



## Ireland: The Blight that Remained

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IN THE DAY of the potato blight, Ireland laboured under the absentee landlord, clearly identifiable as the Englishman living richly off the rental proceeds shipped across the Irish sea. The situation is not so simple now. Ulstermen today have the resident land owner to contend with as they struggle to develop their economy. Nearly all farms are owned by Irishmen, resident, but not necessarily working. And this, I think, is one of the hidden factors beneath the turmoil from Belfast to the Bogside in Ireland.

Tempers fired by social and economic injustice are polarised into religious conflict and swamped in the bigotry of proclamations endorsed by the representatives of God here on earth. Economic inequalities are vaguely acknowledged by such phrases as "the need for deep-rooted reforms." Deep rooted? Not likely. Merely further demands from politicians for more aid to alleviate obvious suffering—bolstering the system that created it.

Figures show that the areas of highest unemployment are around Londonderry, Enniskillen and Newry, deep in the rural regions, stretching along the border with the Republic. The principle reason is migration of the population away from farming, into the urban areas. In Ulster the exodus amounted to two thousand people a year. Subsidiary aggravations are the decline in traditional textile and shipbuilding industries, and urban resources, for living and working, have now been stretched to breaking point. On the dispute over the reallocation of political power hangs the question of the redistribution of wealth.

There are 64,000 farm owners, but fewer than 38,000 own farms officially considered to be of any consequence. Most of the remaining 26,000 let out their land under Conacre (derived from "corn acre"), a system that can be traced back to the early nineteenth century. Under Conacre, the landlord who decides not to use his land puts it up for auction, and neighbouring farmers, who rarely get a chance to expand their holdings, bid for the annual tenancy. Currently, rents range between £8 and £16, climbing as high as £25 an acre. Of the two million acres of farmland, 15 per cent (300,000 acres) are held under Conacre.

This system is regarded as good for the agricultural sector, which employs 10 per cent of the working population and which is undoubtedly efficient by U.K. standards. This is true within the framework of present social values. Land that would otherwise remain idle is utilised. But Conacre is nonetheless criticised by some

because owners will not quit the land and thus permit amalgamation of the many very small units that at present predominate (27,000 farms are below 50 acres each), resources inevitably become scattered. Farmers may have to cover large distances with machinery and labour. And as there is no security of tenure beyond one year, good farm practice (e.g. long-term soil fertility) tends to be neglected.

Why do the owners not quit? Enquiries among the Stormont Government's spokesmen and civil servant economists produce two reasons. The major explanation is that as the farmer gets older, he feels less like working and will let more of his land in Conacre. When he retires, he will have let all his land; he can therefore continue to live in the farmhouse, which he would have to vacate if he sold the farm. "On top of that, he would not know what to do with the money if he sold," I was told.

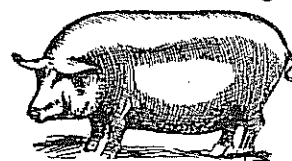
Consequently, existing farms are not as efficient as they would be, but they continue to struggle on anyway under heavy subsidisation, including a £1½ million "remoteness" subsidy from the Treasury in Whitehall to cover part of the costs involved in selling to the mainland. Capital that retired farmers could usefully invest in developing industries, providing new employment, does not materialise from home sources; hence the heavy, and—in an unstable society—unhealthy reliance on vulnerable foreign capital.

The second reason is shortage of working capital. Why not sell more land to intensify investment in the rest? Said a Belfast spokesman: "I suppose they're hoping for better days. They might hope to accumulate some capital in the future, so that they can use their land themselves. Selling land is the last resort."

Because of this entrenched attitude, which creates a critical measure of stagnation, the economy must fail to realise its full potential for expansion. Consequently, to try and keep pace with the trend away from the land, approximately £50 million of taxpayers' money is spent every year in attracting and subsidising new industries in Northern Ireland.

A tax on land values would have a laxative effect. Some small farmers would go bust, but the economy would benefit from larger and more efficient units. The revenue could be used to maximum effect in building up the rural infrastructure (so pushing up land values even further) and thus helping to attract job-providing industries.

Conacre protects the inefficient or tired farmer. He can "cut his losses—and it is not going to cost him



anything in terms of capital investment," as one of the official spokesmen put it to me. But what of the cost to the community?