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Introduction

Lady Morgan, Regency society hostess and author of several dull novels, maintained in *O'Donnell* (1814) that fiction was 'the best history of nations', because it 'exhibited a mirror of the times in which it is composed: reflecting morals, manners, peculiarities of manner and prevalence of custom' (Dunne, 1987: 133). The theme is an old and somewhat hackneyed one. Among economic historians, Alexander Gerschenkron, the historian of Russian economic backwardness, has acted upon this assumption, wading through dull Soviet novels for their 'anthropological value', for 'the light (they) throw upon various aspects of everyday life' (Gerschenkron, 1968: 318). *Faute de mieux*, Gerschenkron believes that works of fiction may be used, inter alia, 'to reveal the imperfections of Soviet industrialization'. Moses Finley, the eminent classical historian, broached the same theme (Finley, 1986). The road has been travelled by Irish historians too; indeed one of their most recent conferences was devoted to the 'Writer as Witness: Literature as Historical Evidence' (Dunne, 1987), and one of the most interesting current controversies in Irish historiography concerns the issue of what inferences are to be drawn from early modern Gaelic bardic writings (e.g. Ó Buachalla, 1983).

A lecture on the theme by Oliver MacDonagh, later published as 'The Nineteenth Century Novel and Irish Social History', proposed the novel as historical evidence (MacDonagh, 1970). MacDonagh began by arguing that Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* 'illuminates the effect of the wind of change blowing across the British Isles in the late eighteenth century, and in particular the effect of the revolutionary disorders of the 1790s, upon the Irish landowning classes' (MacDonagh, 1970: 5). And so on through four other novels. My aim here is to use the theme taken up by MacDonagh and others as a way of organizing some reflections upon the findings of recent work – not just my own – in Irish economic and social history. But this paper is also about tensions between such literary sources and quantitative sources in Irish economic history.

Brian Merriman and Pre-famine Demography

The Munster poet-schoolteacher Brian Merriman remains an enigma, but *Cúirt an Mheánoiche* or *The Midnight Court*, the poem he wrote c.1780, was widely recited, copied in manuscript, and translated in the period before the Great Famine. It is a somewhat ribald poem, but the fact that Frank O'Connor's lively translation (1945 (1959)) was banned by the Irish censor tells a great deal about the cultural transformation that had occurred in Ireland since the Famine. Still, O'Connor is no longer banned, and Merriman has a society to preserve his memory.

As far as population history goes, eighteenth-century Ireland is still in many respects a 'hidden Ireland'. *The Midnight Court* is a tempting source; but at its centre is the implication that the Irish, at least Irish males, were reluctant to marry, and this is difficult to square with the results of recent research, which stresses dramatic population growth through high nuptiality (Walsh 1969).

Kevin O'Neill (1984) has attempted the reconciliation, by proposing that Merriman's poem is best understood as a reflection of the contrast between Irish farmers and labourers in their attitudes to marriage and property. O'Neill draws on his own work about pre-famine rural Cavan, which has farmers marrying cautiously and late, and labourers marrying young and for love (O'Neill, 1985). O'Neill thinks that the savage attack on reluctant grooms in the *Midnight Court*, where a group of young women bring the menfolk to book for reluctance to marry, is an attack on the arranged marriages of the farming class. O'Neill is probably right about this class contrast in marriage age, but his interpretation of Merriman is unconvincing. The problem is simple: O'Neill is a victim of some looseness in Frank O'Connor's generally excellent translation of the Irish original. The following passage is crucial:

*Is minic do chimse righinsigh bhaotha,
Ag tuitim le tíos is bímse baoch dóigh.
Gofa le mná do ló agus d'oíche
Ag cosnamh a gcáil 's ar scáth a ngníomhartha,
Ag seasamh 'na bhfeighnil 's a bhfeidhm go fáлта,
A n-ainm ar chloinn is bheinnse sásta.*

O'Connor translates thus:

*There are poor men working in rain and sleet,
Out of their minds with the troubles they meet,
But, men in name and deed according,
They quarry their women night and morning –
A fine traditional consolation!
And these I would keep in circulation.*

The trouble is that O'Neill makes much of these lines; he depicts the men described here in O'Connor's translation – the only males to escape the lash of the Court lightly – as 'the poor, not yet contaminated by the

advance of materialistic English culture'. But Liam Ó Murchú, the latest editor of *The Court*, provides a literal translation, which carries quite a different message (1982, ed):

I often notice foolish, dawdling fellows (eventually) settling down to domesticity, tied to wives night and day, protecting their (the wives') reputations and managing on their (wives') escapades, caring for them, though weak in ability. Once they give their names to a family I am happy.

