

Chapter 2

Ireland, 1907–1947

The Socio-Economic Context

Prof. Cormac Ó Gráda

When the 33-year old James Larkin arrived in Belfast from Liverpool in 1907 to organise that city's dockers, Belfast was the biggest city in Ireland. Even tagging the population of the middle-class townships of Pembroke and Rathmines-Rathgar onto Dublin's still left Belfast with a slight numerical edge over Dublin by 1901, an edge that it would maintain for a generation. Belfast's status as one of the great industrial cities of the United Kingdom, having quadrupled its population since 1850, must have made it seem like the right place for Larkin to begin his career in the Irish labour movement. Belfast was Linenopolis; but it was much more. It contained the biggest shipyard in the world and thriving engineering plants, distilleries, ropeworks, and much else. Its big, brand-new city hall, built in 1906, aptly reflected civic pride and achievement.

By contrast, Dublin, which would become Larkin's main focus after some dramatic months in Belfast and where he died in 1947, had been losing out in a relative sense for decades. From being one of the great cities of Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century it had dropped back to the second division by its end. Still, though bloated somewhat by Famine immigration in mid-century, its population of a quarter of a million in 1850 would rise to nearly 400,000 on the eve of the First World War. Of course, Dublin's share of a declining population continued to grow (to 4 per cent in 1850, 8 per cent in 1911), and therefore so did its relative economic importance in Ireland.

The occupational profiles of Ireland's two biggest cities almost a century ago make for interesting comparisons. In 1911 slightly more than half of Dublin's labour force worked in what the census deemed 'industrial' occupations, but the 55,000 men in such occupations included 9,000 builders and decorators and 19,000 unskilled mechanics and labourers, many of whom belonged to the 'stagnant pool' of casual workers. Using different occupational categories, Prof. Mary Daly estimates that 20.4 per cent of Dublin's male workers and 31.7 per cent of its females were employed in manufacturing.

Belfast's profile was very different. There, 36.2 per cent of the men and 70 per cent of the women in the labour force had manufacturing jobs.¹ Linen employed about 11,000 men in Belfast and the shipyards another 7,000, engineering works 6,000, and iron and steel a further 5,000. Half the 48,000 women employed in the industrial sector worked in linen mills, while another quarter worked in clothes factories.

As the numbers suggest, Dublin's industrial base was rather weak. It is symptomatic that the leader of Dublin's employers, William Martin Murphy, a tycoon with a background in construction, was a newspaper, tramway and department store proprietor—hardly your classic industrial capitalist. The industrial troubles of 1913 were associated with transport workers and dockers rather than factory operatives or miners.

The contrast between Ireland's two biggest cities was just as striking in housing. In the nineteen-hundreds Dublin's poor housing and ill-health were notorious. In 1911 the city contained over five thousand one-room tenements in which five or more people lived; of these, 643 housed eight or more people. Overcrowding was greatest in the Mountjoy, Merchants' Quay and Inns Quay wards in the inner city. Belfast's housing stock was newer, and therefore better. Tenement accommodation there was a rarity, and the city contained only thirty-four of those one-room tenements occupied by five people or more. Partly because sectarian tensions confined most of Belfast's Catholics to the oldest parts of the city, they were at a disadvantage in housing terms, but even they were much better off than Dublin's poor.

Larkin moved to Dublin before the end of 1907. There his early efforts fed on Dublin's notoriously bad housing. In the wake of the events in O'Connell Street on 31 August 1913, the *Irish Times* claimed that Larkin's followers lived 'for the most part in slums like Church Street,' adding that 'if every unskilled labourer in Dublin were the tenant of a decent cottage of three or even two rooms, the city would not be divided into two hostile camps.'²

That contrast between rich and poor in Dublin before the Great War is emphasised by the extremely detailed tables of death produced at the time. The death rate per thousand was 16.5 for the professional class and 17.5 for the middle class, in contrast to 40.2 for the general service and workhouse category. The far higher mortality rates of the poor were largely the product of higher infant and child mortality, but overcrowding also meant that the poor were much more vulnerable to killer diseases such as tuberculosis and pneumonia.

