



Title	Seasonal migration and post-famine adjustment in the West of Ireland
Authors(s)	Ó Gráda, Cormac
Publication date	1973
Publication information	Ó Gráda, Cormac. "Seasonal Migration and Post-Famine Adjustment in the West of Ireland." St Patrick's College, Dublin, 1973.
Publisher	St Patrick's College, Dublin
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/353

Downloaded 2026-05-01 19:13:29

The UCD community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters! (@ucd_oa)



© Some rights reserved. For more information

Seasonal Migration and Post-Famine Adjustment in the West of Ireland*

CORMAC Ó GRÁDA
(University College, Dublin)

I

During the past decade, researchers in Irish historical demography, notably nineteenth-century demography, have been making substantial progress. S. H. Cousens and B. M. Walsh have dealt with post-Famine trends in population, and have had much to say that is new and stimulating. In a number of recent articles they have drawn attention to, and sought reasons for, the disparities between demographic patterns in the east and the west of Ireland.¹ Broadly speaking, for about thirty years after the Famine, emigration rates from the poorer west were of the same order as those from the east, while the rate of natural increase was greater. Indeed, in some remote areas, the population level attained in 1841 had been surpassed in 1871. In Cousens' useful terminology, pre-Famine conditions persisted in the west; the median size of holding in some baronies, for example, was much smaller in the 1870s than when statistics first became available in 1847. The west remained to a considerable extent, a potato economy, dependence on the root being almost as great as in the pre-Famine years. Cousens and Walsh were obviously—and rightly so—fascinated by the statistical picture. Cousens has attempted to explain, in a number of ways, why initial post-Famine adjustments were so different in the east and the west, and Walsh has been concerned with the breakdown of the traditional structure in the west from the 1870s onwards. The present paper does not question the validity of the explanations offered by them, but it does seek to emphasize the importance of one neglected

* Ba mhaith liom mo bhfuochas a ghabháil le L. M. Cullen, J. J. Lee, B. Walsh, Pádraig Ó Snodaigh, Pól Ó Duibhir, agus le cairde eile. Táim buíoch, leis, do Sheán Ó Súilleabháin sa Chóimisiún Béaloideasa. Ar ndóigh, mise tá ciontach in aon bhotún atá fós san alt.

¹ S. H. Cousens, 'Emigration and demographic change in Ireland 1851-1861', *Economic History Review* 19 (Dec. 1961); S. H. Cousens, 'The regional variations in population changes in Ireland, 1861-1881', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 22 (Dec. 1964); B. M. Walsh, 'A perspective on Irish population patterns', *Eire-Ireland* 4 (Autumn 1969); B. M. Walsh, 'Marriage rates and population pressure in Ireland, 1871 and 1911', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 28 (April 1970).

factor, namely, seasonal migration. My contention is that, in overlooking migration, Cousens and Walsh probably tended to stress some other factors which may really have been of only secondary importance.

II

Seasonal migration to England and Scotland, as well as movement within the country itself, had long been a feature of Irish rural life. References to it, both in prose and in verse, go back as far as the eighteenth century, and it may well be that earlier writers, such as Barbara Kerr,² underestimated its extent in that century. While there is no way of knowing how many thousands travelled abroad for harvest work as early as this, some contemporary reports indicate that the flow was substantial. Bishop Berkeley of Cloyne, the philosopher, expressed concern in his *Querist* (1735) about the numbers of harvest workers crossing the Irish Sea for work each year:³

525. Whether it not be a custom for some thousands of Frenchmen to go about the beginning of March into Spain, and having tilled the lands and gathered the harvest of Spain, to return home with money in their pockets about the end of November?

526. Whether of late years our Irish labourers do not carry on the same business in England to the great discontent of many there? But whether we have not much more reason than the people of England to be displeased at this commerce?

527. Whether, notwithstanding the case supposed to be brought into it, any nation is, in truth, a gainer by such commerce?

528. Whether the industry of our people employed in foreign lands, while our own are left uncultivated, be not a great loss to the country?

529. Whether it would not be better for us, if, instead of sending our men abroad, we could draw men from the neighbouring countries to cultivate our own?

530. Whether, nevertheless, we are not apt to think the money imported by our own labourers to be so much clear gain to this country; but whether a little reflexion and a little political arithmetic may not show us our mistake?

The 1730s were years of great hardship in Ireland, and perhaps it is not so surprising to hear of cottiers travelling afar to make ends meet. Still, the substantial movement which Berkeley seems to have

² B. M. Kerr, 'Irish seasonal migration to Great Britain, 1800-1838', *Irish Historical Studies* 3 (1942-3).

³ The *Querist*, Queries 525-30, reprinted in J. Johnston, *The Querist in historical perspective* (Dundalk 1970).

observed at the time may have stemmed from an older practice, and there is evidence to show that it continued to flourish later in the century. In a work which purports to describe social conditions in Ireland before the Union of 1800, Robert Bell dealt at length with migrant labourers. He is worth quoting because he casts a good deal of light on the conditions endured by the migrants at the time:

There was a third description of Irish peasant, scarcely differing from the other two in any other circumstance than that of their emigrating to some part of Ireland or England where wages comparatively large were given for labour. . . . Those itinerant labourers lived for the most part in the most mountainous and uncultivated parts of the interior of Ireland. . . . The meagre scrap of land which each of them occupied was hardly sufficient to afford them a bare subsistence throughout the year. If the whole of the produce, after deducting a tenth for the use of the established clergy, were sold, it would fetched little more than the rent that was paid for it. The only recourse, therefore, which they had for the payment of their rent, was that of travelling to some distant place where by hard labour, and harder economy, they generally made up what was wanting to satisfy the demands of their landlords. The holds of the packets sailing from Dublin to Parkgate and to Liverpool might, at this season, be seen crowded with poor wretches, who, after paying a half-crown for their passage, had scarcely as much more money remaining to defray the expenses of their journey to the counties situated near the metropolis. This journey they generally performed barefooted, because they were obliged to spare their shoes for certain kinds of work that could not be performed without them.⁴

Mentions of this custom of seasonal migration becomes more frequent in the next century but estimates of the extent of the flow to Britain, not to mention the internal movements, remain rather conjectural for the pre-1841 period. The Mendicity Report of 1816 observed that there were 'probably five thousand more Irish in London in the latter end of June than there had been five weeks before'.⁵ We know from this report, and on the authority of Dorothy George,⁶ that the great majority of these arrivals did not remain in London, but waited there for harvesting to begin in the Home Counties. The migrants became far more numerous in the decades

⁴ R. Bell, *A description of the conditions and manners of the peasantry of Ireland* . . . (London 1804) 10-12.

⁵ *Report from the Committee on the State of Mendicity in the Metropolis*, p. 7, 1815, v.

⁶ D. George, *London life in the eighteenth century* (Harmondsworth 1966) 121.

following Waterloo. Thus, the Railway Inquiry of 1835 reported that over ten thousand harvesters came to Great Britain from Ireland annually, but this figure is certainly an underestimate, since steamship companies refused to provide passenger data.⁷ From the 1820s onwards these companies carried thousands of passengers, mainly from the ports of Dublin, Drogheda, Derry, and Belfast. So intense was the competition between them that in some parts they moved around the coast for harvesters: for a time, they halted in the remote Rosses of Donegal.⁸ Their ships, hardly more than a few hundred tons weight, sometimes carried as many as a thousand or fifteen hundred passengers on a single journey.

