

Irish Agricultural History: Recent Research*

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PROBABLY the best-known message of Irish agrarian historiography of the last few decades has been that 'the landlords are not central to Irish history' (Cullen, 1981: 253). The result has been increasing attention to the business of farming, and to techniques, output, and prices. It has been shown, surely to the satisfaction of everybody by now, that traditional historiography had been misled by farmer-nationalist propaganda in its depiction of the typical landlord as cruel and neglectful. The revisions have come in different flavours, though: some betraying shades of nostalgia for polite landed society (Roebuck, 1981a, b), some holding in unsentimental fashion that tough landlords were necessary for agricultural efficiency (Crotty, 1966).

In terms of efficiency, simple economic theory suggests that there is little to choose between a system of rent-paying tenants and peasant proprietorship, since in either case the farmer retains the marginal return on extra effort. For this outcome to hold, of course landlords and tenants must be surplus maximizers: the efficient landlord must eschew short-term predatory behaviour but must evict the lazy and the incompetent tenant, just as the leisurely owner-occupier must be willing to sell to his more energetic peer at a price reflecting the land's productive potential (Crotty, 1966; Solow, 1971; Mokyr, 1983; 1985: Ch 4). In effect, most recent research into the Irish tenure system reaches conclusions that better fit these theoretical presumptions.

The literature reviewed here includes no grand survey of Irish agriculture such as the multi-authored *Histoire de la France Rurale*, or van Zanten's impressive 'Economische ontwikkeling van de Nederlandse landbouw'.¹ Most of it has appeared in Irish journals or in Irish-oriented conference or *feestschrift* volumes.

Much of it is necessarily tentative and unsystematic. Still, it reflects the flowering of Irish economic-historical and historical-geographical research in the last few decades, and its quality and scale is striking compared to, say, that of the previous half-century.

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¹ *Histoire de la France rurale*, under the direction of Georges Duby and Armand Wallon, Paris, 1976; J L van Zanden, 'Economische ontwikkeling van de Nederlandse landbouw in de negentiende eeuw', *AAG Bijdragen*, vol 25.

1 1600-1800

The output of research into seventeenth- and eighteenth-century agriculture has been growing, but is still small. Raymond Gillespie's chronology of harvest failures in the early seventeenth century (1984) shows one reason why: the thinness of the raw material make this a frustrating and difficult period to explore. Gillespie manages to show that despite the received view of a mainly pastoral agriculture, poor grain harvests could lead to dearth and even famine. At the same time, his contribution is a good guide to the sparseness of contemporary written records sources: 'it is impossible to make a full assessment' of the crisis of 1601; 'evidence for the second decade is sketchy', while 'the evidence for the remainder of the 1630s is sparse' (Gillespie, 1984: 8, 9, 10, 12). The continuous price data so readily available elsewhere in this period are apparently lacking for Ireland. The raw state of the historiography of seventeenth-century agriculture is also plain from the recent debate between Gillespie, Nicholas Canny, and M Perceval-Maxwell on the implications of an unusual source for agricultural history, the depositions presented by landholders claiming compensation for property lost during the rebellion of 1641. The accompanying inventories resemble the probate and farm sale data used by English economic historians. Canny, who equates modernization with the Irish adoption of imported techniques (compare Bell and Watson, 1987; Bell, 1987), infers substantial progress in the south from the depositions, finding that anywhere English planters settled, farming 'compared favourably with the best in Europe'. Gillespie and Perceval-Maxwell deny the randomness of the depositions, and Gillespie the implicit claim that the immigrants had nothing to learn from native techniques, drawing attention to how Ulster planters copied the native method of ploughing by the tail (1986: 93)! The non-specialist may find something incongruous about inferring regional differences from such thin sources. McCarthy-Morrogh's study of the government-sponsored Munster Plantation of the 1580s is relevant here too. Though intended to promote tillage, that plantation's benefits (as revealed through trade figures) were concentrated on livestock and wool, and on limited changes to field boundaries (McCarthy-Morrogh, 1986: 225).

