

CONACRE: A SYSTEM OF LAND RENTAL IN PRE-FAMINE IRELAND

by James R. Reilly, CGRS

The period between the end of the Napoleonic War in 1815 and the start of the Great Famine in 1845 was a time of considerable change in rural Ireland. Every social class - landlords, large and small tenant farmers, and especially a growing class of landless workers - was affected in one way or another. The landless suffered most in terms of wages, employment and general living conditions.

Basically, there were two major categories of rural workers - cottiers and landless laborers. The most fortunate laborers had steady work with one employer, but the great majority worked irregularly. As "bound" workers the cottiers received a cabin and a plot of land on which to raise potatoes and graze a cow in return for a stipulated number of days' service in the field or at the looms of their employers. They had no leases and rarely handled cash; their employers, primarily tenant farmers, merely deducted their wages from the amount of rent owed. There was no reason for the farmer and the conacre holder to keep records. Indeed, both parties had reason to keep their arrangement as covert as possible, lest a landlord or his agent discover just how much the tenant farmer's holding was really worth per year and increase his rent. Although their wages were low, only a few pence a day, their rents were normally high, perhaps £2 per year for a cabin and potato garden. However, the less fortunate "free" workers, the landless laborers, sought employment from any source available, received cash for their labor, but were obliged to purchase provisions or rent land for subsistence on the open market.

In nineteenth century Ireland conacre was the name given to the system whereby land was let not for a number of years, but rather for a single season, usually one year. The land was let for a specific purpose - the taking of a single crop of potatoes, corn or grazing. It was a form of subletting used by landowners and farmers to rent to those who had insufficient or no land of their own to secure the basic food supply needed for their families to survive. Designating all holders of less than five acres as being cottiers or laborers, this class comprised between thirty and thirty-five percent of the total number of tenants in rural areas. Conacre was also used by small farmers as a means of wage payment in lieu of cash and by resident landlords as a source for a cheap labor force.

It was claimed that cottiers actually preferred to be paid in conacre, since they could get it at a more reasonable price from their employers than if they had to bid competitively for it. The land, known as "spade-land" or "potato-ground", was not a profit-making venture by the landlord but rather a means of providing his estate laborers with food. The particular area of the estate under conacre was changed from year to year to avoid soil exhaustion, a practice worth remembering when searching parish registers and civil registrar districts.

Just as labor was substituted for money payment of rent, so too was conacre substituted for money payment of labor. Occasionally, the priorities were reserved; instead of working in order to gain potato-ground, laborers sometimes took potato-ground in order to be given work. The rate per acre for conacre land varied from £4 to £12 depending upon competition and demand for land among the cottiers and laborers. In the great majority of cases, however, the rate was £6 to £8. Actual money

was seldom involved in payment. In some cases, the competition for conacre had the effect of driving up the rent per acre to the point where it was greater than the value per acre of the crop grown.

The only advantage according to some of the cottiers and laborers themselves was that, given a good crop, they grew the potatoes cheaper than if they had to purchase them in a market. If conacre potatoes were regarded as being cheaper, it was because the purchase of market potatoes was impossible without cash, and those who lacked cash were forced to get credit at 25% interest from the local money lender.

The disadvantages of conacre were considerable. Not only did the renter risk losing all through crop failure, but he also risked being exploited and defrauded by the farmer. Even when nominally high wages were paid, the price of conacre rose accordingly depriving the cottier or laborer of any profit he might otherwise have made and preventing him from making any provision for the future. Conacre had a detrimental effect upon the soil; those who took conacre were those generally least in a position to properly tend the land, in many cases the land was exhausted through over-cropping and lack of fertilization. The only people who profited were the farmers whose interest in the land was not the well-being of the soil but making profit from renting conacre to the landless cottiers and laborers. Just as they generally charged higher rents for cabins and paid lower wages for labor, various witnesses in contemporary reports and inquiries claim that farmers exploited the demand for conacre to a far greater extent than did the much vilified gentry and aristocracy.

The relationship between the conacre-taker and farmer was certainly a source of friction. Since the farmer himself was a tenant, failure to pay his own rent was occasionally followed by "distrain", that is, the seizure of his possessions and provisions until he paid his rent or even the same of these items for the payment of the delinquent rent. If his farm was distrained, the conacre produce was liable to be seized as rent by the landlord, even though the cottier or laborer might have already paid the farmer. The conacre holder was caught in the middle and faced ruin.

Further cause for strained relationships stemmed from an 1840 Court of Common Pleas ruling that a landlord-tenant relationship did not exist between the farmer and conacre holders; therefore, the farmer did not have legal recourse against the conacre holder for failure to pay his rent. As a consequence farmers demanded pre-payment or rent or leaving the crop in the farmer's hands until payment was made. Even in the mid 1830' conacre holders in many parts of the country were allowed to dig their potatoes only as they paid for them; this day-to-day existence and the fact that their conacre produce could be distrained caused great uncertainty.

Conacre hindered a solution to one of the chief problems of the period - how to deal with an entire social class which had lost its economic reason for existence. The "idleness of the Irish peasants", which the English considered proverbial, was not due to choice; chronic unemployment lay at the base of the poverty and misery of agricultural laborers. The dependence on a few months' earnings for a year's sustenance was fraught with risk - the illness, death or injury of the laboring male could mean starvation for the family. Contributing to this problem was the absenteeism of the landlords based in England who not only rackrented their tenantry

but allowed the farmers to exploit the cottiers and laborers, the landed to exploit the landless.

It is easy to understand why the famine took such a terrible toll of the cottier-laborer class when it struck in 1845.

©All rights reserved