The Poor Inquiry of the 1830s provides a better indication of the probable size of the annual flow. In one of the long questionnaires appended to that inquiry the following was included: 'What number of labourers are in the habit of leaving their dwellings periodically to obtain employment, and what proportion of them go to England?' There were over three thousand replies, covering over a thousand parishes. Assuming that the replies were well spread, a most conservative assessment of the evidence would suggest that seasonal migration to England and Scotland at this time amounted to about thirty-five or forty thousand. The replies imply an internal flow of comparable size.⁹ The Poor Inquiry also contains a useful passage explaining how British capitalism benefited from the Irish migration:

The great advantage of movable bodies of labourers, whether for harvest or for other purposes, is that they enable works to be done for which the native workmen are inadequate, without either disturbing the ordinary rate of wages throughout the country or giving a stimulus to population. All the assistance to be obtained from persons engaged in other branches of industry would be insufficient in certain places to enable all the grain to be harvested in good condition, if the land was highly cultivated. . . . The Irish reapers, therefore, . . . have, by supplying the extra hands required at a particular time of the year, conferred a great economical benefit on England; in this case, has been unmixed with any moral disadvantage, inasmuch as they have not stayed long enough to produce any change in the habits of the natives by their example or association.¹⁰

⁷ On this, see B. Kerr, art. cit., 370.

⁸ N. Ó Domhnaill, *Na glúnta Rosannacha* (Dublin 1952) 63.

⁹ *First Report from H. M. Commissioners for Inquiry into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland*, 1-309, Appendix A (Supplement) (C 369), H.C. 1835, xxxiv, 811-1219.

¹⁰ *Report on the State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain. (Poor Inquiry—(Ireland) Appendix G)*, xlvi, H.C. 1836, xxxiv, 473.



The first soundly-based figure stems from the 1841 Census Report. In that year, almost 60,000 migrant harvesters were enumerated at Irish ports on their way to Britain. This figure must be considered somewhat of an underestimate too, because it does not include those who joined the tramping boats, nor those who left from the minor ports such as Westport or Burtonport. At the same time, the actual level was probably closer to 60,000 than to 100,000.

The next enumeration of harvesters did not take place until 1880. It has often been argued that the number of migrants plummeted after the Famine, never again to reach its peak of the early 1840s.¹¹ This view has been stressed particularly by those who would advocate a cheerful interpretation of post-Famine developments. Grimshaw, an eminent Irish Victorian, reasoned that a decline occurred, and his judgment has never been seriously questioned. The present paper, which argues from the framework established by Cousens, maintains that the evidence for a post-Famine decline is weak, at least until the late 1860s or early 1870s.

The 1866 Commission on Irish Railways produced evidence which suggests that seasonal traffic was larger, rather than smaller, in the 1860s than in the 1840s. Because this information has been neglected for so long, and because it is crucial to the interpretation being followed here, it is quoted extensively. There is, first of all, the account of a former manager of the Midland Great Western Railway, the controversial Mr Peter Roe:¹²

5749 . . . I have always been in favour of cheap fares. While I was manager of the Midland I introduced the experiment of carrying harvestmen at a very low figure. I was put off for two years by the directors, who did not approve of such a low figure as I proposed. However, they consented to allow me to try it, I think in the year 1849 (it was a miserable year in the west of Ireland). The first year I succeeded in getting 4,000 of them to travel, the next year I got 10,000 to travel, and when I left the Midland I think the number had increased to 25,000; and now I see by the chairman's statement they carry 78,000, which is evidence that people will travel if you give them an accommodation which comes within their means, they are very poor.

5750. That will only be at one particular period of the year?—Up

¹¹ See, e.g., J. E. Handley, *The Irish in modern Scotland* (Cork 1947) 164. J. H. Johnson, 'Harvest migration from Nineteenth-century Ireland' in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Reprint No. 41 (1967) 98.

¹² *Royal Commission on Railways, Evidence and Papers Relating to Railways in Ireland*, 239, 169, 287 (C 417), H.C. 1866, lxiii, 489, 419, 537.

and down. I carried them during the time I was manager whenever they offered themselves during the year.

5751. You described them as harvestmen?—We then called them harvestmen: they are now fourth-class passengers. Fourth-class passengers is the proper name to give them.

Mr John Ennis, member of parliament, and chairman of the company in the early 1860s, also gave evidence to the commission. He also referred to the fourth-class passengers, since they were one of the mainstays of his company:

4016 . . . With regard to harvest labourers, of whom we carried 70,000 last year backwards and forwards to Dublin on their way to England, we have carried them for about a halfpenny a mile. . . .

4089. How do you distinguish the harvest labourers from the other passengers? At the time you are conveying the harvest passengers do not other labourers and persons present themselves desiring to be carried at the same low rate?—We treat any persons who will travel by those fourth-class trains that we start in the same way; if a man in a blue coat chooses to come we will carry him.

4090. Do you also carry women and children on those trains?—No.

4091. Not if they present themselves asking to be carried at those low fares?—If they did come and ask us I do not think we could or should refuse them, but in fact and in practice they never do.

4092. I suppose they are all through passengers?—Yes.

4093. You issue a particular description of ticket?—Yes; called the harvest ticket.

There is finally the evidence of Alexander Parker, a Dublin industrialist. Mr Parker was more colloquial than the rest:

6865. A considerable time since, when Lord Dunsandle was chairman of the Midland Great Western Railway, the reapers, and those persons who come over to England and cut your hay and your corn in the summer and the autumn, were in the habit of tramping up to Dublin, carrying their sickles and walking up. His Lordship, with another of the directors, went amongst them and said 'Boys, it's hard work this walking up to Dublin wearying yourselves out; what would you be content to pay if we brought you up by railway?' And they said they would be very glad indeed to be saved the journey; that it was very fatiguing in hot weather. And then his Lordship proposed to put on fourth-class wagons to bring them up, and they were so brought up to Dublin. From that time those poor men have always been brought up in that way. . . . (A)lthough that portion of the population has been much thinned by emigration, yet the receipts upon that railway from that source have increased rather than diminished. . . .

If we disregard the conflicting claims of Lord Dunsandle and the former manager to the original idea of harvesters' tickets, the story which emerges from these excerpts is fairly unambiguous. The Midland Great Western Railway, at least till 1865, was the beneficiary of an expanding market, and the numbers of migrants heading from parts of the country served by it were on the increase at this time. None of the witnesses even hints at a decrease in traffic. Moreover, while anybody could buy a fourth-class ticket, it seems reasonably clear that the vast majority came and went each year, and were indeed harvestmen. The 'gentleman in a blue coat', mentioned above, was, as a rule, too fond of his comfort to travel in cattle-wagons with scores of poor, noisy migrants from Mayo and Galway. A conservative guess might be that the Midland was carrying about 60,000 harvesters annually in the mid-sixties. This figure seems fair, since, according to the Midland's half-yearly reports, which are kept at Heuston Station in Dublin, the average number of fourth-class passengers between 1861 and 1865 was 78,000 per half-year. Allowing for the thousands who travelled from areas not served by that company, a figure of 100,000 for the whole of Ireland can hardly be regarded as an exaggeration. The substantial number who travelled from Achill and Erris to Scotland did not use the services of the Midland, nor did that company operate from Donegal, another county from which migration to Scotland was substantial. The railway reduced economic distance between the west of Ireland and the harvesting areas of England and Scotland: other things being equal, one would expect an increase in traffic.

