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978-0-521-55388-9 - After the Famine: Irish Agriculture, 1850–1914

Michael Turner

Excerpt

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# 1 Introduction: Ireland and Irish agricultural history in context

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## The European context

It is not always remembered that the Irish economy in the first half of the nineteenth century, as well as thereafter, was inextricably bound to the rest of Britain. As Mokyr and Ó Gráda have put it ‘Ireland and Britain were part of the same economy’, and indeed, nearly one-third of the population of the British Isles came from Ireland. The connection was a very direct one: constitutionally in the very existence of the United Kingdom from 1800 (though legally and therefore effectively from 1 January 1801); and materially in the food stuffs and manpower which Ireland provided for industrialising Britain.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the country may not have been as backward as legend would have it. It had begun the process of industrialisation in the eighteenth century, especially in textiles, and later in shipbuilding and allied industries. Although the decline of the textiles industry came early, other industries remained and did not decline until much later in the nineteenth century, or indeed like shipbuilding they actually grew. Measured against some other European countries Ireland will look less the industrial laggard, or the ‘peasant’ economy of popular myth. Even though by the second quarter of the twentieth century something near to 50 per cent of her employed population was still engaged in agriculture, and the agricultural sector provided over 30 per cent of GDP, this profile was by no means unusual in Europe as a whole. It may not be flattering to link Ireland (in fact the Free State for this particular period) with the economies of eastern and southern Europe in this way, but unlike them it might be true to say that in relative terms she became more agricultural from a once more mixed economy in the previous century.<sup>2</sup> It was her nineteenth-century partner,

<sup>1</sup> J. Mokyr and C. Ó Gráda, ‘Poor and getting poorer? Living standards in Ireland before the Famine’, *Economic History Review*, 41, (1988), 209.

<sup>2</sup> See R. Munting and B.A. Holderness, *Crisis, Recovery and War: An Economic History of Continental Europe, 1918–1945* (London, 1991), pp. 48 and 51. Given the constraints of the data the summary of European data relates to c. 1930 for employment, and to the

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the remains of the larger original UK, which of all European countries had deserted agriculture in the most profound way since the nineteenth century.

Let us not be misunderstood, this is not to say that Ireland was industrialised or experiencing an industrial revolution in the nineteenth century. She was not best endowed with the principal industrial raw materials of fuel (meaning coal rather than peat, which was the mainstay of the domestic hearth), and minerals, though by the late nineteenth century she had a railway network and was not short of capital. If we regard Ireland as a region of a larger economy, the United Kingdom, it should not cause surprise and alarm to see a process of specialisation take place which emphasised agriculture in Ireland. Of more importance perhaps, was not the absence of industrialisation on any scale, but rather the fact of specialisation within Ireland itself and the emphasis on industrialisation in Ulster.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, in her own right therefore, Ireland became, rather than remained, more essentially an agricultural economy, and a highly commercialised one at that. Although its people often existed on or not much above the margin of self-sufficiency, providing their own food, fuel and clothing,<sup>4</sup> the country also generated a very sizeable surplus. This is hardly the prescription for, or the traditional image of, a backward economy.<sup>5</sup> Ó Gráda's estimates suggest that the bulk of the livestock, and perhaps one quarter of the grain was exported as early as the 1830s and early 1840s. Furthermore, total Irish exports in 1845 could have fed over 2 million people.<sup>6</sup> The shock of the Famine therefore was felt all the more, not just in the decline in food for the population, but also because specialisation meant that the agricultural sector was vital to the economy at large through its exports.

Britain in the mid-nineteenth century could rely on agricultural imports from Ireland – they were on tap, but they were not of a scale to suggest a

broad period 1938–50 for GDP statistics. See also J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 69–71.

