

Prologue

While not wishing to ‘give any one the impression that Galway is all dead’, Robert Lynd put it thus in 1912:

If you let the sexton take you up the bell-tower and show you Galway and its streets from that height, you will as likely as not get the impression that you are looking out upon a city where the very houses are death’s-heads. Skulls of lofty mansions, the windowlessness of which gives an appearance as of empty eye sockets, line the streets in graveyard ruin. Other buildings lie in stony masses, like bones heaped and mixed together in an old tomb. No one who has not seen Galway from a height like this can realize to the full what an air the place has of a town awaiting a blessed resurrection. Little of the grand life has been left here. Emptiness sits in the places of abundance. Tall and smokeless chimneys rise everywhere, giving the town at noonday the appearance that other cities have at dawn. So hollow of joy and vigour does this grey town look from the tower of St Nicholas that it has been likened fitly enough to a scooped-out egg-shell. Flour-mills, factories – how many were there even thirty years ago that are now silent behind cobwebs and broken windows!¹

Galway’s charm and economic success lay in days that had long since passed and in the 1920s the line of quays, empty warehouses and unused mills gave melancholy evidence of a former affluence. Yet while it displayed little of its ancient grandeur, Galway retained what Henry Inglis described as ‘an air of a place of importance’.²

Galway was both an urban and a rural county, a congested district and a Gaeltacht region. It was a focal point of the Land War (1879–81) and the Ranch War (1904–8) and was one of the few areas outside Dublin that was ‘out’ in 1916. Yet it played only a minor role in the military struggle of the War of Independence (1919–21) in comparison with counties such as Tipperary and Cork. The pistol was widely used in Galway, but it was employed to force the surrender of land rather than the surrender of the British forces.

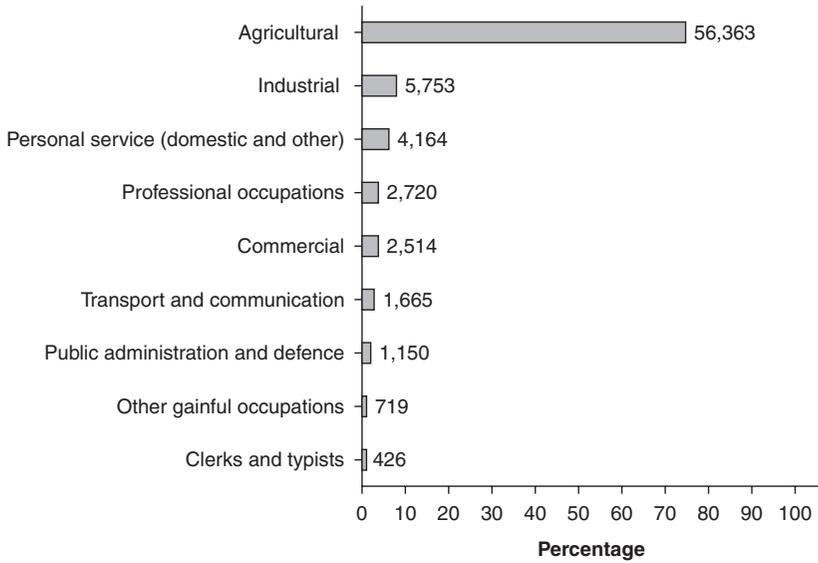


Figure P.1 Persons in specified occupation in County Galway, 1926

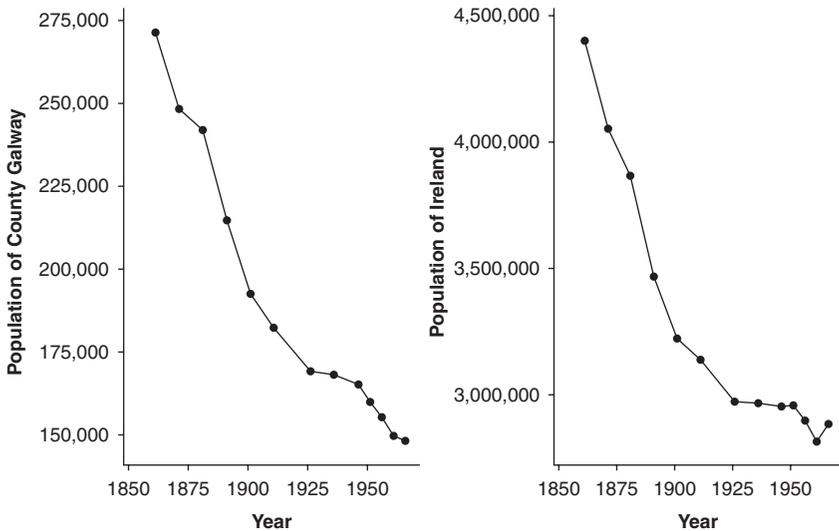


Figure P.2 Population of County Galway and population of Ireland, 1861–1966

Regional studies of the Irish revolution undertaken by David Fitzpatrick, Peter Hart, Marie Coleman, Michael Farry, Fergus Campbell, Joost Augusteijn and others have revealed the fact that Irish political experience is far more complex than the traditional one-dimensional