In a neglected work,¹³ James Handley has usefully surveyed the role played by Irish harvesters in Scotland, and the problems which faced them there. He treats them with great sympathy and understanding, showing that they were indispensable in several parts of that country, mainly for grain-harvest work in mid-century, and for potato-picking later on. That they were equally indispensable in some other parts of Great Britain, is obvious from a parliamentary report of 1869 which discusses the employment of women and young children in agriculture. This source does not note any marked decline in migration from Ireland, either, but contains passages which, if anything, would imply the contrary. One is given here, partly for the light it throws on the harvesters' time in England:

¹³ Handley, *The Irish in modern Scotland*, 164-90.

The population of the Fylde is very scanty, and the greater proportion of the work on farms is done by Irish labourers who arrive in large numbers early in April and return to their native country about the end of September. Their ordinary wages are about two shillings a day, finding their own food, with the exception of buttermilk, which is supplied to them gratuitously, at the rate of a quart a day. At harvest time, they have an additional shilling a day. Wheaten bread is their only substantial food. They sleep in barns and outhouses upon straw, with a sack for a pillow. Their object being to save money, many carry back to their country £10 to £12 of their wages for the half-year. They are most efficient labourers, and a more industrious, honest, cheerful, easily managed, and well-conducted class of men is nowhere to be found. This periodical immigration of Irish labour has become a necessity in the Fylde and is an essential condition in its cultivation. The men generally return to the same homesteads year after year and employers and employed are naturally pleased to see each other again. If, from a closer approximation of wages in Ireland to those in England, or from any other cause, this supply of labour should at any time cease, it is difficult to conceive how the cultivation of the Fylde, in its present form, could be continued. . . .¹⁴

The investigations of the Irish Poor Law inspectors, carried out in 1869 and 1870, convey the same impression of a heavy migration. Those inspectors reporting from areas where migration had long ago ceased to be significant tell of a decline. However, inspectors Hamilton, Roughan, and Brodie, whose reports dealt with the poorer sections of Connacht and with Donegal, all stress the importance of seasonal migration in their areas.¹⁵ It would seem that seasonal migration to Scotland and to England continued, at least until the late 1860s, to be as great as ever from those areas where it had been a marked traditional feature. At this time, seasonal work added £10 or more to the budget of many a western family, and made up perhaps a third of their total income.¹⁶ This money was often used to pay off the landlords' rent, as it had been in the past. It is hardly correct to depict the west of Ireland as an area where rent was not an important economic category, where subsistence would have been impossible even in a no-rent situation. The payment of rent, the annual migration, the continued poverty—all were closely linked, and the chain was not broken till the 1880s

¹⁴ *Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons, and Women in Agriculture, Second Report*, App. I, 153 (C 23822). 186819, xiii, 227.

¹⁵ *Reports from Poor Law Inspectors in Ireland as to the Existing Relations between Landlord and Tenant . . .*, 15-6, 53, 45 (C-31), 1870, xiv, 51-2, 81, 89.

¹⁶ *Report from the Select Committee on Agriculture*, 355 (C 612), H.C. 1833, v, 369.

or later in some areas. It is impossible to put a precise date on the beginnings of a decline in migration to Britain, though. The management of the Midland Great Western complained of a decline in the traffic of harvestmen when reasons were being sought in 1869 for the bad financial performance of that railway.¹⁷ However, the Midland altered its fourth-class arrangements at this time, so that strict comparison between different years is not possible.

III

Statistics of seasonal migration to Great Britain become available once again for the 1880s. There is, unfortunately, a certain amount of ambiguity surrounding these, and the commentary accompanying them. In effect, there are two sets of data for each year, one based on reports prepared by the constabulary, and the other on information received from relevant railway and steamship companies. The former estimate yields a consistently lower figure. The situation is not hopeless, though. Handley has argued, conclusively in my opinion, that the latter, if adjusted a little, gives a more accurate picture, and has given two reasons why the constabulary figures should be treated with some suspicion.¹⁸ In the first place, the returns were compiled in June, before many prospective migrants would have decided whether to travel or to remain at home. Secondly, there was the wariness of the people about giving a straight answer to a question officially put, 'a reluctance strengthened by the fact that the enumerators were "peelers"'. The constabulary were less popular than usual in 1880 and later, after the outbreak of the Land War. In 1880, the first year in which the statistical survey was carried out, enumeration by the Royal Irish Constabulary produced a total figure of only 22,900: the return based on the number of labourers conveyed by the Great Western Railway (27,659) plus those leaving ports (14,613) gave a total of over 42,000. Grimshaw, who was registrar-general at the time, and who wrote the accompanying report, was quick to note the discrepancy, but reached the more comforting conclusion that 'the numbers returned by the agricultural enumerators represent those who steadily and habitually from year to year pursue the avocation of migratory agricultural

¹⁷ For information on this, and on the general background history of the Midland, I am extremely grateful to R. N. Clements and G. R. Mahon of the Irish Railway Records Society. Cf. too, Clements' article on the Midland centenary in the 1948 issue of the Society's journal.

¹⁸ Handley, *The Irish in modern Scotland*, 170-71.

labourer'.¹⁹ Grimshaw's reasoning on this point is singularly unconvincing; even allowing for the number of workers who are supposed to have made two trips annually, the discrepancy is still 16,000. Moreover, there is no evidence whatever to support his contention that this discrepancy was of a temporary nature: a divergence of comparable size between the two sets of figures lasted for as long as the statistical investigations continued. Grimshaw positively misleads the public by annually repeating the statement that the R.I.C. figures 'represent those who habitually pursue the avocation of migratory agricultural labourer'.²⁰ It is difficult not to conclude that he was so concerned with presenting an optimistic picture of the Irish scene, that he merely ignored the more alarming implications of the higher estimates. Here, the distortion does seem deliberate: in another place, Grimshaw, using phraseology more strident than was typical of contemporary civil servants, accused those who expressed doubts about the future of Irish agriculture of being 'enemies of their country'.²¹ We agree with Handley, who has said that the constabulary accounted for only about sixty per cent of all who migrated for agricultural work. Table I reproduces the Handley estimates for representative years after 1880.

TABLE I
Migration to Britain for Harvest Work:
Representative years after 1880

Year	Number
1880	38,000
1881	35,000
1882	25,000
1884	24,000
1886	21,000
1888	20,000
1890	23,000
1892	25,000
1894	26,000
1896	27,000
1898	30,000
1900	32,000
1910	18,500
1915	13,000

Source: J. E. Handley, *The Irish in modern Scotland* (Cork 1947) 171.

¹⁹ *Report and Tables relating to Migratory Agricultural Labourers*, 7 (C 2809), 1881, xciii, 813.

²⁰ *Agricultural Statistics, Ireland, 1886. Report and Tables relating to Migratory Agricultural Labourers*, 4 (C 4806), 1886, lxxi, 128, and for other years.