<sup>3</sup> The strength of Irish industrialisation is subject to much debate. For example see the review of deindustrialisation in the decades leading to the Famine in J. Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800–1850* (London, 1985 edn.), pp. 13–15. In this section I have followed the line taken by K.A. Kennedy, T. Giblin and D. McHugh, *The Economic Development of Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, (London, 1988), pp. 7–12 who follow J.J. Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society 1848–1918* (Dublin, 1973), especially pp. 11–13. For industrialisation in Ulster in the period 1820–1914 see P. Ollerenshaw, 'Industry, 1820–1914', chapter 2 of L. Kennedy and P. Ollerenshaw (eds.), *An Economic History of Ulster 1820–1939* (Manchester, 1985), pp. 62–108.

<sup>4</sup> Mokyr and Ó Gráda, 'Poor and getting poorer?', 211.

<sup>5</sup> Lee, *The Modernisation*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>6</sup> C. Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine: Explorations in Economic History, 1800–1925* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 51, 57–8.

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vital dependency for Britain. In addition, they offered mutual benefits since Ireland enjoyed a protected extension of the British home market. However, when the Famine struck the Irish economy it had but marginal effects on Britain – especially given the near coincidental repeal of protection – but for Ireland, the demographic effects were stupendous, as were the immediate agricultural disruptions. Without doubt, dependency was a one-way ticket. If then the reaction of the British authorities to the Famine was ‘too little too late’, as the popular parlance often has it, then for the purposes of this book this is not the important point. Rather it is more generally significant that agriculture had been and then remained the mainstay of the Irish economy whereas in Britain and much of Western Europe the Industrial Revolution was in full flow to varying degrees.

Moreover, the fact that agriculture was that mainstay does not have to imply that it was an impoverished economy. We have already indicated the rumblings of an industrial revolution, and while poverty could be found, and without too much difficulty, nevertheless, it is now thought that average incomes in Ireland may actually have increased in the decades leading to the Famine, even if the base from which this progress advanced was very low and the poles of inequality had widened. Contemporary accounts of Ireland in the early to mid-nineteenth century are a damning indictment, but they are now thought to be based on different, or shall we say *foreign* appreciations and expectations regarding consumption. If the Irish were badly clothed and housed, they were, in the strictly nutritional sense better fed.<sup>7</sup> The potato diet may have been monotonous, though even that is subject to debate, but it was certainly body building. After the Famine those average incomes certainly did rise. If real GNP per capita in Ireland in 1841 was 40 per cent of that attained in the UK by 1830, then by 1913 it was 60 per cent. If in 1841 her real GNP per capita placed her in the bottom third of twenty-three European countries when ranked against a UK base, then by 1913 she was in the top half and not far short of France, Austria and Sweden, all of which were within five percentage points above her. On the downside, and perhaps more significantly however, was that economies with similar emphasis on agriculture, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent Belgium, were all and always above her in such an exercise. In contrast the Mediterranean and eastern European economies, certainly by 1913, were all below her.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Kennedy *et al.*, *The Economic Development*, p. 17; J. Mokyr and C. Ó Gráda, ‘Emigration and poverty in prefamine Ireland’, *Explorations in Economic History*, 19 (1982), especially 360–62; and in greater detail see Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved*, chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> Kennedy *et al.*, *The Economic Development*, p. 14.

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Table 1.1 *Population growth in selected European countries in the nineteenth century* (in 000 and inter-censal percentage changes)

	Belgium	Denmark	France	Germany	IRELAND	Italy	N'lands	GB
1801		929	27,349			17,237		10,501
			6.4			6.6		14.0
1811	4,166		29,107	22,377		18,381	2,047	11,970
			4.7			7.3		17.7
1821			30,462		6,802	19,727		14,092
			6.9		14.2	7.5		15.4
1831	4,090	1,231	32,569	28,237	7,767	21,212	2,613	16,261
	6.0	4.7	5.1	7.6	5.3	8.1	9.5	14.0
1841	4,337	1,289	34,230	30,382	8,175	22,936	2,861	18,534
	4.5	9.8	4.5	10.0	-19.9	6.2	6.9	12.3
1851	4,530	1,415	35,783	33,413	6,552	24,351	3,057	20,817
	6.6	13.6	4.5	6.4	-11.5	2.7	8.2	11.1
1861	4,828	1,608	37,386	35,567	5,799	25,017	3,309	23,128
		11.0	-3.4	15.4	-6.7	7.1	8.2	12.7
1871		1,785	36,103	41,059	5,412	26,801	3,580	26,072
		10.3	3.6	10.2	-4.4	6.2	12.1	14.0
1881	5,520	1,969	37,406	45,234	5,175	28,460	4,013	29,710
	9.9	10.3	1.9	9.3	-9.1		12.4	11.2
1891	6,069	2,172	38,133	49,428	4,705		4,511	33,029
	10.3	12.8	0.8	14.0	-5.2		13.1	12.0
1901	6,694	2,450	38,451	56,367	4,459	32,475	5,104	37,000
	10.9	12.5	1.9	15.2	-1.5	6.8	14.8	10.4
1911	7,424	2,757	39,192	64,926	4,390	34,671	5,858	40,831