In 1911 women constituted a majority in both cities, but men far outnumbered women in the prisons, hospitals, mental institutions, and workhouses. In Dublin such institutions contained over twice as many inmates as Belfast (15,533 against 7,735), more a reflection of Dublin's status as capital city than anything else.

Neither city had much in the way of a labour—never mind socialist—movement, though both nationalist and unionist movements contained a labourist tendency. Though Jim Larkin's stay of half a year or so 'shook Belfast to its roots' in 1907, according to his biographer Emmet Larkin (no relation), 'in the long run he achieved little of a tangible nature' there, and the événements of the spring of 1907, which began by uniting workers, ended up by increasing sectarian tensions.³ Labour would never win control of either Dublin or Belfast, though the Labour Party, founded by

Larkin and James Connolly in 1912, would get close in Dublin in 1942, when it became the biggest party in the city council.

By the nineteen-forties Dublin had regained its numerical superiority over Belfast. The population of most towns in the South grew after independence. In history, increasing urbanisation usually means industrialisation, and the policy of import-substituting industrialisation introduced in 1932 was partly responsible for the rising population of Ireland's cities and towns. The increasing urbanisation of the population should have provided a fertile field for trade unions, but the rise in union membership was by no means as smooth as the rise in town populations. Huge increases in membership in the nineteen-tens were followed by drastic declines in the twenties. After 1932, rival trade unions competed for the affiliation of workers in Seán Lemass's new factories, driving up membership again.

The course of wages over Larkin's years in Ireland is well documented. A wide-ranging survey conducted by the Free State Fiscal Inquiry Committee in 1923 showed that before the Great War skilled workers in Ireland were paid almost as much as their British peers. The gap in unskilled wages in the towns was still about one-quarter, however.⁴ But what of changes over time? In summary, the story is one of rapid rise between the early nineteen-hundreds and the early twenties, followed by little sustained rise thereafter till the nineteen-forties. Comparing wages for a broad range of skilled trades in 1914 and 1947, the year of Larkin's death, suggests a nominal rise of about 250 per cent over the period; the rise in unskilled wages would not have been very different.⁵ Real wages rose in the wake of the Great War, but, after adjustment for rising living costs, the rise in real wages between the mid-twenties and the mid-forties was minimal.

The nineteen-twenties were years of retrenchment and what would later be called 'fiscal rectitude'. Though the contrast between Cumann na nGaedheal and the young Fianna Fáil can be overdone—because by 1930–31 world conditions and political pressures were forcing Cumann na nGaedheal into measures undreamt of earlier—the changeover was nevertheless probably the most radical to occur in independent Ireland. Under Fianna Fáil, the nineteen-thirties were worse for farmers but better for urban dwellers than they would have been under Cumann na nGaedheal. The industrial work force rose considerably. Comparing wage data in Irish and British cities at the end of the thirties presents a mixed picture: bricklayers and local authority labourers were paid as much in Ireland as in Britain, for example, but the same could not be said for transport workers.

However, Irish wage levels lagged behind after 1939. Comparing industry-wide levels in 1938 and 1946 suggests that the gap between Irish and British men's wages rose from a sixth to a third; for women the rise was from 8 to 31 per cent.⁶ Was this because of the weakness of a famously divided labour movement? Larkin, after all, hated not only bosses; nor

was he guiltless in his feuds with Tom Johnson, the mild-mannered leader of the Labour Party, or the more difficult William O'Brien of the ITGWU. Some of the significant drop in the share of wages and salaries in net manufacturing output (from an average of 48.9 per cent in 1936–40 to 46.0 per cent in 1941–43) and in labour's share of domestically generated national income (from 51 per cent in 1938 to 44.3 per cent in 1944) might be explained in this way; but over the longer period it is the poor performance of the economy, not labour's declining share of the proceeds, that mattered most. War's end produced a rash of strikes, beginning in 1946 with a strike by teachers in Dublin. The Labour Court was set up to improve industrial relations in August 1946, but the strikes continued. On the night before the end of a two-month bus and tram strike in November 1947, passers-by in the streets cheered trams making trial trips.

