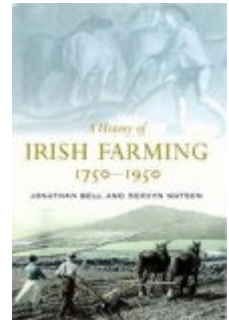


Jonathan Bell and Mervyn Watson. *A History of Irish Farming, 1750-1950*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009. Illustrations. 368 pp. EUR 36.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84682-096-0.



Reviewed by Brian Casey

Published on H-Albion (October, 2011)

Commissioned by Nicholas M. Wolf (New York University)

Farming was a way of life for a majority of people in Ireland until relatively recent times. Therefore, the arrival of Jonathan Bell and Mervyn Watson's *A History of Irish Farming* is a welcome and timely work. Informative and accessible to the specialist and nonspecialist alike, Bell and Watson frame their study by noting the belief of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century contemporaries that Irish agriculture was backward, especially in comparison to farming practices in England. Agriculturalists, the government, and landlords in Ireland went to a great deal of effort to encourage farmers to engage in "improvements" in the belief that such work would lead to an increase in the value of land. Bell and Watson take the contrary view that Irish agriculture was not backward as contemporaries argued, but rather that Irish farmers adapted techniques to their own particular conditions despite agriculturalists' dismay at the crudity of these techniques.

This tension between adaptation and pressure to improve can be traced in a number of

facets of Irish farmers' lives. The authors argue in chapter 1 that the management policies of some landlords supported the nationalist orthodoxy that portrayed them as capricious evictors who did not care for their tenants. It is also acknowledged that such a view has been, for the most part, long since debunked. Rather, some landlords engaged in risky agricultural experimentation with their tenants, often through the auspices of local agricultural societies, in the hope that farmers would embrace "new and improved" techniques. While Bell and Watson argue that methods used by farmers were relatively effective for their survival, they acknowledge that subdivision and rundale were massive threats to the vitality of Irish farming in the nineteenth century. The Famine saw these systems all but disappear, although there were, of course, exceptions: rundale was still practiced in Rathlin Island, off the coast of Antrim, until the early twentieth century, reflecting how stubbornly farmers held onto a method that suited the way they wanted to farm.

Nevertheless, the result was an Irish landscape that today is a relatively modern adaptation.

Housing reflected the extremities of wealth and poverty that existed in Ireland, with landlord residences, or “Big Houses,” making an important contribution to European architectural heritage. These residences dominated the landscape of rural Ireland from the mid-eighteenth century onward. By contrast, while the condition of laborers’ houses varied throughout the country, they rarely resided in salubrious surroundings. Indeed, the ostentatious nature of landlord residences provided a stark juxtaposition with the hovels located outside demesne walls. Writers and travelers, such as Arthur Young, were frequently appalled by the condition of housing in Ireland, with the crudest types, called scalps, built into the sides of hills.

Such living conditions dominated debates on housing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and continued well into the twentieth. Landlord desire for improvements on their estates extended to the material conditions of rural homes, leading some to offer prizes to their tenants in the hope that this would lead to an improvement in housing. Incentives were offered for the best-designed and maintained houses, for example. But these incentives rarely had any impact, and the poverty of lower-class Irish housing was such that very few houses predating 1700 remain intact.

Discussions about the layout and design of farmyards emerged in agricultural literature from the mid-eighteenth century, but it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that such discussions became more frequent, with the focus being on their design and layout. Agriculturalists, like John Sproule, encouraged the use of stalls for feeding livestock in the winter, but despite the presence of such designs in agricultural literature, Bell and Watson argue, on the one hand, that these yards did not serve any pragmatic purpose and were often just for show. On the other hand, the presence

of cultivation ridges, the well-known “lazy beds,” on the Irish landscape was a reflection of the ingenuity of Irish farmers and perhaps the most infamous aspect of cultivation until the Famine. While such methods were labor intensive, leading contemporaries to complain that their use reflected the backwardness of Irish agriculture, they were successful in reclaiming marginal land when combined with drainage schemes. However, there was a lack of drainage works on farms in Ireland, a problem that bedeviled farmers and landlords alike. Some farmers did engage in small-scale schemes, mostly to provide surface drainage.

With improvements in the drainage of land, there was much greater improvement and standardization of ploughs. Methods of ploughing improved in the nineteenth century, and in fact horse-drawn ploughs were used on many farms until the 1950s, when tractors became more widespread. Approaches and methods of tilling soil made the most significant advances during the timeframe covered in this work, though agriculturalists were of the opinion that tenants did not adequately appreciate spade husbandry. The authors discuss the evolution of both tillage and the implements used in this craft, such as the variety of spades used (including the most common, the loy). Contemporary observers had varying ideas about the efficiency of Irish spades and the digging techniques used. It was not until 1850 that a standardized spade was introduced which was embraced with enthusiasm by farmers. This introduction was coupled with an attempt at standardizing digging techniques through the organization of competitions, and the authors draw attention to the usefulness of digging in employing extra laborers during the Famine as a form of relief in order to ease pressure on workhouses.