²¹ *Report of the Royal Commission on the Land Law (Ireland) Act, 1881 . . .*

IV

It is possible, from literary and folklore evidence, to summarize the main migrant routes within Ireland during the post-Famine years. There were, a century ago, migrants travelling from Connamara to Clare, from east Galway to the northern part of Tipperary, from west to east Mayo, from Waterford to south Tipperary, from south and mid-Cork to the northern parts of that county, and, most important of all, from west Donegal to the so-called Lagan.²² Irish was being spoken by harvesters in the Clondalkin area in the 1860s and the 1870s.²³ And while internal migration is not the main concern of this paper, and was less substantial after the Famine than the movement to Scotland alone, some accounts are of interest. For example, the following is from Baile Bhúirne in County Cork:

The Baile Mhúire people went east, or 'down' as they used to call it, for the potato harvest. They travelled in groups of five or six. Nobody blamed them for going—they might work at home for a shilling a day, while they might get twelve or thirteen shillings a week down there at the potatoes. . . . On they went; they had regular places to go for potato-picking and wage work—around Mitchelstown, Charleville, and other places in that district. One evening, six of them arrived at a particular spot. One of them was quite old, and probably had seen sixty harvests. . . . On Sunday morning they stood at the hiring spot. A man approached. 'How many of you are there?' he asked. 'Six', they said.²⁴

Another account, also dating from the mid-nineteenth century, comes from Waterford:

In the old days, many from around here used to go north to Tipperary each year, harvesting and potato-picking, and so on. Quite often, their employers were less than generous when it came to the matter of bed-and-board; and some of them were very bad indeed. It was many the man who grew weary of them, like the one who said—

Ní raghadsa go Tiobrad Árann
 Ag tuilleamh mo phá arís
 Mar thabharfadh an t-ocras an bás dom
 Is chaithfinn mo ránn a dhíol.

951 (C 4969), 1887, xxvi, 981.

²² Irish Folklore Commission (Coimisiún Béaloideasa Éireann) manuscripts [henceforth CBÉ] (Folklore Dept., University College, Dublin) 84, 147, 434, 369, 1202, 1245, 1278.

²³ *Béaloideas* 12 (1942) 186.

²⁴ *Béaloideas* 35-36 (1967-8 [1971]), 'Scéalaíocht Amhlaoibh Í Luinse', 216, 218. (The translation from the original Irish is my own.)

In áit na mbocairí bána
 Gheobhainn bainne bheadh ráithe d'aois
 Gan ach pingin ar an gcairt de
 Is mór-chuid den mbláthach tríd.²⁵

The manuscripts of the Irish Folklore Commission, from which these passages have been taken, are very informative on spailpíní, or migrant workers. Stories from many counties would indicate a vigorous, if declining, movement in the summer months for a few decades after the Famine. Hiring fairs and *cross na gcábóg* (literally, hiring-crossroads) lasted in some places well into this century. In some areas, it was a custom for the harvesters to stand outside the church on a Sunday morning with their spades, and to wait for the local farmers to approach them.²⁶

A further reason for being suspicious of the Royal Irish Constabulary estimate of migration is the extremely small number of internal migrants recorded by them. In 1880, they recorded only slightly over two thousands of these. This figure is certainly a good deal too low, though it is impossible to measure now the actual size of the internal flow. It seems that movements to the Lagan alone would have accounted for two thousand, and more, in 1880. In the early 1890s, about a thousand Gaoth Dobhair people annually sought out the Lagan, and Cloughaneely and the Rosses probably provided an even greater number.²⁷ There is no reason to think that the flow was greater in the 1890s than it had been in the 1880s.

V

Even the conservative Royal Irish Constabulary figures, which date from a time when the migration had passed its peak, show how crucially important to the economy of some regions these movements must have been. Grimshaw, in a further passage, comments on Mayo:

The county of Mayo represents the extreme of the peculiarities depending upon this curious example of social economy. In this county we find that at least 41.7 per thousand of the population habitually migrate, nearly all to Great Britain, in order to obtain an essential portion of their livelihood, that these migratory labourers

²⁵ CBÉ 84, p. 382. The verse refers to one *spailpín's* intention never to return to Tipperary because of the meanness of employers there.

²⁶ CBÉ 369 p. 382.

²⁷ Congested Districts Board *Baseline Reports* (Dublin 1892-8) pp. 104, 119, 129. (These once-confidential reports contain much valuable information. They are not easily accessible however.)

constitute 17.3 per cent of the adult male population, that 44.3 per cent are landholders, and of these only 8.9 per cent are occupiers of the smallest class of holdings, and that although Mayo is the most remote of Irish counties that furnish migratory labourers in large numbers, yet the proportion of these who proceed to Great Britain, especially England, is greater than any other county in Ireland.²⁸

While this statement, to repeat, is based on constabulary data, and while the proportion of landholders given is misleadingly low,²⁹ it does convey the central role of migration. When it is realized that, on average, the migrant harvester could earn a net £10 in a season, and that rents of that order were typical of smallholdings in the west, the economic role of migration is really brought home. 'Migrant labourers had plenty work down the country long ago', said one former Kerry harvester to a folklore collector, 'they went from all over Kerry, poor people trying to hold on to their homesteads'.³⁰ Several witnesses to the Bessborough Commission had the same story to tell:

17103. The way I am paying £18 (rent) is going off to England. I have two sons there sending me money.

17386. We could not save the rent unless we went to England to earn it.

17489. Was he in the habit of going to England to work?—Yes, and all his brothers used to go to England to earn the rent.

17490. Is it the same with all the other tenants on the property?—It is the very same.

17155. We are like wild geese, your honour.³¹

²⁸ Grimshaw in *Report and Tables on Migratory Agricultural Labourers*, loc. cit., 12.

²⁹ Many migrants must have held the land in all but name. From the socio-economic point of view the fact that aged parents held title is almost irrelevant.

³⁰ CBÉ 147, p. 205.

³¹ *Report of H. M. Commissioners of Inquiry into the Working of the Landlord and Tenant (Ireland) Act, 1870 and the Acts Amending the Same* (Bessborough Commission) (C 2779), 1881 xviii and xix.

TABLE II
Seasonal migration in different Poor Law Unions
per 1,000 population

<i>Poor Law Union</i>	<i>Rate (R.I.C.)</i>	<i>Rate (Adjusted)</i>
Swinford	91.6	152.5
Claremorris	57.0	95.0
Dunfanaghy	51.4	85.5
Castlebar	46.0	60.0
Newport	34.5	56.5
Castlereagh	29.5	49.0
Sligo	25.8	43.00
Glenamaddy	23.7	39.5
Ballina	17.7	29.5
Tuam	17.2	28.5
Belmullet	16.8	27.5
Glenties	14.6	24.0
Westport	14.1	23.5
Mountbellew	13.5	22.5

Source: P.P. 1881 (LXLIII). The adjusted figures have been obtained merely by multiplying the R.I.C. by five-thirds. They are far from accurate, and are used only to indicate the proportions involved in the roughest way. Obviously, the adjusted figure for individual Poor Law Unions may be misleading.

Niall Ó Domhnaill, historian of his native Rosses in County Donegal, has made the same point: 'Seasonal earnings helped householders keep their homes'.³² And another Donegal writer, who had been a migrant worker on the Lagan and in Scotland in his time, also stressed the link between migrants' earnings and rent payment.³³ It is hardly fair, then, to characterize the migration to England and to Scotland as part of the search for a rising standard of living, the result of rising expectations. It is much more realistic to see in it a crucial part of the search for subsistence. The once-confidential *Baseline Reports* of the Congested Districts Board, though dating from a slightly later period than ours, illustrate what a large share of family income in these areas was made up of money earned by labouring abroad. Tables IIIa and IIIb are based on these reports.³⁴

³² Ó Domhnaill, *Na glúnta Rosanacha*, 66. (My translation.)

³³ P. Gallagher (Paddy the Cope) *My story* (Tralee, n.d.). The best autobiographical account of the migrant's life, in my opinion, is Aodh Ó Domhnaill's *Scéal Híúdal Sheáinín* (Dublin 1940). This work is edited by Eoghan Ó Domhnaill, and is well worth an English translation.

³⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 105, 415.