Gillespie also invokes Sir William Petty's crop yield ratios, presumably based on Petty's own observations in Munster in the 1660s, to criticize Canny's cheerful picture of farming in that province (Gillespie, 1986: 93). Alas the wide ranges cited by Petty are enough to back either case:

	Yield	Ratio
Wheat	4 to 9	
Rye	5 to 10	
Bean-Barley	3.3 to 8	
Oats	2.67 to 5.33	
Barley	5 to 10	
Peas	3 to 4.5	

Source: C H Hull, *The Economic Writings of Sir William Petty*, 1899, vol 1, p 176.

Petty's lower-bound estimates seem positively medieval, but his upper-bounds are quite impressive: in England a century later the ratios for wheat, oats and barley were about ten, eight and nine. In Ireland, such high yields, if at all common, must have reflected technology rather than intensive labour input, since the island was rather sparsely populated in the seventeenth century. But Petty typically leaves no clue as what 'representative' yields were. Of course, since seventeenth-century Irish farming was pastoral in orientation, reliable data on milk yields and carcass weights would be more revealing.

The Canny-Gillespie-Maxwell exchange is a reminder of how little we really know still about agricultural productivity in early modern Ireland. Research on land tenure and settlement patterns is on firmer ground. While O'Dowd (1988) has been able to show that the power of Gaelic landlords persisted longer than previously thought, work on the pattern established by the brutal expropriations and settlements of the seventeenth century highlights regional variation. In south Ulster, that pattern held broadly until the nineteenth century, but in south Munster it was disturbed by substantial land sales in the interim, particularly by non-resident landlords (Duffy, 1981, 1988; Dickson, 1982; Smyth, 1988a).

Agricultural progress in the post-Restoration period is indicated by very rapid growth in both external and internal trade. The latter is captured by export data (a sevenfold rise between the 1660s and the 1790s), the former proxied by the proliferation of fairs throughout the country. The number of fairs held almost doubled between 1684 and the 1770s, the rise being greatest outside Leinster, and farmers everywhere increasingly turning their operations towards the market (Dickson, 1988: 96-101; see too Gillespie, 1987; Crawford, 1987; Smyth, 1988b). This was a period of rapid population growth by contemporary European standards and of urbanization too, indirect evidence that agriculture hardly

stood still. Though livestock provided the main link with markets, farming remained mixed, with the potato substituting for fallow and winning an increasing share in tillage output. An appreciation of the limited role of head landlords in engineering these changes has earned a more important role for those 'middlemen' wedged between proprietor and farmer (Dickson, 1979). Crawford (1975; also Gillespie, 1988) has charted the course of Ulster 'tenant right' over the eighteenth century from merely a tenant's claim of priority when his lease came up for renewal to a right to payment (in the words of one astounded observer) 'where no lease exists and where no improvement has been made. Andrews has pointed to the humbler victories won by some squatters on the public commons; he tells with relish the story of one John Doyle of Broadleas Common, a long-time squatter, whose registration as a freeholder was upheld in court in 1836 (Andrews, 1987: 20). A common theme in the literature is that by the late eighteenth century, when proprietors began to remove middlemen and take direct control of the running of their estates, rural population was too great for direct management to have much effect (Roebuck, 1981a, 1988; Maguire, 1972; Horner, 1981).