Let us focus for a few moments on social conditions towards the end of Larkin's life. Before the introduction of BCG, tuberculosis was a deadly disease that hit large numbers of young people in the prime of life. It was most likely to attack in conditions of overcrowding and big families. In the nineteen-hundreds tuberculosis claimed more than 11,500 lives a year in Ireland; it was then the most common cause of death among Irish people. The disease must have had a macabre resonance for Larkin: it had claimed the life of his own father, an immigrant from Armagh, in Liverpool in 1887. In the nineteen-thirties it still caused about 3,500 deaths annually in the South, or about one death in twelve.

The death rate from TB was a sensitive barometer of deprivation; tellingly, it rose during the years of the Second World War. James Deeny, chief medical adviser to the Minister for Health in the nineteen-forties, wrote in his memoirs that 'to visit some of these places and see long lines of people, mainly young men and women, in bed in old-fashioned wards, under miserable conditions, without even a hot-water bottle in winter, hopeless and helpless, most of them slowly dying, was heart-breaking.'⁷ The need to provide isolation facilities for TB patients had proved an intractable problem for decades. By the time this was finally agreed, in 1945–46, the technology that would make prolonged stays in sanatoriums unnecessary had already been discovered. In the thirties and forties mortality rates from TB were twice as high in Ireland as in Britain. As the latest chest surgical treatments became available to the poor, the death rate fell from 1.25 per thousand in 1945 to 0.54 in 1952.

The victory, or near-victory, over TB and other infectious diseases curable by antibiotics came late to Ireland, and the result was a dramatic fall in mortality from TB in a short space of time. In the nineteen-forties increased concern with public health found its less controversial representations in postage-stamp cancellations of the time, such as *Are you sure your food is clean?* and *Cosain do leambh ar an diftéir*.

Infant mortality, often invoked by both historians and development experts as a guide to living standards, claimed about one young life in fifteen in the early nineteen-twenties. The rate was twice as high in the

cities as in rural districts. Infant mortality also rose significantly during the Second World War; the rise, mainly due to gastro-enteritis, was particularly marked in Dublin.⁸

The Southern economy remained open in one important sense during 1939-45: the emigrant outflow during the war years was very high, a reflection of both depressed conditions at home and the buoyant demand for labour in Britain. Between 1940 and 1945 136,000 travel permits or passports were issued to men and 62,000 to women. Those seeking them were people, mainly young and unskilled or semi-skilled, about to seek work in Britain. Since each trip required a permit, these numbers exaggerate the true emigration rate,⁹ but the net figure was perhaps two-thirds of the total. The widening real wage gap helps explain the rise in emigration, but employment opportunities were also much better in Britain. The low proportion of females among emigrants and the small number of permits issued in 1944 reflected the severe controls imposed at the time; the female proportion rose again after 1945. The Emigration Commission later interpreted the youthfulness of the emigrants—particularly the women—as evidence that emigration to Britain was 'not looked upon as involving a permanent or complete break which results from emigration overseas.' Throughout, the rate of emigration was highest in the west and in the border counties.

In what would become the Republic in 1949, economic conditions improved somewhat during Larkin's last years.¹⁰ Personal expenditure rose and investment recovered, doubling in real terms between 1944 and 1946. Following a decade or so of virtual stagnation, industrial output rose by about two-thirds between 1946 and 1951, and the increase was destined mainly for the domestic market. The census of 1951 offered another sign of hope: it was the first since 1841 to register an increase in the Twenty-Six Counties. Unemployment as a proportion of the total insured labour force fell from 10.6 per cent in 1946 to 7.5 per cent in 1950.

But the main boom in the late forties was in consumption, as people tried to make up for time lost during the war years. The number of cars registered for the first time rose from 2,848 in 1946 to 17,524 in 1950. Imports of nylon stockings rocketed from a few thousand a year during the war to an average of over 230,000 pairs in 1946-51. Still, tea and sugar continued to be rationed; in late 1947 the Government subsidised necessities at the cost of increasing duties on the 'old reliables', doubling the duty on fur and cosmetics and enacting huge increases in cinema prices. Royal Baking Powder offered a way 'to make light puddings in spite of dark flour.' On the eve of one of the worst cold spells on record, Fuel Importers (Éire) Ltd improvised by offering Dubliners a hundred tons of firewood clippings, which were 'not regarded as rationed fuel.' Eggs continued to do their vanishing act in late autumn in the towns, and consumers pretended not to understand 'why eggs should disappear as soon as prices are pegged.' The early months of 1947 saw the longest cold spell in memory, producing more hardship than any time during the war years.