*Note:* The dates conform to the UK census. For other countries the population figures relate to dates which may be up to five years adrift of the dates indicated.

*Source:* B.R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics 1750-1975* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 29–34.

This general improvement took place in spite of a rise of population that was greater than occurred in Britain and most of the rest of Western Europe, though that rise had clearly slowed down in the decades immediately preceding the Famine to a level which was nothing very special compared with other countries (for which see table 1.1). By then the nutritional advantages of a potato diet had built up a head of steam. The evidence on nutrition as displayed in the mean height of men in the mid-century suggests that only Norway produced taller men than Ireland.<sup>9</sup> This must say something for some kind of efficiency within its

<sup>9</sup> On population growth in the century before c. 1850 see C. Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine* (London, 1989), p. 13; on the changing population after this see B.R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics 1750-1975* (Cambridge, 1981 edn.), p. 31; and on the issue of stature and height see Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine*, p. 17 and

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economic system, though it does rather stress the nutritional advantages of that potato diet. The efficiency perhaps was in the transformation of a crop into energy, and there were also good agricultural by-products from potato cultivation into livestock fodder. Therefore it was a particularly cruel irony that the population which gained such strength from its dietary mainstay was dealt such a crushing blow when the potato crop failed.

It is not always appreciated that the potato blight which heralded the Famine was not confined to Ireland, nor was it by any means the first time that there was a failure of the potato crop. It has been suggested that the death rate resulting from the subsistence crisis of 1740–41, for example, was equal to that of the 1840s.<sup>10</sup> The importance of the crisis of the 1840s therefore might more importantly be explored not in the innate damage it caused, but in the different response it invoked from the economy and society of Ireland. The earliest indications of the profound damage the potato blight could do came from the Continent, and this had been preceded by its visitation on North America in the previous two years. The disease first struck the crop in Belgium in June 1845, and within a month or so had spread over the whole of Flanders and into neighbouring France and the Netherlands. It proceeded in August to stretch into more central parts of Europe, to Switzerland and generally along the Rhine and Rhone river systems, and then across the Channel into England. By early September 1845 it was into Ireland, but it was not until the harvest of October that the extent of the damage was realised and made an impact on the consciousness. Crop losses were greatest in areas where the disease first appeared, therefore not in Ireland but in Belgium, Holland and north-east France. This east to west diffusion of the blight was reversed in subsequent years.

It was the succession of bad crops, and also the relative susceptibility of the very potato varieties in more general use in Ireland than elsewhere which made Ireland suffer the greatest impact. Thus, even though the Scottish highlands were badly hit in 1846, only second in virulence to Ireland, they had emerged unscathed the previous year.<sup>11</sup> Therefore a combination of circumstances special to Ireland resulted – a succession

Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved*, p. 9. See also S. Nicholas and R.H. Steckel, 'Heights and living standards of English workers during the early years of industrialization, 1770–1815', *Journal of Economic History*, 51, 4 (1991), 947, and in more detail in Nicholas and Steckel, 'Tall but poor: nutrition, health and living standards in pre-famine Ireland', *Working Paper Series on Historical Factors in Long Run Growth*, 39 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> An oft repeated idea, for which see Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society*, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> P.M.A. Bourke, 'Emergence of potato blight, 1843–6', *Nature*, 203 (22 August 1964), 805–8.