292 In other words, Merriman's Court of female judges spares those cuckolded men who gave a cloak of respectability to their wives' extra-marital offspring, and indeed claim the credit for themselves. O'Neill might have taken the hint from O'Connor's own tongue-in-cheek admission that 'the best authorities hold that (the translation) is almost entirely my own work' (O'Connor, 1959: xiv).

The irony is that the population of County Clare, where the Court sat, and where Merriman lived for much of his life, was rising faster around this time than ever since. The first successful Irish census was not taken until 1821, but an informed guess at population growth in Clare in Merriman's time would be about two per cent. This is an extraordinarily high rate of growth by contemporary European standards, and would have required high nuptiality and high fertility. The historian basing his or her case on Merriman would have no inkling of this. It may well be, as Seán Ó Tuama (1984) has surmised, that Merriman, who was apparently well into his forties when he married, was merely giving a veiled hint of his personal predicament.

Other literary, but documentary rather than fictional, sources in the pre-famine period err, if anything, in the opposite direction, i.e. they give the impression that the Irish married earlier than they really did. Travellers' accounts of the precocious and irresponsible marrying habits of the Irish in the pre-famine era are legion, and are quoted in plenty in the classic of Irish demographic history Kenneth Connell's *The Population of Ireland 1750-1845*. They must be handled carefully too, because they reflect what seemed the typical or the modal age at marriage, rather than the statistical mean. The point is not new in other contexts.

Merriman also refers to contraception. First, explicitly:

*Leis sin ná hiarrsa a riagain réaltach
Meilleadh myriad le riail gan éifeacht,
Scaoil a chodladh gan chochall gan chuibhreach
Síol an bhodaigh 's an mhogallshuill mhaiteach,
Scaoil fá chéile de réir nádúra
An siolbach séad is an braon lábúrtha.*

Frank O'Connor's translation is as follows:

*Down with marriage it's out of date,
It exhausts the stock and cripples the state.*

*The priest has failed with whip and blinkers
Now give a chance to Tom the Tinker.
And mix and mash in Nature's plan
The tinker and the gentleman!*

Here again Frank O'Connor gets it wrong, but different editors of *An Chúirt* agree that 'cochall' most likely means a contraceptive sheath (Ó Murchu, 1982: 113). Merriman's other reference is circumstantial:

*Ach bheirim don phláigh í, lá mar chinn í,
Alegaithe láimh le Gáras, sínte
Caite ar an ród gan orlach fúithi
Ag gramaisc na móna ar bhóithribh Dhúire.
M'íongantas ann ós cheann moi chéille
– Is crithim go fannle scanradh an scéil seo –
Ise bheith seang nuair shantaigh féin é!
Is mór na grásta é rá ni mbriathra:
Nóimint spáis níor ghá le hiarraidh
Ó léadh ar bord dí os chomair na gcoinnle
An tEgo Vos a d'ordaigh Íosa
Gur shéid sí lucht go bleacht ina cíochaibh
Acht naoi mí beacht is seachtmhain chinnte!*

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This time Frank O'Connor's translation is apt:

*I found her myself on the public road,
On the naked earth with a bare backside
And a Garus turfcutter astride!
Is it any wonder my heart is failing,
That I feel the end of the world is nearing,
When, ploughed and sown to all men's knowledge,
She can manage the child to arrive with marriage,
And even then, put to the pinch,
Begrudges Charity an inch;
For counting from the final prayer
With the candles quenched and altar bare,
To the day when her offspring takes to the air
Is a full nine months with a week to spare?*

Is this a hint that contraception was practised in pre-famine Ireland? I doubt it very much, for a number of reasons. First what Kenneth Connell (1950) calls *argumentum ex silentio*: *An Chúirt* is very much the exception that tests the rule. Second, the notion that the Irish, before the Famine as well as after, were 'well-behaved' sexually (without being puritanical about it) is supported by the low levels of illegitimacy and bridal pregnancy produced by the study of old parish registers. Third, as already noted, fertility was high in pre-famine Ireland, too high to allow contraception much of a role.