Still, the report of the Social Service Department of the Rotunda Hospital, Dublin, for 1947 recorded 'a marked improvement in the general economic conditions of the patients. Increased wages and supply of goods made it possible for the average skilled workman in regular employment in the city to maintain himself and his family, at least as well as he did before the war.' For the unemployed and casually employed, things were also better, but they were still unable to support themselves without assistance from voluntary charities.

The Rotunda's social workers interviewed nearly seven thousand new patients; the slight decline from previous years was put down to the transport strike and the severe weather early in the year. The development of new public housing estates in Donnycarney and Cabra West meant that half the Rotunda mothers lived three miles or more from the hospital. One-third of those interviewed were found to need assistance. Their main requirements were extra nourishment and clothing; a few needed a maternity ambulance, help with housing accommodation, follow-up, and supervision.

The following account from the Rotunda's report for 1946 offers a revealing glimpse of conditions faced by the poorest inner-city Dubliners at the time:

Mrs. N. developed Phlebitis following her discharge from the wards on her 7th confinement and was advised to rest in bed at home. We were asked to arrange for a district nurse to call daily to dress her leg and also to ensure that she could obtain adequate rest and nourishment. We discovered that her home consisted of one small, attic room. There were holes in the floor, the outside walls were dripping with wet whilst the plaster was falling off the inside walls and ceiling and all water had to be carried up from the ground floor. Mrs. N. was in bed; the head of the bed was against the damp wall and beside an open window: as a result the baby had developed a cold. Mrs. N. and her husband and five children—the eldest was six and a half years—lived in this room and slept on the only bed. In spite of the difficulties, the home was reasonably clean. Mr. N., an unemployed cattle drover, was dependent on 18s. 4d. unemployment assistance, 12s. 6d. food vouchers and 5s. children's allowance per week and his rent was 10s. Occasionally he obtained a day's work and earned about £1. In addition the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was giving him a food voucher, value 4s. per week and the Catholic Social Service Food Centre was giving Mrs. N. dinner and milk every day. We applied at once to the Corporation Housing Department for accommodation for this family and seven months later they moved to a four-roomed Corporation house.

Such conditions provided an ideal breeding-ground for TB. But in general, housing had made considerable strides in Dublin and in the country as a whole since the nineteen-hundreds. The average number of people per room in Dublin had dropped from 1.55 in 1926 to 1.29 in 1936 and 1.14 in 1946. The proportion of families having more than two people per room fell from 45.3 per cent in 1926 to 27.3 per cent in 1946.

Social change has been much more rapid in the four decades after Larkin's death than in the four decades that straddled his time in Ireland. To take one example, on the face of it, sexual attitudes were as rigid in the nineteen-forties as they had been in the nineteen-hundreds; the 'illegitimacy' rate was about the same in 1950 as it had been in the early twenties. Even in Dublin, births outside marriage were very much the exception. As a young Dublin woman put it to the American sociologist Alexander Humphries about 1950, 'if a girl got into trouble the boy who was responsible would always marry her. And if he didn't, nobody would have anything to do with him. Even his own parents would make it hard for him. So the boy usually does marry the girl.'¹¹

All the same, census data suggest some change in sexual mores during this period. Direct evidence on premarital conceptions is lacking, but the census reports for 1911 (for the whole country) and 1946 (for the Twenty-Six Counties only), which contain special studies of marital fertility, offer some tantalising clues. They show a marked increase between 1911 and 1946 in the proportion of couples married less than one year at the time of the census who had at least one child. Among teenage brides the proportion rose from 12.7 per cent in 1911 to 30.6 per cent in 1946. The proportion in 1911 is consistent with minimal premarital sex, but the 1946 proportion indicates that one-fifth or more of those marrying in 1945-46 may have done so after conceiving. Among all brides of less than a year the proportions were less but the rise just as striking: 6.8 per cent to 15.9 per cent. The 1911 levels are consistent with little in the way of premarital sex. In 1946 the incidence of teenage premarital pregnancy or 'shotgun weddings' was very much less in Connacht and the three counties of Ulster than in the rest of the country. This is an important, previously unremarked on, change.

