a recent writer has put it, "their economic position was by no means enviable" either.<sup>12</sup> Our guess is that their total head rental income dropped from about £12 million in 1845 to about £8.5 million in 1851-2. This is now explained briefly.

In 1852 Griffith was asked to embark on a new valuation, much more thorough than the earlier ones. This valuation, which is still in use in Ireland today, was not completed till 1868. While coaching his valuers, Griffith, an extremely meticulous man, advised that "the total valuation should not exceed the fair letting value to a solvent tenant".<sup>13</sup> But the new valuation was also to be based on a system of prices, like the Townland Valuation, and Griffith issued a table based on 1850-2 prices to his workers in the field. In practice, however, the valuers were not so inflexible; they relied a great deal on their intuition in deciding plausible estimates. The completed valuation should approximate the rental in 1852, but it is unlikely that tenants did in fact pay landlords £9.2 million, the amount of the completed valuation, in rent in 1852. Griffith himself, always a shrewd observer, had this much to say in that year:<sup>14</sup>

My feeling is that the loss of the potato crop, which was the principal food of the people, has so deranged the social arrangements, that property has declined in value by nearly one-third, particularly in the south and west . . . At the same time, my knowledge of the actual depreciation of property is chiefly derived from the south where the valuation is in progress; perhaps the reduction in Leinster does not exceed one-fourth, and in Ulster with the exception of Donegal, it does not exceed one-sixth.

Griffith went on to say that the average letting value had fallen to under ten shillings an acre at the time. Other observers held that the fall in the old valuation did not fully reflect the decline in rents during the Famine.<sup>15</sup> Hence our choice of £8.5 million.

Rents began to rise again after this. Sir Josiah Stamp, and more recently

Barbara L. Solow, have shown that they had risen by at least thirty per cent by the mid-1870s: by then, the pre-Famine level of £12 million had been reached once more.<sup>16</sup> One imperfect cross-check of this figure may be mentioned: in over eighty cases where the evidence was unambiguous. I gave a Crotty-style treatment to rental levels of individual holdings and estates, both in 1850 and 1870, as reported in the minutes of the Bessborough Commission of 1881.<sup>17</sup> The implied increase in rents amounted to 33.7 per cent, more or less in line with the Stamp-Solow estimate.

## V

This substantial increase was not the result of a rack-renting landlord policy. Evictions were infrequent after the early 1850s, and the market in tenant holdings seems to have been relatively inactive.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the landlords were fortunate in that the post-Famine period was one of rising food prices; indeed, as may be seen from Table II, their *share* of total agricultural value added was greater in the early 1870s than in the early 1850s. A famine of 1845-8 proportions, and the consequent decline in population, had it occurred thirty years earlier, would have posed far more severe problems for the landlord class.

Irish landlords, unlike many of their English counterparts, were not enthusiastic improvers, either before or after the Famine. I have estimated elsewhere<sup>19</sup> that their expenditure on improvements between 1850 and 1875 cannot have exceeded £7 or £8 million—perhaps three per cent of gross rents received over these years. Thus the rise in rents contains only a very small return-on-investment element. The small size of holdings, the uncertain political situation, general economic conditions, the availability of more lucrative investment alternatives—all of these factors may have contributed to the landlords' reluctance to improve. An added reason may have been the very buoyancy of rents. In England, at this time, "landowners' outlays were expended at times of depression in order to ward off or mitigate rent reductions".<sup>20</sup> If we consider the inaction of Irish landlords in this broader context, it may be easier to understand.

It would be rash to seek a standard-of-living argument solely in the figures provided in Table 2, and only a few very tentative observations are offered here. The output and rent totals combined seem to suggest that *average* non-landlord

TABLE 2. *Rent and Agricultural Output in 1840-5, 1852-4, and 1869-71*<sup>21</sup>

Year	Output	Rent	Output (£m.) (Pre-Famine Prices)
1840-5	49.8	12.0 (15.0)	49.8
1852-4	51.1	8.5 (9.0)	39.9
1869-71	48.6	12.0	33.3

rural incomes rose sharply as a direct result of the Famine, but that the increase was not sustained beyond the early 1850s. This generalisation is based on the assumption that numbers employed on the land fell from about 1.5 million in 1851 to 0.9 million in 1871.<sup>22</sup> It must not be forgotten, however, that throughout this period, factor incomes from abroad, in the form of the earnings of *spailpíni* or migrant workers, helped in some rural areas, as did the large flow of emigrants' remittances.<sup>23</sup> Money from these two sources probably added £4 or £5 million a year to earnings from the land. All in all, however, our results make the "cheerful" version of post-Famine adjustment somewhat more difficult to argue. While the Famine undoubtedly succeeded in reducing substantially the size of the rural proletariat, it may well be the case that the standards experienced by those who survived did not markedly improve. In other words, while *average* incomes rose, this may have been largely due to the fact that the farming section of the total rural population was proportionately more important in the post-Famine period. Needless to say, aggregates hide regional disparities, and there is reason to believe that regional disparities *were* important in the 'fifties and the 'sixties.<sup>24</sup>