In sum, here is one well-known literary source that must be treated

with care. The historical demographer must beware of Merriman as support for this or that pet theory.

The Great Famine

294 The Great Famine was the most important event in nineteenth-century Irish history. Though people's first reaction to the potato blight was incomprehension and surprise, it was natural for commentators in the wake of the Famine to look for warning-signs of what was to come in pre-famine trends. In an age dominated by the ghost of Malthus, the Famine quickly came to be seen as something predictable, indeed inevitable. Whence the tendency to look for pre-famine famines of increasing severity and incidence in the run-up to the Famine. Now I have argued elsewhere (Ó Gráda, 1983; 1989) that these famines have been overdone by historians. I have drawn attention to the contrast between the account of William Wilde in the census of 1851, where he infers that serious famines were endemic, and the account of the same Wilde in 1841 where he puts starvation deaths in the 1830s as scarcely over one hundred, and considers famine fevers not worth separate discussion. Everybody in Ireland was traumatized by the Famine: and Wilde's 1851 account was not immune. Perhaps this is a good place to make a point about Anthony Trollope's Irish novels as a historical source. Trollope, remember, spent many years in Ireland, working for the post-office, and it was while there that he first met success as a creative writer. Oliver MacDonagh (1970: 9) invokes him, insisting that Trollope's knowledge and experience make him 'a uniquely valuable interpreter of mid-nineteenth century Ireland'. But MacDonagh points to what seems to him a glaring paradox in Trollope's canvas (MacDonagh, 1970: 9):

There is no catastrophe, and little horror, in Trollope's Ireland. In terms of conventional Irish historiography, it is all rather like an account of France between 1789 and 1799 with scarcely a mention of the revolution or the Directory.

Now MacDonagh is inclined to attribute this to 'characteristic weaknesses of the author, (who) always tended to universalize his English experience'. The 'always' is unfair, because what is remarkable in Trollope's Irish writings is the contrast between *Kellys* and the *O'Kellys*, written before the Famine, and *Castle Richmond*, written after it. The contrast is easier to reconcile in recent Irish historiography than in terms of the 'traditional' historiography mentioned by MacDonagh. Recent writing by myself (1984) and by Peter Solar (1987) emphasizes the sheer statistical improbability of something like the Famine. Thus Trollope must not be blamed for the lack of foreboding in *The Kellys and the O'Kellys*. I believe that Trollope's pre-famine impressions are reliable, although MacDonagh, fed on a more traditional view, must make excuses for him. The same point can be made about a lesser writer, but

still the best-known Irish writer of the pre-famine years, William Carleton. Again the difference between Carleton's *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, written during the 1830s, and his *Black Prophet*, written at the height of the Great Famine, is remarkable. The *Traits and Stories* is full of fun, but the later work, harkening back to an almost-forgotten famine in Carleton's youth, highlights problems that passed almost unnoticed in his earlier work.

The Rural Moneylender

Nobody likes moneylenders, except perhaps some economists. Since Irish moneylenders in bygone days typically left no records, novels are a tempting source. In Ireland, gombeenmen, as they were known, are remembered chiefly from the bad experiences of some who fell foul of them, and the high rates of interest they charged. But how high? Were the rates the product of risk or monopoly power? I reproduce below some passages from William Carleton's *Black Prophet* and Liam O'Flaherty's *House of Gold*. First Carleton:

There is to be found in Ireland, and, we presume, in all other countries, a class of hardened wretches, who look forward to a period of dearth as one of great gain and advantage, and who contrive, by exercising the most heartless and diabolical principles, to make the sickness, famine, and general desolation which scourge their fellow creatures, so many sources of successful extortion and rapacity, and consequently of gain to themselves.

Carleton evokes how the gombeenman, Darby Skinadre, confronts his customers. To one Jemmy Duggan, he pleas:

I don't doubt your honesty, Jemmy; but Jemmy, if I sell my meal to a man that can pay and won't, or if I sell my meal to a man that would pay and can't, by which do I lose most? There it is, Jemmy – think o'that now. Six in a family, you say?