Attitudes to family limitation were also changing, though the big changes would come later. Even at the beginning of the century the middle classes were practising family limitation in Dublin. Humphries cites a man with a clerical job about 1950: 'People have to curtail their families. If I were to have another baby this year I'd be down on my uppers. The cost is terrible and this business about free maternity is bunk. It is inefficient and no one is going to avail himself of it unless he is a pauper.'¹² But the control was through 'rhythm' and continence, not through contraception.

Larkin's early years in Ireland coincided with the beginnings of what we know as the welfare state; in his final years, the welfare state was entering its glorious phase. One of the measures introduced by Asquith's reformist Liberal administration of 1906-11, the Old Age Pension Act (1908), was a particular boon to Ireland. The pension was means-tested, so Ireland's relative poverty entitled a higher proportion of people to its provisions. But the fact that one in twenty-five of the entire population of Ireland had been granted the pension by early 1909, against one in eighty-eight in England, was only partly a reflection of Ireland's greater poverty: there was also a good deal of what would today be called 'welfare fraud'.

The trouble was that hard evidence on people's ages was not easily come by: throughout the country the elderly and not-so-elderly testified to 'eating a potato out of [their] hand on the night of the Big Wind' in 1839. As Augustine Birrell, Chief Secretary at the time, reminisced much later, 'the "Big Wind" eventually played such havoc with the Treasury chest that it had to be discarded as untrustworthy evidence of age.' Birrell's department was put to the pin of its collar by 'the complexity of the budgets sent in by applicants, some of whom farmed over three hundred acres, and possessed horses, cows, and implements of husbandry.' A complete revision of the list was made, but thousands below the required age of seventy still benefited.

Still, the measure did much for the quality of life of old people, and it produced a massive income transfer to many of those who needed it most. Many elderly couples must really have believed, with their five shillings each, 'nach mbeadh siad aon lá bocht lena mbeo arís.' The old age pension also produced an amazing increase in filial piety and for some old folk a shift from the workhouse to family care. It was said that 'if an old age pensioner begins to cough, so much anxiety is displayed by his family that the doctor is dragged out of his home ... to prolong the life of this eligible member of the family.'¹³ Ernest Blythe, the first Minister for Finance of the new state, is perhaps best remembered nowadays for having cut the old age pension in 1924—an understandable ploy, perhaps, in that this item alone absorbed one-tenth of the Free State's public expenditure and that falling prices had been increasing the real value of the pension since 1921, but mean-minded and regressive all the same.

As noted, the nineteen-twenties were not propitious years for advances in social welfare. In this era of de Valera-bashing it is no harm remembering that in this sphere the Fianna Fáil administrations of the nineteen-thirties were far more radical than their predecessors. They alleviated the miserable lot of the unemployed, they gave thousands of small farmers a modest 'dole', and in the towns they considerably expanded the stock of public housing. In the thirties the alternative to them was not a compassionate and 'enlightened' administration of the modern kind but more of Cumann na nGaedheal nineteen-twenties-style.

A measure enacted towards the end of Larkin's days, the payment of children's allowances to families with three children or more from 1943, created its own controversies. The Department of Finance fought a rearguard action against it. Though neither as generous nor as fair as the old age pension, it proved a boon to many hard-pressed families. More generally, the slow growth of the economy firmly constrained the scope of welfare reform.

Economically and socially, Larkin's years in Ireland were ones of modest progress and missed opportunities. Part of the problem was that Ireland, a newly independent economy, made its share (and perhaps more than its share) of policy mistakes. By the late forties it should have been clear that the road to economic self-sufficiency was a cul-de-sac. Some, in

their enlightened moments, realised as much; but it would take longer for politicians, trade unionists and the people to realise that the aphorism 'no man is an island' applied to small economies, even island economies, as well.