In terms of thoroughness, detail, and methodology, the work of Arthur Young marks a great leap forward over Petty. Though Young was reviled by many contemporary agronomists, a re-examination of his research methods is a reminder of how ambitious and original his project was. Allen and Ó Gráda (1988) argue that while Young was opinionated and wrong-headed on many issues, his methods of enquiry were conscientious enough. Young was inclined to consider Irish farming methods silly and backward, but his data belie his harshest criticisms. A detailed analysis of the English, Irish and French yield data collected on his various tours shows that Irish yields were respectable, far higher than French and emulating English levels. However, for Young (and this recalls Gillespie's criticism of Canny) the only way forward was through the diffusion of English methods, and their failure to spread in Ireland upset him. In truth, such methods were inappropriate or superfluous in Irish context in several respects. The potato reduced the appeal of turnip diffusion, and the abundance of natural grasses in Ireland obviated the need for artificial varieties (Bell and Watson, 1987; Ó Gráda, 1988: Ch 2). 'Improvement'-oriented contemporaries castigated the Irish for 'archaic' practices such as paring and burning, spade-tillage, and small fields, but modern historians are more inclined to give Irish cultivators the benefit of the doubt (eg Lucas, 1960; Lucas and O Danachair in Gailey and Fenton, 1970). If anything, they tend towards the other extreme,

applying the 'survivor principle' to farming techniques: a technique's perseverance is evidence of its 'efficiency'.

2 1800-1850

The critical period between the Union and the Great Famine has been a magnet for some of the best research in Irish economic history, and particularly the history of agriculture. Contemporary sources, both printed and manuscript, are much richer than for any earlier period, and they have now been intensively quarried. Bourke (1965, 1978), Crotty (1966), Solar (1987), Mokyr (1985), and Turner (1984) have performed the essential spadework for a quantitative history of prefamine agriculture.

On the eve of the famine output per male worker was about half the British level (Solar, 1987; Ó Gráda, 1988; Ch 2). Now that historians no longer believe that the gap was due to laziness or some other Irish character defect (Bell and Watson, 1987; Bell, 1987; Solar, 1983; Ó Gráda, 1988, Ch 2), they highlight instead the paucity of resources at the disposal of the average Irish farm labourer and farmer. And, though this comparison with Britain hardly flatters Irish agriculture, the half-century before the famine was one of progress in many respects. Yields per acre, already high in Arthur Young's time, continued to rise. In the early 1840s, potato yields were twice the French level, and grain yields not much less than the English (Allen and Ó Gráda, 1988). The prefamine decades now emerge as an era of technological diffusion: historians have unearthed from farming manuals, trade data, and farm accounts a story of 'improvement' in terms of seed varieties, livestock strains, and new equipment such as Scottish ploughs and lighter carriage vehicles (Bell and Watson, 1987; Ó Gráda, 1988: Ch 2). Modernization was most marked on larger farms but certainly not confined to them. It encompassed the humble donkey, almost unknown in Young's time, and the 'lumper' potato, notorious in the wake of *Phytophthora infestans*, but reputed safe and high-yielding before then. Just before the famine, there were over ninety thousand donkeys on Irish farms (three-fifths of them on holdings of ten acres or less, compared to one-fifth of the horses). The size distribution of farms must be borne in mind in evaluating the extent of 'improvement'. It was enough for a minority of farmers to be 'improvers' for the bulk of the landed area and agricultural labourers to be affected (compare Jones Hughes, 1982). The period has also been considered one of estate 'improvement', as head landlords removed 'middlemen' and assumed a more active role in management (Donnelly, 1973; Maguire, 1972).

Still, the extent of progress remains a matter of debate. Solar's brilliant dissertation (Solar, 1987)

presents an extremely gloomy picture of an agricultural economy grinding to a stationary state, while Andrews (1982) has pointed to the limited prospects for further land reclamation on the eve of the famine. Turner's comparison of livestock numbers in county Down in 1803, 1841, and 1847 seems to point the same way, ruling out much increase in livestock output in that atypical county. The data used by Turner are probably too weak for strong inferences, however (Turner, 1984). The shortcomings of the 1841 censal data are familiar (Bourke, 1965b), but the 1847 figures – the first in an annual series of Irish agricultural statistics – are also probably too low. I suspect that the steady and substantial rise in nearly all the series, livestock and crop acreages, between 1847 and 1853 or 1854 (see table below) may be in large part due to improving coverage in the early years of official data gathering. Certainly the massive rise during those years was never to be equalled again during the nineteenth century, and is difficult to square with the modest rises in live cattle, beef, pigmeat, and butter exports (Solar, 1987: 110, 159, 160, 189).