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of failed crops, coupled with a level of consumption dependence on a form of monoculture not replicated elsewhere to the same degree. This was related generally to insufficient economic development and industrialisation, which is not the same as saying there was no industrialisation.<sup>12</sup> While potato dependency was not confined to Ireland it was not so widely prevalent in other European countries. Unfortunately the Irish had developed this dependency to a fine art. As often as not, in the two centuries or so before the mid-nineteenth, the introduction of potatoes in Europe came on the back of the failure of other more traditional grain-based staple foodstuffs.<sup>13</sup> To this extent it had developed as a fall-back crop, or as an emergency crop. In Ireland, in contrast, it had already become the mainstay crop, and there was in consequence no such insurance to fall back upon. Added to all of this was the actual severity of the crop failures, 'it was in no way a "normal" harvest failure, but was roughly twice as severe as the worst that might have been expected on the basis of recorded nineteenth-century experience in Ireland and other countries of western Europe'.<sup>14</sup>

After the Famine the potato declined in importance with the declining population, and this decline had important knock-on effects through the reduction in intensive methods of manual cultivation, involving the general decline of spade husbandry and also a decline in the labour-intensive application of manure. Taken together these had repercussions for the acreage under all crops and the yield from those acres, both of which declined down to the 1870s.<sup>15</sup>

Irish agricultural output did recover however, but an important concern is whether changes within agriculture were in motion before the Famine struck. If they were it would suggest that whilst Ireland was not necessarily at the forefront of European agricultural development, she was also by no means in the rear. If we take physical productivity for example, whilst wheat yields in England were higher than in Ireland at the mid-century, the reverse was the case for barley and oats, and even later in the century, when both economies had experienced a major shift towards livestock production, grain yields were broadly similar. At the same pre-Famine mid-point physical productivity in Ireland and Belgium

<sup>12</sup> Which is not to play down the impact of mortality in other European countries, but rather to play up the devastation in Ireland. For a few comparisons see Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 60; Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved*, p. 276.

<sup>13</sup> See B.H. Slicher Van Bath, *The Agrarian History of Western Europe A.D. 500–1850* (London, 1963), pp. 266–71.

<sup>14</sup> P. Solar, 'The Great Famine was no ordinary subsistence crisis', in M. Crawford (ed.), *Famine the Irish Experience 900–1900: Subsistence Crises and Famines in Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1989), p. 118.

<sup>15</sup> P.M.A. Bourke, 'The average yields of food crops in Ireland on the eve of the Great Famine', *Journal of the Department of Agriculture*, 66 (1969), 26–39.

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was also quite similar, even slightly higher in Ireland from the point of view of yields per acre of the main crops, and also higher for some animal products, and this situation had not significantly changed over the preceding decades.<sup>16</sup> When compared with other European countries in the second half of the nineteenth century, France and Italy for example, Irish yields were significantly larger, and, from nine northern European countries in the 1880s, Irish oat yields were second to the Netherlands, her wheat yields were third behind Denmark and Britain, but her potato yields were fourth behind Britain, the Netherlands and Germany.<sup>17</sup> By the eve of the First World War, Irish wheat yields were surpassed only by Denmark, and equalled by Belgium, whereas her barley yields were exceeded only by both the Netherlands and Belgium.<sup>18</sup> This is not altogether a satisfactory comparison since wheat cultivation in some European countries was not as important as rye, but then by the end of the century wheat production in Ireland was also unimportant. Average crop yields can be misleading indicators of land productivity however, because they say nothing about the dispersion about the mean or the skewness of the distribution. Thus in mid-century it looks as though both land and labour productivity were in fact greater in Belgium than in Ireland.<sup>19</sup> Before the Famine the high yields, which give credence to a high land productivity, were only achieved by a high labour input.