With Harry Hackett it is much the same:

I'm ruined all out – smashed down, an' broke house an' foot; there's the Slevins that wint to America, an' I lost more than thirty pounds by them.

To Molly Cassidy, Skinadre confides that 'every one's disappointment falls upon me, till they have me a'most out of house an' home'.

Liam O'Flaherty, best-known for *The Informer*, has Ramon Mor Costello in his *House of Gold*. Ramon Mor was based on a real-life character, Martin McDonagh, Galway merchant and member of parliament for the government party in the 1920s. Yet O'Flaherty's portrait mirrors Carleton's, even if Ramon Mor's influence and wealth exceeded that of Carleton's mealmonger:

He had a curious inhuman expression (in) his eyes . . . (His) mother's mouth was the living symbol of avarice.

'Ramon Mor is the cause of it, he has ruined the country. My curse on him'. 'God forgive you' said the old woman, 'there's many a house would be without flour only for him. And isn't he one of ourselves, when all is said and done?'

'That island of Inismuimhneach', he shouted, 'gave birth to the worst scoundrel that ever set foot in the town of Barra. Ramon Mor's father, Michael the Peddler'.

'Stop now', said the old woman, 'respect the dead'. 'The Peddler . . . came here as a tea man after he had come back from the sea, as an agent for an English tea company. It was he brought tea into the place first'.

'Give no rebate. Mind. To nobody. Stand no nonsense. Go by the accounts'.

'It was I kept the whole country from starvation, feeding them on credit in the bad times. Now, when things are different they have ideas in their heads, they turn on me and call me a grabber and a tyrant'.

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Note that while both Carleton and O'Flaherty's gombeenmen articulate the standard economist's apologia for moneylenders, neither has any sympathy for it. What of their accounts as historical 'witness'? I think they suffer from the same weakness as some folklore evidence. As character-sketches and renditions of the actions that took place, and indeed as articulations of populist attitudes, they are fine. But they tend to impose anachronistic or utopian criteria of justice and efficiency on their evidence, and have a poor sense of economic or indeed political constraints.

In the case of the gombeenman, what is clear from scraps of direct evidence is that while some of them could and definitely did exploit, nevertheless over time their power declined considerably, and the rate of interest they could exact dropped. Liam Kennedy's study of the gap between the 'short' and 'long' or cash and credit prices charged by shopkeepers in the 'congested districts' in the west of Ireland in the 1890s is important here. Kennedy's analysis of the implicit rates charged suggests that a quarter charged ten per cent or less and one-half of the total less than fifteen per cent. Now at a time when government consols yielded about three per cent, it is unfortunate that anyone should have been charged fifteen per cent. but this is a far cry from the fifty or hundred per cent which the gombeenmen were accused of, or which are the norm in underdeveloped economies today. Another piece of evidence from the congested districts implies that excessive charges, in the economist's sense, were the exception: the little banks set up by idealists in the cooperative movement in the west in the 1890s and 1900s, against shopkeeper opposition of course, found that they could not compete with

these same shopkeepers without government subsidy. When that subsidy was withdrawn in 1907 for party-political reasons, most of them went under. Perhaps what the literary accounts lack is the sense that there are impersonal forces at work shaping the environment in which the likes of Skinadre and Ramon Mor worked, and their economic power. Yet there is something to be learned from the portraits of Darby Skinadre and Ramon Mor.

Wills and Inheritance

Here is a topic that features a great deal in the work of the Irish literary renaissance. The argument is that the farm succession regime generated by the great famine was a reflection of the malthusian lessons learned: subdivision through partible inheritance gave way to impartible inheritance. The new system reduced population pressure, but at a cost: one privileged son got all, and the rest were disinherited, many of them 'exiled' in Britain or America. Such a system might be expected to generate rivalries and tensions. Certainly, the literary sources suggest this. Here I dwell on just a few.

The first is a play called *Birthright*, a once-popular but almost forgotten piece by Cork playwright, T.C. Murray. It is set in the countryside west of Macroom around the turn of the century. The story-line is simple. Farmer Bat Morrissey has decided to hand his farm over to the elder of his two sons. The younger, more interested in farming but selected for the emigrant ship by his parents, feels slighted and the 'hundred or more distinctions' made between him and his brother ultimately prove too much, and the action ends in fratricide.