Year	Cattle	Horses	Sheep	Pigs
1803	96286	25164	36698	41597
1847	115411	30644	44530	22475
1854	130974	31483	64159	57262

Source: Turner, 1984: 31; *Agricultural Statistics*

Most of the literature on pre-famine agriculture remains Malthusian, at least implicitly. A predictable controversy broke out, therefore, over Joel Mokyr's finding that the land-labour ratio is a poor predictor of average income or wages in Irish counties in the early 1840s (Mokyr, 1985: ch 3). Cogently argued with newly-marshalled data, the result prompted its author to engage in a fascinating quest for other reasons 'why Ireland starved'. Criticism of Mokyr's anti-Malthusian finding has focused on the assumption of low economic integration across counties (necessary for the econometric exercise) and the specification of land quality (Kennedy, 1983).

However, the revisions of recent research must not obscure the problems facing Irish agriculture. Mokyr (1983) and Hoffman and Mokyr (1983) are reminders of the drawbacks of over-reliance on the potato. A long-term perspective suggests too that there was something 'unnatural' about Ireland's reliance on grain, given that it 'is by nature counted a great soil of pasture' (Edmund Spenser quoted by McCarthy-Morrogh, 1984: 158).

Yet both optimists and pessimists now agree that there was nothing inevitable about the crisis that struck Irish agriculture in 1846. Neither the history of pre-famine famines (Ó Gráda, 1984, 1989) nor the variability of pre-blight potato yields indicate that the potato was unduly risky, particularly given how poor

Ireland was by contemporary standards (Solar, 1988; 1989a,b). If evidence in contemporary Irish provincial newspapers enables Solar to argue that 'the potato does not seem to have been noticeably more likely to fail than other crops in the southeast' (Solar, 1989b), what of areas further west where root crops had a comparative advantage for climatic reasons? Perhaps further research along the lines pursued by Solar can tell. Pre-famine Ireland was in terms of material consumption the poorest place in western Europe, but its poor were generally well fed and relatively healthy, and they lived relatively long lives (Clarkson and Crawford, 1988; Solar, 1987; 353; Ó Gráda, 1988). These meagre comforts were due to the potato.

Between the Union and the famine, the Corn Laws benefited Irish landlords and farmers, and encouraged tillage. The proportion of output due to grain and potatoes was probably as high in 1840-5 as it ever had been. Some historians nevertheless point to 1815 as the high-water mark for tillage in Ireland, claiming that the famine accentuated rather than initiated consolidation and the drift towards pasture (Crotty, 1966; Foster, 1988: 318; Goldstrom, 1981). Two ways of answering the question have been attempted. The only effort so far at obtaining a direct aggregate impression of consolidation has produced conflicting evidence. Some 165 of 317 witnesses (mostly farmers and land agents) interviewed by the Devon Commissioners in the early 1840s declared it 'prevalent', but only 63 of 1502 witnesses questioned by the Poor Law subcommissioners in 1835 declared it 'very widespread' or 'prevalent', and 800 of them did not bother to answer (Mokyr, 1985: 130-1). Dramatic examples of a shift to pasture might be cited. The distinguishing feature of the great Terry Alt rebellion of 1830-1 was the sight of substantial crowds of farm labourers engaged in digging up large enclosures recently converted to grass, and turning cattle free to roam on the roads.² But such evidence is no proof of overall trends. The alternative route is a macro-level analysis of the composition of output before the famine and the trend in agricultural exports between the Union and the famine makes a significant switch to tillage very unlikely (Ó Gráda, 1988: Ch 2: Solar, 1987: 407-12). The famine quickly convinced proprietors and farmers that the days of tillage were over. Both Corn Law repeal and the rise in real wages in the wake of the famine forced a switch away from grain.