The real downturn in Irish land productivity could be seen in that once stalwart of the agrarian economy, the potato. With the loss of intensive methods – spade husbandry, weeding, and intensive manuring – the average potato yields in Ireland in 1909–13 came a poor seventh in the European league. The importance of this may be seen less in terms of human nutrition but more in terms of the input to livestock, particularly pigs. The three countries which perhaps bear the closest comparison with Ireland in terms of broad economic profile, Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium (perhaps Belgium unfairly so since it was a relatively early industrialiser), all had significantly higher potato yields. As far as the data are available, two of those countries, Denmark and the Netherlands, were far advanced in terms of milk yields, a commodity which we shall

<sup>16</sup> P. Solar and M. Goossens, 'Agricultural productivity in Belgium and Ireland in the early nineteenth century', in B.M.S. Campbell and M. Overton (eds.), *Land, Labour and Livestock: Historical Studies in European Agricultural Productivity* (Manchester, 1991), pp. 367–8.

<sup>17</sup> Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine*, p. 53; P.K. O'Brien, D. Heath, and C. Keyder, 'Agricultural efficiency in Britain and France, 1815–1914', *Journal of European Economic History*, 6 (1977), 365. The 1880s evidence comes from Solar, 'The Great Famine', p. 119.

<sup>18</sup> For a comparative table see P. Lamartine Yates, *Food, Land and Manpower in Western Europe* (London, 1960), p. 197.

<sup>19</sup> Solar and Goossens, 'Agricultural productivity', p. 376.

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see in later chapters was central to nineteenth-century Irish agricultural output until the 1870s or 1880s. Therefore, whilst the recovery from the Famine was swift, that recovery must be seen in the context of her European rivals. In addition, whilst that recovery took a directional turn out of arable into pastoral activity, some would say almost in anticipation of the essentially arable depression which certainly threw British agriculture sideways in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, again her European rivals clearly made a similar, and in some cases a better adjustment.

These European comparisons are not necessarily as illuminating as may at first sight seem to be the case. Certainly the structure of agriculture in Ireland could not be replicated very easily in Britain or on the Continent. The structural division of landlord, tenant and labourer which was in place in England and steadily reinforced as the nineteenth century proceeded was not the same as the landlord, tenant, labourer relationship which existed in Ireland before the Famine. The direct relationship which existed between landlords and tenants in England, no doubt at times with intermediary agents to conduct the actual business, did not have a strong counterpart in Ireland. In that country the intermediate position was held by middlemen, who in law were the tenants of the landlords, but they sub-contracted to under-tenants. Besides, the dominant absentee aspect of Irish landlords, often absentees from the country not just from the neighbourhood, divorced them from their lands and therefore from a very active interest in the running of those lands in a way which was quite unlike the influence of English landlords over their own possessions. In addition, there was no peasant proprietorship to speak of, if by peasant we mean owner-farmer. Whilst the tenants retained a form of ownership of the system of agriculture they were involved in, there was no great Irish ownership of the actual land. Even the ownership of the system was determined largely outside the hands of the tenants due to their obligation to meet ever rising rents. In Ireland it was the production of cash crops and livestock products that paid that rent, but it was the labour-intensive potatoes which were the means of sustenance and subsistence. In general, George Grantham has suggested that the dominance of labour intensive crops marks a phase in the economic development of European agriculture, 'when the demand and supply of cash balances influenced allocational decisions as well as the price level'. He put this down to a capital constraint, partly related to the need to front load the capital requirement in a society where agriculture could not command credit. He did suggest, however, that it was prevalent in isolated districts. Thus in eighteenth-century Cham-



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pagne they grew hemp as the cash crop, but rye as the subsistence crop.<sup>20</sup> In Ireland, where it was more widespread, cereals acted as the cash crop leaving the production of potatoes, a crop which could be grown in great abundance especially with heavy labour input, spade husbandry and constant weeding to keep up yields, as the most common source of sustenance for most Irishmen and their families. This was the case for the small tenants but also for the underclass of Irishmen. The cottier system, whereby farmers provided small plots of land of under 5 acres and for which the cottiers paid high rents and often also provided labour services, was widespread. Finally the 'landless' labourers often rented yet smaller plots under a system known as conacre on short leases. It was the plots of land farmed by the cottiers and labourers which were the main sources of potato production. This system, which was so vastly different from that which prevailed in England, also had little in common with the proprietorial arrangements which existed on the Continent. While much of European agriculture was also small scale, nevertheless it was not operated in the same way. In Ireland, as on much of the Continent, it left the average plot of cultivation so small as to make the generation of an investible surplus very difficult.<sup>21</sup>