After exploring material conditions and husbandry, a transition is made in chapter 8 to take up the special subject of the potato in Ireland. First referenced in the historical record as early as 1606, the potato became the staple of the Irish

diet because of the high yields it could produce on even marginal lands; an adult consumed up to eight pounds a day in the decades prior to the Famine. Debates ensued regarding the spacing required when planting seed potatoes and methods varied across the country. From the early nineteenth century, agricultural societies promoted the use of drill as the most beneficial method of growing the crop, although the use of lazy beds still persisted in many parts of the country. The proper storage of potatoes was also discussed by agriculturalists, as they took a keen interest in the construction of pits used for their storage. The devastation caused by the Famine and other catastrophes in the nineteenth century saw agriculturalists emphasizing the importance of spraying potatoes with chemicals in order to prevent the spread of disease, a practice that became standard on farms by the end of the nineteenth century.

Turning to the role of animals, Bell and Watson note that the Middle Ages saw horses supplant oxen as the draught animal of choice on farms. In the modern period, breeding was often carried out to suit local needs, and the likes of the Connemara and Cushendall ponies were hardy, agile animals, usually found in marginal, mountainous areas. The 1840s saw attempts being made to improve the quality of cattle on Irish farms, and with records of animals now being kept, evidence of the reliance on two breeds in particular emerges: the Kerry and Dexter varieties. Both were considered to be excellent milkers and attempts were made to separate them into distinct breeds. Leading landed families, such as the Fitzgeralds of Carton, began to champion the breeding of Kerry cattle in particular. Cattle farming took place in two distinct regions--the West and the midlands, and the South--for two different purposes. Cattle were fattened in the former region, while the South dominated the production of butter and dairying products--first on the farm itself as the preserve of women, and later in large-scale creameries. Sheep, too, were subject to at-

tempts to standardize breeding starting in the late eighteenth century. By the late nineteenth century, Kerry Hill and Roscommon sheep became the most successful breeds. Pigs, meanwhile, were known as "the gentleman who pays the rent" and were especially associated with small farmers. Profitable, too, were geese, as their feathers were quite valuable. Finally, the second half of the nineteenth century saw a greater number of poultry being exported (eighteen million by 1900), thus reflecting their value for small farmers.

The study winds down by exploring the cultivation of grain in Ireland. One problem faced by farmers in harvesting this crop was the amount that was lost because it was harvested late and in an inefficient and labor-intensive manner. An improved design in scythes in the nineteenth century did ameliorate the situation, although the need to sharpen every ten minutes interrupted any workflow that may have been achieved. Late harvesting also meant that it was frequently too thick to cut with scythes. In Britain, real change emerged in the late eighteenth century in the form of reaping machines, and by the 1850s these had evolved into combined reaping-and-mowing machines; forty thousand such machines harvested 25 percent of the total crop by 1871. Despite their success in Britain, the use of such machines was treated with caution in Ireland due to their cost effectiveness. They were best utilized on a large scale. Even after harvesting, 10 to 20 percent of grain was lost due to inadequate storage, with more lost while threshing took place--as it was a cash crop, threshing happened on a very rapid basis in order to get it to the market immediately. This, in turn, could cause damage to the crop. Bell and Watson conclude that the methods of threshing, winnowing, and storing all depended on how quickly the farmer wanted the crop, what access he had to technology, and how he utilized the labor that was available.

While the authors apologize for an Ulster bias in the book, they still bring in sufficient examples

from across the country to render such an apology unnecessary. This work is a vital compendium for students of rural Irish history from 1750 until 1950, and the clear and succinct explanations of the practices and techniques of Irish farming make it easier to understand the very technical language. It challenges widely held assumptions that Irish farmers were lazy and indolent, instead arguing that they were only interested in subsistence. The lack of tenant-right on many estates would have been a shackle that would have dissuaded many farmers from carrying out substantial improvements, as landlords exerted control over their tenants due to a lack of leasing arrangements on many estates. Chapters on fairs and agricultural societies would have been welcome additions to this volume, while the role played by agricultural societies in attempting to educate farmers in “progressive” agricultural techniques has yet to be fully explored in Irish historiography. However, this is just a minor quibble in what is indeed a fine work.

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Citation: Brian Casey. Review of Jonathan Bell and Mervyn Watson. *A History of Irish Farming, 1750-1950*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. October, 2011.

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