The growth of agricultural output was undoubtedly slackening before the famine. The extent and cause of the deceleration are a matter for debate. Solar (1987: 30-5) has inferred what amounts to a Ricardian stationary state from the failure of agricultural exports to rise in the pre-famine decade, but the trend is

muddled by the series of extremely bad harvests in 1839-44. In England these were the years of the 'hungry forties'; in Ireland an unknown proportion of output was diverted from exports to domestic consumption (Donnelly, 1973: 32-5). Thus it would be premature to infer the beckoning of a stationary state from trade data alone. Besides, some slackening is to be expected from the decline in labour input growth, most serious in the east where marginal productivity of labour was highest.

Rural violence and protest, a fashionable field of inquiry further afield, have also attracted the attention of Irish specialists. The 'low politics' of local peasant societies have been traditionally ignored by Irish political historians, but social historians have shown how important they were (Clark and Donnelly, 1983; Fitzpatrick, 1985). Connolly (1987) and Donnelly (eg 1978) have studied eighteenth-century movements, though most recent work has been on the post-1800 period. Aims, causes and results have been debated. There is fertile ground here for competing hypotheses: tenants versus landlords (Beames, 1983; Mokyr, 1985); labourers versus tenants (Lee, 1980); intrafamilial and interfamilial squabbling (Fitzpatrick, 1982). Roberts (1983) has proposed a class model of faction fights, Fitzpatrick a familial one for what was earlier seen as class-inspired (Fitzpatrick, 1982). Donnelly (1985: 166-7) clearly thinks that there is no simple answer.

Nor has the extent of the unrest been decided. 'Nothing could have been further from the peaceful society of some anthropological folklore' (Clark, 1979: 66) than rural Ireland before the famine. Peaks such as the Rockite uprising of 1820-2 in Munster or the Terry Alt unrest of 1830-1 in Clare involved very large numbers of people, and truly terrified the landed élite. The perception from Dublin, London and further afield was of endemic violence. And yet there are grounds for supposing that the agrarian crime rate was probably falling before the famine, and the police ability to cope improving (Broeker, 1970).³

The Great Famine highlighted the uniqueness of Irish agriculture (Daly, 1986; Ó Gráda, 1989). Recent estimates of output on the 'national farm' just before the famine (Solar, 1987; Ó Gráda, 1988) show that the potato accounted for less than one-quarter of the total. Nevertheless, it was the dominant food of three million out of Ireland's 8.5 million people, and an important element in the diet of the remainder (Bourke, 1965a; Mokyr, 1981; Cullen, 1981). Moreover, the low wages associated with the 'potato standard' underpinned the huge tillage acreage that made Ireland to some extent Britain's 'granary' (Ó Gráda, 1984; Solar, 1989a). When it failed, the poor

² James S Donnelly, 'The Terry Alts', unpublished, 1986.

³ A good local example is provided by Mícheál Ó Cíosáin, *Chnoc an Oir*, Maynooth, 1988, p 137.

may well have been willing to offer work for less than a subsistence wage, but the 'efficiency wage' that farmers must pay rose (McGregor, 1984; Mokyr, 1983: 223-6).

In medieval Europe a crop shortfall of 50 per cent was typically enough to produce a 'dearth': in Finland in 1867/8 a shortfall of less, in a depressed economic environment, was enough to trigger a famine. The failure in Ireland in the late 1840s, a halving or more of the potato harvest for several years in succession, was of a different order by historical standards. Indeed, the harvest of 1845/6, down by nearly one-half, resulted in privation, but in little if any excess mortality.