TABLE IIIa
Receipts of a family in ordinary circumstances
in Cloughaneely, County Donegal, in the 1890s

	£	s.	d.
Sale of 2 pigs	7	10	0
1 cow beast	5	0	0
*3 sheep	1	16	0
180 doz. eggs	4	10	0
geese		5	0
butter	2	12	0
*kelp	6	0	0
*fish	2	0	0
turf	2	0	0
wool		15	0
labour	10	0	0
	<hr/>		
Total	41	18	0

(* = in some localities only)

TABLE IIIb
Cash receipts of a six-person family

	£	s.	d.
Sale of pigs	6	0	0
cattle	2	0	0
butter	3	10	0
oats	3	0	0
straw or hay	1	0	0
potatoes	2	0	0
eggs	3	0	0
chicken		5	0
Man in England	8	0	0
	<hr/>		
Total	33	15	0

Tables from Castlerea and other parishes convey essentially the same message. It would seem that a cruel and unusual form of proletarianisation³⁵ had proceeded very far in such places. The link with the land was rather tenuous and the standard of living very low. Indeed, any discussion of living standards in post-Famine Ireland, which did not consider the status of as many as one hundred thousand harvesters and a still larger number of dependents at that time, would be unbalanced. *En passant*, it is suggested here that

³⁵ Unusual, that is, in late nineteenth-century Europe.

a rise in, or a stable level of, migration in the fifties and the sixties may even imply immiseration rather than betterment, because it may mean that more man-hours than before were necessary for rent-payment (and the payment of other debts) in the relevant counties. This, of course, does not preclude a rise in the standard of living elsewhere.

VI

Having documented at some length the extent and the role of seasonal migration in the post-Famine period, it is now time to analyse in some detail demographic patterns in the west, and the causes of the decline in migration from the late 1860s on. I have already suggested that the practice of seasonal migration played a part in maintaining pre-Famine conditions in much of the west: that partial proletarianisation in Britain was exchanged for the prospect of a fuller proletarianisation in America or elsewhere. In spite of the great loss of life in the late 1840s and the large-scale clearances that followed, traditional economic and social patterns persisted. One might argue, in a sense, that the Great Famine had failed to carry out its appointed task in these areas. Some of the Classical economists had envisaged such an outcome in the event of large-scale emigration; because they thought any beneficial effects would be purely temporary, they were opposed to any policy which proposed state-aided emigration. Given the 'habits' of the 'native Irish', they were convinced that population would soon reach its original ruinous level again, and there would be no long-run gains. Herman Merivale, economics professor at Oxford, said of the scheme advocated by Irish-born Robert Torrens:

Suppose, then, that while the importation of capital is yet in its infancy, a million of cottiers, or one-third of the whole, as Colonel Torrens would propose, were at once transferred to America. What would be the consequence? Merely that one-third of the land would remain uncultivated. That one-third would eventually be the most barren. The landlords of the most fertile soils, wherever these happened to be, depopulated by emigration, would be able to invite hands from the less fertile by the offer of a slight remission of rent. Things would remain, at the end of the experiment, precisely where they were before, except that the number of cottiers would be smaller, and their condition a little better. That the natural progress of population would soon bring them back to their former number—their being no sufficient motivation to any alteration of habits on their part—is most certain. . . .³⁶

³⁶ H. Merivale, *Lectures on colonization* (London 1861) 153-4. See too N. W. Senior, *Journals . . . relating to Ireland I* (London 1868) 271-2.

This was in 1840. Of course, a famine is not the same thing as mass transportation with the help of public money. Nevertheless, post-Famine trends convinced Merivale that he had been off the mark when he made the above statement, because, as far as Ireland as a whole was concerned, there was no 'natural progress of population' after the Famine. Still, his remarks may seem more relevant to the outcome in parts of the west of Ireland than he thought. One does not have to accept the Classical's derogatory notion of 'habits' to agree that the Famine did not alter the west of Ireland beyond recognition, whatever may have happened in the rest of the country. One of the great merits of the recent work of S. H. Cousens has been to show conclusively that the Famine was not such a watershed in the west, and that the pattern suggested by Merivale was followed at least to some extent, into the 1860s and even 1870s.

Why the great difference in demographic patterns? While Cousens does not avail of the old 'push'-'pull' terminology in describing the factors behind emigration, he seems to imply that 'push' elements were the dominant ones in the west in the early stages. Elsewhere, 'pull' factors, strengthened by the dissemination of news from the New World, were the dominant ones. This paper is not concerned with rigorously establishing the notion that the differing demographic trends in Ireland were partly due to the differing relative importance of 'push' and 'pull' factors. For the present, this much is stated merely as a simplification, though it does embody a hypothesis that might repay some testing.³⁷

Emigration from the west soared in bad years, as Table IV (below) shows. 1863 and 1880 were particularly severe years in much of the country. However, emigration rates from the west and north-west were lower over the period 1851-71 than in the rest of rural

³⁷ On the general question of 'push' versus 'pull', see B. Thomas, *Migration and economic growth* (Cambridge 1954) *passim*; M. Wilkinson, 'European migration to the United States: an econometric analysis of aggregate labour supply and demand', *Review of Economics and Statistics* 52 (1970) 272-9; B. Hoiska, 'New migration opportunities and the Gompertz growth law' (unpubl. mimeo, 1972). The trouble with econometric testing in the Irish case is that, as of now, no continuous income or output series is available. One might be tempted to use proxies such as potato yields, or grain output, but it is doubtful whether results based on such proxies would carry much weight. At this stage the provision of continuous agricultural output statistics seems the most feasible and the most useful, first step. A useful source on the different motivations of prospective emigrants at the turn of the century is L. Paul-Dubois, *Contemporary Ireland* (London 1908). This is a translation of *L'Irlande Contemporaine* (Paris 1907).

Ireland. This much bears out the relative importance of 'push' in western counties, at least in the immediate post-Famine decades.

TABLE IV

Emigration from Ireland, (a) the 1863 level as a proportion of 1862, and (b) 1880 as a proportion of 1879

	(a)	(b)
Carlow	1.53	3.13
Dublin	0.73	1.58
Kildare	1.23	3.44
Kilkenny	1.57	2.69
Laois	1.88	3.97
Longford	2.61	2.18
Louth	1.63	2.95
Meath	1.79	4.17
Offaly	2.02	3.88
Westmeath	1.73	1.97
Wicklow	0.71	2.39
Clare	1.65	1.40
Cork	1.33	1.44
Kerry	2.63	2.13
Limerick	1.74	1.85
Tipperary	2.10	1.81
Waterford	1.22	3.18
Antrim	1.12	1.20
Armagh	1.58	1.86
Cavan	2.35	1.70
*Donegal	2.15	2.18
Down	1.34	1.47
Fermanagh	1.81	2.20
Derry	1.56	1.47
Monaghan	1.68	2.19
Tyrone	1.91	1.65
*Galway	2.90	2.76
*Leitrim	2.79	3.00
*Mayo	3.38	3.62
*Roscommon	2.81	3.14
*Sligo	2.05	5.28
Wexford	1.09	3.00
National average	1.62	2.01

Source: Derived from the *Census of Ireland for the year 1871*, pp. 434-5; *Census of Ireland for the year 1891*, pp. 528-9. Counties with heavy seasonal migration are asterisked.

