



Traditional kitchen on display at Fermanagh County Museum. Copyright of Fermanagh County Museum.

Fermanagh's Farm Economy

Fermanagh's economy, through the heyday of the British Empire and the industrial revolution – the 18th and 19th centuries – remained rooted in the soil and, today, the farm economy is still the mainstay of everyday life. However, the making of that farm economy is often a tale of the unexpected.

A strain of the infant industrial revolution did seep into the farm economy of the 17th century, with the birth of a linen industry in Fermanagh. Linen making

was the first cottage industry – the farmers grew and harvested flax, which was spun, boiled, 'wound' and woven into linen at home, usually by the women. Flax and linen, anything from the raw cloth to a fine, bleached textile, was sold on the town markets – mainly in Enniskillen, Fermanagh's modern capital. The linen industry was never particularly stable – boom and bust throughout the eighteenth century, as it adjusted to the whim of industrial markets. There was a particularly steep decline in the 1770s, but this cottage industry survived until the second quarter of the 19th century, when it finally succumbed to the unerring logic of the industrial revolution as linen weaving became centralised in urban factories.

For a short time, the linen industry did confer on the rural people of Fermanagh a small measure of comfort and security and the benefits from this cottage industry were, for that era, spread relatively equitably. However, rural society was immutably hierarchical and the tenant farmer at the foot of the social tree suffered in the shadows cast by his more elevated peers. Fermanagh's plantation aristocracy enjoyed the rarified atmosphere and panoramic view of the world from the top of that social tree. However, Fermanagh's aristocratic families, as a rule, recognised and were directed by a sense of social responsibility – they did not become absentee landlords, notorious in Irish and Scottish history.

Whilst residents on their estates, many of Fermanagh's landlords let tracts of their land to middlemen (terney begs or tiarnaí beaga) who, in turn, sub-let land at inflated rents to smaller tenant farmers. Inevitably, these middlemen became the target of farmers' unrestrained scorn and rage, being regarded as nothing better than usurers. Gradually, through the 18th century, the

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middlemen vanished, to be replaced by landlord's agents and a class of well-to-do tenant farmers, who were the heartland of the landlord's support. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, farmers who were considered to be amongst the affluent lived on anything from 15 to 30 acres: they kept some cattle, grew cereals – wheat, oats and barley – flax and the ubiquitous potato. There was an underclass of cottiers who let only an acre, on which they grew potatoes, and laboured on others' land to live, and the irredeemable poor – labourers with no land.

The 1845 – 47 Famine attacked the farming underclass. Many died of starvation or, hunger-ravaged, of typhus epidemics against which they had no resistance. Others emigrated – one quarter of the Fermanagh population disappeared between 1841 and 1851. Some fled the countryside to the town workhouses. The affluent farmers were insulated from famine by a diverse cropping regime. However they did not emerge from this turmoil unscathed. The repeal of the Corn Laws saw Irish cereals uncompetitive on the export market and they began to concentrate increasingly on livestock.

The famine is an indelible stain on Irish history. From that time, farmers – from 'yeoman' to 'cottier' – understood that only they would be reliable guardians of their future, and they sought salvation from famine in a series of land reforms. Historians mark the late 19th century as a platform of radical political and social change in Ireland. The impact of the Land League and the land reform of the 1880s is sometimes underestimated. More than any other political event, the concessions of the 'three fs' – fair rent, free sale and fixity of tenure and compulsory land purchase at the turn of the century and after the Partition, have shaped the social values of people in rural Fermanagh. Today, a farming community, owning the land and sure of its place in the scheme of things, is the backbone of rural Fermanagh.

Author Iain Macauley

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