It was frequently claimed during the famine that Irish agriculture continued to produce enough food for everybody. The point, echoed in populist historical accounts, anticipates Sen's entitlements approach to famine mortality (Sen, 1981). Crude political arithmetic lends it some support (Ó Gráda, 1988: ch 3; Solar, 1989; see too Bourke, 1978), but the calculations ignore the dynamic effects of requisitioning or redistribution in a context of repeated crop failure. The best defence of the entitlements argument entails analysing the famine in a United Kingdom context: even if Ireland's own food supply was hard stretched, there was certainly enough in Sen's sense in the United Kingdom, of which Ireland was a full partner, to prevent starvation. The populist search for scapegoats had identified groups who gained from the famine: moneylenders, resilient landowners, shopkeepers, farmers. Hard evidence is lacking, but there are theoretical grounds for doubting that any of these groups really benefited much. The crisis ruined many landlords and reduced the rent-rolls of most; the drop in land prices hardly compensated most farmers for the big increase in money wages; and traders were hurt by reduced agricultural demand (Ó Gráda, 1988). The most likely gainers were lawyers, waxing fat on property transfers, probate and bankruptcy business – their numbers outside Dublin rose by almost half between 1841 and 1851 – and farmers specializing heavily in cattle-raising.

3 1850-1920

This period has been the main target of the 'new' history of tenurial relations. Here the statistics are relatively good. What happened to agriculture? Solar (1983), in a sparkling paper, carries out total factor productivity calculation which shows Irish agriculture on a par with Scottish in the 1850s. The bleak picture painted by nineteenth-century propagandists of post-famine Irish farming has been thoroughly revised in the last two decades or so. Despite some bad years, agricultural output per worker certainly rose, and some new techniques seem to have been adopted with

alacrity (Solow, 1971; Vaughan, 1985; Ó Gráda, 1988). The role of landlords in this improvement has not been measured, yet it is unlikely to have counted for much. Their investment in tenant farming, much of it for show and of doubtful economic value, never exceeded more than a few per cent of output (for a good recent case-study, see Proudfoot, 1986). It is hardly surprising therefore that the decline in landlord investment during the Land War had little impact on farming. Solow's gloomy image of Irish agriculture during the Land War, neglected by agitating tenants and alienated landlords alike, must be weighed against evidence that living standards and productivity continued during the Land War (Solow, 1971; Ó Gráda, 1988). Nor is the post-1880 stagnation claimed by Crotty (1966) borne out by subsequent work either: modest changes in output masked significant productivity increases. The 'ageing' of Irish farmers which Crotty (1966: 104-7) attributed to the demise of an active market in land turns out to be largely a fiction based on farmer mendacity prompted by the Old Age Pension Act of 1908.

Vaughan's micro-study of the farm accounts of Meath grazier Edward Delany implies stasis – at least insofar as land productivity is concerned – on one substantial Meath holding. On Delany's original holding at Woodtown (not far from Dublin), beef output fluctuated around 230 cwt annually between 1851 and 1899 (Vaughan, 1982: 68n). However, output per worker seems to have expanded impressively enough, since Delany increased his income, not by cultivating more intensively but by buying up neighbouring farms. Yet, however enlightening, this is but a sample of one, difficult to square with macro evidence: in County Meath as a whole the number of cattle almost doubled in the same period.⁴

If the gist of Solow's influential study (Solow, 1971) is that the Land War of 1879-1903 was unnecessary, Vaughan's lively survey of the Land War literature considers its outbreak a fluke, and its outcome at best a draw from the tenants' standpoint (Vaughan, 1985); landlord exploitation cannot explain its origins, nor can it be proven that the tenants won the battles of 1880-2 or 1887-90. The tenant struggles of the 1880s and 1890s, far from putting an end to evictions, only provoked more of them, and failed to reduce rents significantly. In the short run at least, the hard-fought Plan of Campaign (1886-91) was at best a draw from the tenants' standpoint (Geary, 1986). The deromanticization of landlordism's more violent foes has been carried to extremes by Foster ('activity . . . linked to *machismo* and sexual frustration') and Murray ('a form of rural gangsterism') (Foster, 1988: 408;

⁴ Department of Industry and Commerce, *Agricultural Statistics 1847-1926* (Dublin, 1930), pp 76-7.

Murray, 1986: 72). Recent work in this anti-deterministic vein credits the genius of Parnell and Davitt (see the excellent biographies by Bew, 1980 and Moody, 1981) with converting an agrarian downturn no worse than another earlier one in 1859-64 (Donnelly, 1976) into a revolutionary situation (Donnelly, 1976; Moody, 1981; Vaughan, 1985): without them there would have been no Land War.