The Irish system was not a microcosm of a wider European practice, it was generically pretty well a wholly different practice. The Famine dealt it a savage blow. This is not to suggest that it was an ideal arrangement. Before the Famine the extremes of income distribution between the cottiers, or below them the labourers, and the landlords widened, and therefore the Irish land system perhaps bred within itself its own destruction, except that the Famine occurred and dealt the actual death blow. Thus the external agent represented by the Famine made it necessary to rethink the future of the prevailing system, and in ways which were not replicated elsewhere in Europe. The potato blight which was the source of the Famine was not special to Irish potatoes, but its repercussions were of a different order of magnitude and asked different questions of the agricultural system than were asked in Scotland and Belgium for example. The Irish agricultural system, as described, may sound like a stark representation of social relationships in the countryside, as if it affected everyone in this way. This was not the case, but it did affect most people. Alongside it a commercial sector of large graziers

<sup>20</sup> G. Grantham, 'Capital and agrarian structure in early nineteenth-century France', *Research in Economic History*, Supplement 5 (1989), 139.

<sup>21</sup> There may be a look-alike situation in France, but there it arose from peasant ownership and therefore a large element of personal independence. See O'Brien *et al.*, 'Agriculture', esp. 373–9.

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and large mixed farmers existed with the small tenants, cottiers and labourers.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of the effect on population alone Ireland was a special case. In 1841 the population was more than three times the size of that in Scotland and over one-half the combined population of England and Wales. By 1921 the Scottish population was greater, and the Irish population was barely one-ninth the size of England and Wales combined.<sup>23</sup> In every inter-censal between 1841 and 1911 the Irish population fell whereas in the rest of Western Europe the opposite was the case (see table 1.1). It is thought that the events surrounding the failure of the potato crop on their own killed between 1 to 1.5 million people, added to which in the six years from 1847 to 1852 perhaps as many more Irish people emigrated, principally to North America, but also to England.<sup>24</sup> The slow-down in population in Ireland before the Famine was partly due to mounting emigration, but what the Famine did was to give this trend a mighty boost.<sup>25</sup> Whilst it slowed down thereafter, it did not stop. It continued at high rates – 90,000 per annum in the 1860s, 60,000 in the 1870s, 80,000 in the 1880s, 45,000 in the 1890s, and only 38,000 per annum thereafter down to the Great War – a level of emigration not matched by any other European countries until it was equalled and surpassed by Italy from the 1870s, and then increasingly by other countries towards the end of the century. Russia, Spain and German-speaking central Europe all eventually engaged in heavy out-migration, but all of these countries had a larger base of population to lose. Thus the fact of emigration was not special to Ireland, but its dynamic was.<sup>26</sup> This loss of labour, directly through the Famine but also through subsequent migration, in association with growing international adjustments in the terms of trade between grain and livestock products dictated a faster adaptation towards livestock farming in Ireland than perhaps was the case in much of Western Europe, and this in turn may have become a self-reinforcing process – a decline in labour availability leading to less labour-intensive livestock farming, but a movement in the

<sup>22</sup> See also Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved*, pp. 19–21 on the likely distribution of pre-Famine farms from small to large, and the dominance in terms of numbers of the cottier and labouring class.

<sup>23</sup> See Kennedy *et al.*, *The Economic Development*, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> On pre-Famine emigration issues see Mokyr and Ó Gráda, 'Emigration and poverty', *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics*, pp. 145–53. See also Kennedy *et al.*, *The Economic Development*, pp. 4–5. Set in a long-term and wider European context see S. Pollard, *Peaceful Conquest: The Industrialization of Europe 1760–1970* (Oxford, 1981), p. 152.