Seasonal migration seems to have reached a peak in the late 1860s. Why was there a decline from then on? Contemporary

officials seem to have taken no note of it until much later when a succession of bad crops resulted in near-famine in western regions. Only then, apparently, was the important economic role of migration publicly recognized: from 1880 onwards, as we have seen, the migrants were enumerated annually, and in 1884 an inquiry was carried out to check the reasons for, and the incidence of, this decline. The results of this inquiry, based on questionnaires returned from almost three hundred localities in England and Scotland, are summarized below:

TABLE V
The Decline in Seasonal Migration
(Source: P.P. 1884 (LVII))

	<i>Number of localities reporting</i>
Decrease reported	251
No decrease	40
Decrease due to a fall in demand	137
Decrease due to a fall in supply	38
No opinion	34
Temporary	22
Permanent	153

This survey covered ten northern counties of England and thirteen southern counties of Scotland, places where the Irish had been going for generations. Of those replies which attributed the decrease in migration to a falling-off in demand, almost four-fifths (101) mentioned the introduction of machinery as the main contributory factor. Later, the Royal Commission on Labour further documented the decline, and also put the blame on machinery.³⁸

The role of machinery was more complex, though, than such replies might suggest. From the very beginning, machinery was seen as a threat to the labourer, or as a source of great savings to the enterprising farmer. When the new McCormick and Hussey machines were first exhibited in 1851, almost everybody was enthusiastic about cost reduction, and the migrants must have seen reason to be apprehensive. Judging from the fun poked at him in *Punch*, the outlook for the Irish *spailpin* was not good:³⁹

³⁸ *Royal Commission on Labour. The Agricultural Labourer* (C 6894), 1893, xxxv.

³⁹ *Punch*, or the *London Charivari* 25 (1853) 127, quoted in Hutchinson i (see note 44) 397-8.

I'm sick of the sickle, Molly dear, and stooping
 so long and so low;
 And it's little grief it gives me, to give the
 old bother the go!
 And when another harvest comes, by the Saints!
 I'd like to see
 The money or anything else that 'ud make a
 raping-machine out of me!
 I've raped in England and Scotland, and I've
 raped in the Lothians three,
 And I dar' say it's twenty years since first I
 crossed the Irish Sea;
 I've raped yer wheat, and yer barley, and oats
 and beans, sez Pat;
 But as for profit—it's sorrow the raping that
 I ever raped of that!
 So, good luck to You, Mither McCormack, and Yer
 Reverence, Mither Bell,
 And good luck to yer, Mither Hussey—I wish
 yer honours well;
 The shearer's footing on the field ye've fairly
 cut away;
 But it's not been worth the standing on, bedad,
 this many a day.
 But we'll throw the sickle aside, Molly, and go
 and try our luck
 On the banks of the far Australian streames, and
 where the otter is billed like a duck;
 For there's mate, and drink, and clothes, Molly,
 and riches and ranks to be won,
 At the Anti—what d'ye call the place, on t'other
 side of the sun?

From Prince Albert down, approval was expressed of the new reapers. However, the enthusiasm did not result in the anticipated substantial sales, and only the larger farmers and the agricultural colleges bought. Proprietors, who had been granted generous loans by parliament as a compensation for the repeal of the Corn Laws, by and large seem to have preferred other means of improving agriculture.⁴⁰

The Famine temporarily thinned the ranks of the seasonal migrants, but the increase in English and Scottish grain acreage during the 1850s and the 1860s was achieved, in part, with the help

⁴⁰ A good reference on improvement during the years of 'high farming' is J. H. Clapham, *Economic history of Great Britain* ii (London xxxx) 270-73.

of a rising flow of Irish labourers. There was simultaneously a slight decline in the numbers of British agricultural labourers.⁴¹

Paul David, who has written extensively on the McCormick reaper, has shown that its diffusion in the midwestern United States was delayed for some years by its relative expense,⁴² and has hinted that the same may have been the case in England, at least at the outset.⁴³ In particular, the English landscape was not tailor-made for the American machines, being badly drained and over-enclosed, and the median holding size was perhaps too small for widespread adoption. In the circumstances, experimentation with labour-saving devices would be worthwhile only in the event of either (i) a sufficient increase in agricultural wage rates, or (ii) a sufficient drop in the price of these devices.

Throughout the 1850s, there was intense rivalry between the different machine manufacturers, the Americans McCormick and Hussey, and the Scots capitalist Bell. By 1860, Hussey was producing a £30 model, and was outselling the more expensive and larger McCormick version. However, McCormick was able to come up with a £20 machine somewhat later. Meanwhile, agricultural wages were rising relative to reaper costs: there is some controversy as to material standards enjoyed by labourers in rural areas after 1850, but they probably did share in the general prosperity of the times.⁴⁴ In any case, it seems that more and more farmers bought machines because of the change in relative factor prices. Paul David has criticized loose references to 'labour scarcity', pointing out that all factors are scarce, and that what is really crucial is relative scarcity. This obvious distinction is relevant.⁴⁵

The fact that Arch's agricultural labourers' union made no

⁴¹ Cf. E. L. Jones 'The agricultural labour market in England', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 22 (Dec. 1964).

⁴² P. David, 'The mechanization of reaping in the ante-bellum midwest' in H. Rosovsky (ed.), *Industrialization in two systems* (New York 1966) 3-39.

⁴³ P. David, 'The landscape and the machine: technical interrelatedness land tenure and the mechanization of the corn harvest in Victorian Britain' in D. N. McCloskey (ed.) *Essays in a mature economy: Britain after 1840* (Princeton 1971) 145-205.

⁴⁴ On the reapers see W. T. Hutchinson *Cyrus Hall McCormick: seed time* (New York 1930) 377-409, and W. T. Hutchinson *Cyrus Hall McCormick: Harvest* (New York 1935) 405-77, 643-87; on prices, the second vol., 414, 439. The standard reference on wage-levels in Britain is W. A. Fox, 'Agricultural wages in England during the last fifty years', in W. Minchinton (ed.), *Essays in agrarian history* ii (Newton Abbot 1968) 121-98. On Ireland, see Bowley's 'The statistics of wages in the United Kingdom during the last 100 years (Part 3)' in *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 62 (1899) 395-404.

⁴⁵ P. David, 'The landscape . . .', 146-7, 182.

progress after its initial days of glory may imply something about the leadership of that union, but it also probably indicates that the workers were in an increasingly bad bargaining position *vis-à-vis* the machines. Wages showed little increase between the 1870s and the 1890s, and the net income of Irish harvesters, those who continued to travel, took a plunge at this time.⁴⁶

But why did the farmers increase their supplies in the face of large numbers of Irishmen, who were prepared to work for very lowly wages? Part of the answer may be that, with time, machines became more economical at any relative factor price implying subsistence income. Certainly the Irish were ready to work for less than their English colleagues—they were frequently used as scabs to break attempts at unionization—but they nevertheless seem to have lost out in the end too. In the 1860s a man might make well over ten pounds for a summer's work in Britain, but by the 1880s average incomes were much less.⁴⁷ In the nineties, there were still some who were content with a net £8, but these constituted a mere remnant of the former traffic, and came from the very poorest areas. 'Pull' factors probably played some part too: the expectations of groups of migrants may have been rising in the 1870s and later.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ On the NALU see J. P. Dunbabin, 'The "Revolt of the Field": The agricultural labourers' union in the 1870s', *Past and Present* 26 (November 1963) 68-97; on the efforts at getting the union established in Ireland, see P. L. R. Horn, 'The NALU in Ireland, 1873-9', *Irish Historical Studies* 17 (March 1971) 340-52.

⁴⁷ Grimshaw in (21) 8 'In old times they used to earn a good deal of money—they used to get about £15 a head but now they don't get anything like it. . . . I believe it is now about £10'. See also Tables IIIa and IIIb above.