Some of the same tensions spurs on Sean O'Faolain's *A Nest of Simple Folk*. When Judith O'Donnell in the end prevails on her dying husband to leave the best land to their youngest son, there are anguished protests from the others. 'Was that free farm', urged the family lawyer on their behalf, 'to go over the heads of his sisters and six brothers to their last child who has never done a stroke of work on the land?' The will breeds resentments that sustain the plot (O'Faolain, 1933)

In Patrick Kavanagh's *Great Hunger*, by way of contrast, it is the loss of sons who must stay at home to care for ageing parents that is being lamented:

*Maguire was faithful unto death
He stayed with his mother till she died
At the age of ninety-one.
Wife and mother in one
She stayed too long
When she died
The knuckle bones were cutting
The skin of her son's backside
And he was sixty-five*

Either way, the theme is the pervasiveness of intrafamilial tension, actual or repressed, genuine grievances or perceived wrongs. These literary sources seem to underline the view that in post-famine rural Ireland inequality begins in the family. They are supported in the historical work of Kenneth Connell on post-famine Ireland, and to some extent in the anthropological work of Conrad Arensberg. Connell juxtaposes a poor but egalitarian pre-famine Ireland with a dourer, more prosperous and inegalitarian post-famine Ireland. And though Arensberg's account of rural Ireland in the 1920s is not of a place riven by conflict, he nevertheless implies that those sons 'who must travel' were hard done by compared to the brother who stays at home (the different treatment of male and female children is an important issue, but cannot be discussed here).

Here, my own research on farmers' wills and probate records suggests that the facts were rather different. It tells a story of parents, by and large, trying hard, if in despotic fashion, to do well by all their children. Not all succeeded, of course, and some had no desire to do so. But I am discussing norms. In general, only children who had emigrated were left out of the reckoning in wills, and this is presumably because they were considered the 'lucky' ones, a belief supported by the huge flow of remittances from them to those who stayed at home. Quite often, the land left to the 'heir', was worth less, when the encumbrances on it were taken into account, than the sums and dowries left to their 'dis-inherited' siblings. The literary accounts, rather misleadingly in my view, equate impartible inheritance with a very unfair succession regime. The reality was by no means idyllic, but it was less riven by conflict and injustice than the literary sources (and some historians' accounts, notably Kenneth Connell's) imply. The point, of course, is that a fine play like *Birchright* or an epic poem like Kavanagh's *Great Hunger*, by telling only part of the truth, are distorting lenses through which to discover general patterns. In this case fact is truly duller than fiction.

Conclusion

In sum, then, Brian Merriman tells us very little about the most obvious things, though the *Midnight Court* may well be quarried for deeper, hidden meanings. The contrasts between the pre- and post-famine works of Trollope and Carleton seem to be telling us something, but in fact they only confirm or, better, support hypotheses that were developed independently. The evidence of repetitive wills and dull probate evidence is a better guide to how inheritance worked than poetry.

I certainly do not mean to end up by suggesting that quantification is the essence of history, still less that economic historians cannot benefit greatly from exposure to literary sources. Not only does fiction have obvious uses for cultural and intellectual historians, but the best

economic historians have always known how to use it effectively, if only to dramatize a point established by other means. Furthermore, if Merriman, Murray and the others mislead on some central points, willy nilly, they provide (like Trollope) also impressions and asides which are useful to the historian. Finally, it could be argued that some of the most profound insights about the past can be discovered precisely in the discrepancies between the bulky, repetitive evidence gathered by social and economic historians, and the fictions of poets and novelists.

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Answering questions concerning causation in economic history is always controversial. It is not possible to prove anything beyond reasonable doubt. All we can do is to employ a priori reasoning to formulate and test hypotheses and then try our best to test these hypotheses. Both parts of this procedure invite criticism. First, the hypotheses to be tested have to be derived either from some kind of deductive economic reasoning (neoclassical or other), or from the opinions and judgements of contemporaries. Common types of primary sources include works of literature, historical documents, original philosophical writings, and religious texts. Read preview Overview. Famines during the 'Little Ice Age' (1300-1800).