Relentless in pursuit of populist myths, the recent literature has been rather indulgent towards landlordism, stressing its powerlessness in the face of overpopulation and economic crisis before 1845, and the modest rent rises and eviction rates of the post-famine period. Only during the famine itself, when, in his eagerness to protect himself, the typical landlord 'cleared' without much scruple, is a less generous verdict warranted (Curtis, 1980; Malcolmson, 1974; Maguire, 1972; Roebuck, 1988; Solow, 1971; Donnelly, 1989). Yet a 'post-revisionist' verdict on the Land War might be that, as social revolutions go, its cost in terms of lost output was low. What seems striking now is how easily the system introduced in the seventeenth century was eliminated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth (Jones Hughes, quoted in Horner, 1981; Duffy, 1988).

A welcome variation on the heavy emphasis on landlord-tenant relations has been the attention focused by Bew and Jones on a different arena: the conflict between landless labourers and smallholders on the one hand, and graziers on the other. The very titles of the studies of agricultural labour by J W Boyle (1983) and Fitzpatrick (1980) tell their own story. As predicted by Davitt, the outcome of the Land War traded one form of inequality for another, and gave rise to new tensions. These tensions found parallels elsewhere in Europe at this time. In Ireland they lay behind the creation of the Congested Districts Board, but their ultimate resolution brought the landless and the western smallholder little joy (Jones, 1983; Bew, 1987; O Tuathaigh in Drudy, 1982).

higher in the South than in six-county Northern Ireland before 1930, and that the gap widened between 1912 and the mid-1920s (O'Connor and Guimard, 1985). Following an established tradition, several authors have recently compared agricultural performance North and South (Attwood, 1966; 1983-4; Sheehy *et al.*, 1981; Stainer, 1987; Cuddy and Doherty, 1984). By taking a long-term perspective the comparison may be used to shed some light on the effect of public policy on output and productivity. The outcome is that the South's performance, measured in terms of output per worker, was abysmal up to c 1960 but much better since then, so that labour productivity in both areas in the 1980s was similar (Kennedy *et al.*, 1988). Other evaluations of recent experience confirms a new southern dynamism, particularly since accession to the EC (Boyle, 1986, 1987; Stainer, 1987; Whittaker and Spencer, 1986). But why was the record of Southern farming so poor before 1960? Historians imply, admittedly without much analysis, satisfaction with the 1920s. If farmers looked back on that decade as a kind of golden age, it was largely because after 1931 the world depression, a tariff regime compounded by an 'economic war' with the United Kingdom, and World War II conspired in turn to hurt them. Their plight is reflected in land price trends, usefully chronicled by Nunan (1987). Though the De Valera administration elected in 1932 sought to aid the small farmer at the expense of the grazier by promoting tillage, its policies placed nearly all farmers at a disadvantage. Smuggling could help them only marginally (Johnson, 1979; compare Norton, 1983). Post-war policy was a different matter, however. Not only was freer access gained to outside markets, but farmers gained increasingly from transfers from consumers and taxpayers (Matthews in Drudy, 1982). Since accession to the European Community, most of the transfer has come from EC sources.

4 *The Record since 1920*

Crotty's claim that owner occupancy was 'bad' for Irish agriculture (Crotty, 1966) is one of the most striking in the literature surveyed here. Surprisingly, it has failed to attract the attention that it deserves from historians (see, however, Lee, 1969). Nevertheless, twentieth-century agriculture has been extensively studied; the essays in Drudy (1982) are a good introduction.

Partition in 1921 has lent a welcome comparative focus to much of the work on the twentieth century. O'Connor and Guimard's separation of the twenty-six county Irish Free State area from the official estimate of all-Ireland farm output in 1912 raises the interesting implication that output per worker was

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- JSSISI = *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*
- ESR = *Economic and Social Review*
- IJAERS = *Irish Journal of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology*
- IHS = *Irish Historical Studies*

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