⁴⁸ Some paternalistic British farmers undoubtedly kept on their Irishmen for years after it ceased to be profitable to do so. Allison Uttley, the nature writer, had a farm background, and her father was one of these, by her account. Uttley's stories about the migrants are sympathetic and nostalgic, but she cannot hide their obsolescence:

'The mowers brought their own scythes, wrapped in cloths, carried on their backs. They were sharp as swords, clean and well kept. . . . The mowing machine was out too. An arrangement had been made with the men that the payment was for the total acreage of grass cut, whether by machine or by scythe. Five shillings an acre they received. My father mowed with the machine, but the Irish mowers, Malachy, Michael and Young Andrew received the money for cutting as if they had scythed it all. In this way the mowers did half the work for the full money and we got the mowing done more rapidly, so everyone was satisfied. From white-misted dawn, when the dew lay heavy on the grass and mowing was easier, to starlight, when the bats darted overhead and the owls came out, the men worked . . .'. From A. Uttley, *Country hoard* (London 1943) 72-3, 75-6, ch. 7 *passim*. Farmer Uttley's Mayomen came for the last time in 1914. It seems safe to say that the typical capitalist farmer was less generous.

In more formal terms, we might represent the demand for and the supply of Irish migrants in Britain as follows:

$$DM = D(W, P_k, T)$$

$$SM = S(W, W_h, W_{us}, C)$$

W represents migrants' earnings, P_k is the relative price of machinery, and T is the tillage output in Britain. (Output, not acreage, since demand would be less in a rainy year.) In the supply equation, W_h stand for alternative opportunities at home, and W_{us} for prospects in the United States. C represents the relative cost of transportation to Great Britain. It is plausible to assume the following:

$$D^1 < 0, D^2 < 0, D^3 > 0$$

$$S^1 > 0, S^2 < 0, S^3 < 0, S^4 > 0$$

In the fifties and the early sixties, the improvement in rail communications with the west increased the supply of migrants at obtaining wage-levels, but in later years, both the introduction of machinery and the American alternative lessened their number. Bad harvests in the late 1860s and the subsequent decline in tillage may also have played a part.⁴⁹

Permanent emigration from Donegal, Mayo, and Connemara became more marked in the 1870s and the 1880s. The initial push may have been due to the series of bad potato crops from the late 1870s on, but unlike the mid-1850s and after, emigration from these areas did not fall back to their previous levels in the mid-1880s.

TABLE VI
Emigration Rates per 1,000 Population (annual average)
from Selected Counties

	1851-71	1871-91
Galway	16.6	15.9
Sligo	10.2	16.4
Donegal	10.6	14.7
Mayo	11.2	14.3
Leitrim	14.8	19.2

⁴⁹ Dunbabin, 'The "revolt of the Field" . . .', suggests that the agricultural depression set in as early as 1865, but D. H. Alcroft (*Past and Present* 27 (April 1964) 109) disputes this. Clapham, *Economic history of Great Britain* ii, 279, saw the disastrous wet years of the late 1870s leading in the depression.

In this sense, the near-famine of 1879-83 was more of a watershed in places than the Great Famine of the previous generation. The uncertain state of the country was probably sufficient to make some leave. The 'freemigration' of 'bliain a' free' may also have been a factor, not to mention the delayed impact of demonstration effects. But it seems reasonable to argue also that the lack of an outlet for seasonal work made a difference to the outcome.

For some of the migrants, temporary work on building sites became a more pleasing alternative to farm work, as wages for the latter fell relatively. For others, a four- or five-month sojourn replaced a three-month one, and for still others, permanent emigration to Britain followed years of seasonal crossings. All these developments tended to break down the traditional system in the west of Ireland, to a greater or lesser degree. This is explained further in the remaining sections of this paper.

VII

Before the introduction of machinery and other factors combined to reduce demand, the existence of seasonal employment helped to maintain the link between small western tenants and their homesteads. Such employment must have been at least partly responsible for the persistence of small holdings, low age at marriage, and persistent poverty. Whereas in the rest of the country rural smallholdings decreased in number, and cottiers and labourers emigrated in vast numbers in the post-Famine decades, this was not so in the west.

TABLE VII

The number of holdings greater than one acre in Poor Law Unions where seasonal migration was substantial, 1851 and 1870

<i>Poor Law Union</i>	1851	1870
Swinford	6960	7564
Claremorris	4341	4460
Dunfanaghy	2715	2671
Castlebar	4433	4689
Newport	1852	2614
Castlereagh	5748	6367
Sligo	5293	5570
Glenamaddy	3456	3249
Ballina	3964	3914
Tuam	5508	5842
Belmullet	2082	2524
Glenties	6283	6442

Source: This table is based on information derived from *Agricultural Statistics of Ireland, 1851 and 1870*.

(There, apparently, the landlord could suffer gladly the subdivision and the subletting so widely criticized before the Famine. Such practices, so far as he was concerned, could only increase his rents, so long as the tenants had recourse to seasonal earnings.) The O'Connor Don, a western landlord himself, when asked as late as 1887 whether a tendency to subdivide still persisted, gave a decidedly positive answer. He was reluctant to allocate blame, but his impression was that the landlords were responsible.⁶⁰ In the west, the landlord or his agent need not be concerned with the source of his surplus: subdivision and the pre-Famine state of affairs might be quite consistent with profit-maximization. While it is quite true that post-Famine landlords did not pursue a policy of altering rents yearly, their money receipts grew more rapidly in the thirty-year stretch after the Famine than at any time since the Napoleonic wars, and it seems best to characterize landlord behaviour as broadly rational and profit-maximizing.

The practice of seasonal migration helped maintain high population levels in much of the west later than elsewhere. It also enabled men and women to marry early, and supported the old agricultural system. When, in the 1870s and the 1880s, the migrant-tenant was finding it increasingly difficult to make the rent, partly due to a fall-off in demand for his services in Britain, it was natural for him to turn his sights towards more permanent emigration and more complete proletarianisation. Niall Ó Domhnaill noted the part that harvesting played in keeping a high population in the Rosses of Donegal:

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, there were men going to Scotland each year for the harvest. For this reason, inhabitants of the Rosses were less affected by the Famine than people in other parts of the country. Between the Famine and World War I the population increased to 14,000; but it was decreased after this with the emigration to America. Originally, the stay in Scotland was confined to the harvest period. But the men gradually got other work over there, so that they were spending six months of the year there. . . . In the period between 1841 and 1911 the population of Donegal (as a whole) fell forty-three per cent; that of the Rosses grew by fourteen per cent. . . . Seasonal earnings helped householders keep their homes. With the odd exception, the men never thought of staying over there, and the women never went. The people had little English and little education, and all they asked of foreign parts was

⁶⁰ Evidence of the O'Connor Don in (21), 781-2.

the seasonal work to help them keep a grip on their homes and to prevent debts from accumulating.⁵¹

The demographic information available supports in a more general way this perceptive regional account. Only seven counties out of thirty-two had higher emigration rates between 1871 and 1891 than between 1851 and 1871, and four of these, Mayo, Donegal, Leitrim and Sligo, were ones in which seasonal migration was important to the people.