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- [1] A. Young, *A Tour in Ireland* (London, 1892), II, pp. 10, 13-16.
- [2] E. Wakefield, *An Account of Ireland, Statistical and Political*, London, 1812, I, ch. 7; Jonathan Swift, *The Drapier's Letters to the People of Ireland*, ed. H. Davis, Oxford, 1935, pp. 156-7.
- [3] W. Petty, in C. H. Hull (ed.), *Economic Writings of Sir William Petty*, New York, 1964, I, p. 139; II, p. 558; Henry Maxwell, *Reasons Offer'd for Erecting a Bank in Ireland*, Dublin, 1721, pp. 23, 47. Both Petty and Maxwell, in committing the mortal sin of the political arithmeticians, assumed a population far below the actual level.
- [4] See David Large, "The Wealth of the Greater Irish Landowners 1750-1815", *Irish Historical Studies*, 1966, pp. 21-47.
- [5] R. Crotty, *Irish Agricultural Production*, Cork, 1966, pp. 294-307.
- [6] *Op. cit.*, pp. 303-4.
- [7] For an excellent background discussion, see R. D. C. Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question*, Cambridge, 1960, pp. 86-133.
- [8] *Select Committee on Townland Valuation* (P. P. 1844 (VII)), p. 149.
- [9] J. Stamp, *British Incomes and Property*, London, 1916, p. 149.
- [10] R. Crotty, *op. cit.*, p. 303; J. Stamp, *op. cit.*, p. 49, 51. The actual calculation is  $10550/13350 = 0.79$ .
- [11] The widespread existence of conacre is documented in both the Devon Commission Report and the Poor Inquiry, but acreages are not given. My calculation is based on the rather arbitrary assumption of 700,000-800,000 acres at £4 per acre.
- [12] K. Nowlan, "The Political Background", in Edwards and Williams (eds.), *The Great Famine*, Dublin, 1956, p. 179.
- [13] R. Griffith, *Instructions to Valuers and Surveyors*; Dublin, 1853.

- [14] *Loc. cit.* Q. 4069. The townland valuation of several southern counties proceeded during the Great Famine, but the results were never published. The valuers were instructed to proceed as before, using their scale of fixed prices, and it was proposed by a rather informal system of percentages to reconcile the valuation so obtained with the current letting values. It emerges from an examination of the records in the Dublin Valuation Office that reductions of at least twenty-five per cent were made. Assuming that rents rose as much in Munster as elsewhere during the pre-Famine period, a drop in rents of about one-half is indicated. I am grateful to Messrs. O Duibhchinn and Murphy of the Valuation Office for their cooperation.
- [15] *Select Committee on Consolidated Annuities* (P.P. 1852 (VI)), Qs. 1415, 1419.
- [16] Stamp, *op. cit.*, p. 158; B. L. Solow, *The Land Question and the Irish Economy, 1870-1900*, Cambridge, Mass., 1971, pp. 57-77.
- [17] *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Working of the Landlord and Tenant Act, 1870* (P.P. 1881 (XVIII) and (XIX)).
- [18] On this, see Solow, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-7. Another indication of *de facto* fixity of tenure is the marked increase in the post-Famine decades of the average age of farmers. Between 1861 and 1881, the percentage of total farmers over sixty-five years of age rose from 13.2 per cent to 21.8 per cent.
- [19] "The Investment behaviour of Irish Landlords 1850-1875", *Agricultural History Review*, forthcoming.
- [20] F. M. L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* London, 1973, p. 247.
- [21] The output estimates are based on work in progress. A drastic transformation took place in Irish agriculture during these years. The fall in the share of the potato is the single most important factor: before the Famine, the potato accounted for as much as a quarter of agricultural output, but by 1869-71 its share had dropped to only about ten per cent. There was a significant increase in the contribution of all livestock products, other than milk—an increase which persisted—while grains became steadily less important.
- [22] These figures are based on the Census Reports of 1851 and 1871.
- [23] On spailpíní, see my "Seasonal Migration and Post-Famine Adjustment in the West of Ireland", *Studia Hibernica*, 13, 1973. Seasonal migration will have brought an extra £0.8-1 million to the west and north-west during the 'fifties and 'sixties: emigrants' remittances probably contributed several times that amount.
- [24] See, e.g., S. H. Cousens, "Emigration and Demographic Change in Ireland 1851-1861", *Economic History Review*, 14, Dec. 1961; B. M. Walsh, "Marriage Rates and Population Pressure in Ireland, 1871 and 1911", *Economic History Review*, 23, April, 1970.