The continued high population levels meant that land, which would certainly have been left waste elsewhere, was still being used in the west in the 1850s and 1860s. Rents in the areas of high migration were higher than elsewhere. Several witnesses to the Bessborough Commission indicate that the average rent on small holdings, many of them consisting partly of bog and unreclaimed land, was of the order of a pound sterling per acre in Mayo and Donegal.⁵² Both the agricultural statistics and folklore evidence tell a story of increased cultivation and reclamation in many localities in the west after the Famine. Cousens⁵³ and the perambulation books of the Griffith valuers⁵⁴ indicate that Mayo tenants were paying rents for bad land and reclaimable waste, which would have been unlettable anywhere else. In this connexion, the satire of the west Mayo folk-poet Tomas Bhriain Rooney may be of interest. He describes Barrthrá, in reality a desolate, barren place, as a land of milk and honey:⁵⁵

Nach deas an baile Barrthrá,
 Bíonn cóiste ag rith gach lá ann . . .
 An bhó nárbh fhiú leat éileamh
 Mara dtig sí ach chun sléibhe
 Bheadh bainne aici ina phaoilta
 Mara mbeadh sí ann ach mí . . .
 Tá ulláí is sú-chraobh ann
 Ag fás sa mBleán Buí. . . .

There is also a rather graphic account in the manuscripts of the Folklore Commission, which describes the process at its extreme:

Less than one hundred years ago a man named Patch Gallagher, locally known as Patch a' tsean-Mhachaire, settled down in this

⁵¹ Ó Domhnaill, *Na glúnta Rosannacha*, 66.

⁵² Bessborough Commission (31), Qs. 16084, 16138, 16333, 16719, 14876, etc.

⁵³ Cousens, art. cit., *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 22 (Dec. 1964).

⁵⁴ These books can be inspected at the Dublin Valuation Office.

⁵⁵ CBÉ 1243, p. 5.

part of the mountain on the bank of the rivulet where there was a strip of arable land (Muingalee). He came at night and built a little sod house and as the place then was so sequestered and remote and without a road within fifteen miles, he had established and, in modern military parlance, dug himself well in before he was discovered by the people of Granny and Cornboy who bitterly resented his intrusion, and for some time demonstrated their hostility towards him by many nocturnal outrages and offences and general ill-feeling.⁵⁶

Patch may well have been a migrant like many of his neighbours.

VIII

Curiously enough, agriculture in these western parts does not seem to have suffered, in terms of yield per acre, as a result of the migration. In fact, what is most surprising is that tillage in Donegal and Mayo was characterized by yields similar to elsewhere between 1850 and 1880, though much of the cultivated land was inferior to the average. Yields fell universally in post-Famine Ireland: in some places, the fall was caused by the shift from spade to plough, but in places such as Mayo, where lazy-bed cultivation remained predominant, the fall was mostly due to the cultivation of previously extra-marginal land. While cultivation by the spade is notoriously labour-intensive, and the men of the west were away from their plots for much of the year, it seems that a combination of hard work by them before departure, and the work of the women after the men's departure, combined to maintain higher yields. In Gaoth Dobhair 'a great amount of the harvesting falls on the women, who dig the potatoes and cut the corn, and make whatever hay is to be made'—so went a report of the 1890s.⁵⁷ The potato economy lasted longer in parts of Mayo, Galway, and Donegal than anywhere else. As late as the 1890s, consumption per capita on the small holdings around Castlereaugh and Claremorris still reached one ton per annum. In Donegal, where dependence on the root had never been as great as elsewhere in the country, a family in ordinary circumstances might consume twenty barrels in a year.⁵⁸

IX

To return to the beginning. Cousens was the first to deal systematically with the different demographic patterns of west and east in the post-Famine decades, and his contributions have been rightly

⁵⁶ CBÉ 1244, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁷ Congested Districts Board *Baseline Report* on Gaoth Dobhair, p. 119.

⁵⁸ *Baseline Reports*, pp. 105, 415, 599.

praised by more recent writers. By using a level of disaggregation not attempted by other scholars before him, Cousens was able to show that several parts of the country experienced a rise in population between 1851 and 1871. As I have mentioned already, he provided a list of possible explanations for the regional variations highlighted by his work, without attempting to assess their relative importance in different areas. Most of the factors mentioned by him will have been relevant to some extent. Cousens's conclusions may be summarized as follows:⁵⁹

The privation of the Famine and the recognized danger of a dependence on the potato as a staple crop was not a turning point in the demographic tendencies of much of the west. The clinging to the land was a social, not an economic phenomenon, all the more strange after a period of such terrible suffering, and moreover in face of a strong tradition, in Mayo, Roscommon, Sligo and Donegal at least, of a seasonal migration to England or to Scotland for the harvest. From a preliminary survey of the 1871 census it is clear that the break between the peasant and the land in the poorer parts of the west had not occurred and still lay in the future. Neither famine nor eviction loosed the hold of the peasantry in much of the west.

Cousens makes the point that the migrating habit might have been expected to ease full proletarianization. In fact, its effect may well have been the opposite. Moreover, the decline in outlets for migrants from perhaps 100,000 in the mid-1860s to perhaps 40,000 at the beginning of the 1880s must have had a considerable effect, demographic as well as social, on the structure which Cousens describes so well. Brendan Walsh, who has also written insightfully on post-Famine population trends, does not allow for the migrants either. He has put his own interpretation very concisely:⁶⁰

The period 1871-1911 also saw the emergence of the western counties as the region with the highest emigration rates in the country. . . . A number of hypotheses may be advanced to explain the sharp fall in the western marriage level after 1871. . . . Population pressure in the west around 1871 was greater than in the east due in part to the greater population loss that had taken place in the east during the preceding twenty-five years and the concomitant growth in farm size. The agricultural depression of the 1880s undermined the economic basis of western agriculture, while the east was partially insulated from the depression by the large-scale shift to dry cattle that had occurred there earlier in the century.

⁵⁹ Cousens, art. cit., *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 22 (Dec. 1964) 228.

⁶⁰ B. M. Walsh, art. cit., *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 28 (April 1970) 161-2.

I have already suggested that the agricultural depression may indeed have played a part in the great social changes occurring in the west from the 1870s onwards. However, its role was probably more complex and indirect than suggested by Walsh. The crisis in Irish agriculture was severe, but the crisis in British agriculture meant less harvesting work, and that, in itself must have been a blow to the structure of the west. The *Baseline Reports* show how important migrant earnings were in the western economy: moreover, not all relevant prices plummeted at this time. Our emphasis would be as much on the mechanization of agriculture in Britain as on the general depression of prices, as the key factors behind the developments explained by Walsh. Naturally, the near-famine conditions of 1879 and after, and the social tensions of the time, accelerated demographic change.

Between the early 1880s and the 1910s the number of migrants was halved. Where migration persisted, so did poverty. The dependence of so many of the Congested Districts on migrants' earnings is noteworthy. Broadly speaking, though, only the potato- and the turnip-fields still beckoned the migrant harvester in the twentieth century; and this only because their harvesting was so difficult to mechanize.

Sometime in the mid-nineteenth century, a Kerry *spailpín* named Mac Cárthaigh composed the following quatrain:

Do bhí allas im' léine is is tréan mar
do shilfeadh mo ghrua,
Is mo dhá ghéigín caola ag pléascadh le
hiomarca dua,
Deargadh mo pháopa ní bhfaighinn i mbun ná
i mbarr,
Is nárbh é an tinpín tuillte, céad díth air,
is deacair é dh'fháilt.

An appropriately grim epitaph for the migratory worker. The *spailpín's* existence in Mac Cárthaigh's time was as harsh as it had been in the eighteenth century, and his eventual disappearance must have meant, in the long run, better times in the areas in which he had lived.