popular version. Fitzpatrick has spoken of how 'it is a regrettable historiographical accident that the political history of the Irish Revolution has hitherto been focused on Dublin, as though Dublin were the spiritual capital of Ireland'.³ This book builds on a significant emerging genre. It extends the historical debate beyond the Irish revolution and introduces a new study of post-revolutionary experience in Ireland at a county level.

In 1922, Galway society was a mix of the haves and the have-nots, of those challenging and those looking to consolidate the new state, of loyal treatyites and avowed anti-treatyites, a professional middle class, a conservative small-farmer community and a destitute rural poor. For many people in Galway, poverty, not politics, was their primary concern. For many others, the possession of land was an obsession more critical than the attainment of an Irish Republic. Furthermore, the idealisation of the west by cultural nationalists and literary revivalists, and the veritable chorus of comment in praise of the simple life it supposedly represented, contrasted with the reality of everyday life.

With a land valuation of £488,276, Galway was one of the poorest counties in Ireland.⁴ In some areas of the rural countryside the simple fact was that in a community where 75 per cent of the workforce was involved in agriculture, the rugged, undulating, exposed nature of the land was incapable of sustaining many of the people except in a state of near poverty (Figure P.1).⁵ In 1926, the population of County Galway stood at 169,366, but it was in a continual state of decline (Figure P.2). The fundamental truth behind the image of rural Ireland as the reservoir of native culture was that of an emigrating population.⁶

Emigration, of course, was not unique to the west of Ireland. Yet what typified the *mentalité* of the rural emigrant was its penchant for moving 'from the known to the known', that is to say, 'from areas where the emigrant lived to places where their friends and relations awaited them'.⁷ In 1904 Horace Plunkett wrote:

Recently a daughter of a small farmer in County Galway with a family too 'long' for the means of subsistence available, was offered a comfortable home on a farm owned by some better-off relative, only thirty miles away, though probably twenty miles beyond the limits of her peregrinations. She elected in preference to go to New York, and being asked her reason by a friend of mine, replied in so many words, 'because it is nearer'. She felt she would be less of a stranger in a New York tenement house, among her relatives and friends who had already emigrated, than in another part of County Galway.⁸

Among a people who had 'for more than a century looked west across the Atlantic to America as the nearest land, its nearest kin',⁹ it was Boston, Chicago or New York, and not Dublin or the Gaeltacht colonies

of County Meath that offered a sense of security and a sense of the familiar. As Máirtín Ó Cadhain wrote of his character Mairin in *The Year 1912*,

she had been nurtured on American lore from infancy. South Boston, Norwood, Butte, Montana, Minnesota, California, plucked chords in her imagination more distinctly than did Dublin, Belfast, Wexford, or even places only a few miles out on the Plain beyond Brightcity.¹⁰

The lack of social mobility in rural Ireland produced a society where countless people had rarely, if ever, strayed outside a two- or three-mile radius from their own home. Such societal limitations fostered a solidarity and sense of place in the 'local' communities and 'local' village associations of the towns and cities of North America, Britain and elsewhere.

The continual high level of emigration was a clear adjustment to congestion, pressure on the land, and the lack of social and monetary mobility in rural Ireland. Economic want forced many people to emigrate. However, many others, beguiled by hopes of social betterment, chose to leave. Fitzpatrick has commented that

as the impulse to emigrate altered from shove to tug to promotion, so the expression of farewell changed from casual to sorrowful to congratulatory. Emigration became a fact of life, a 'fashion', a 'fever'. As P. D. Murphy wrote in 1917 of 'the intending emigrant': 'You can tell him at a glance, for there is something in his appearance that betrays him. He is listless, restless, discontented ... He has caught the fever that has depopulated the Irish countryside.'¹¹

Unwilling to sacrifice herself to the drudgery of small holder west of Ireland rural life, many a young Irish girl, wrote George Russell, 'must have looked on the wrinkled face and bent back and rheumatic limbs of her mother, and grown maddened in a sudden passion that her own fresh young life might end just like this'.¹²

For some aspiring emigrants, the expression of farewell may well have changed from the sorrowful to the liberating, but for those compelled to emigrate, the newfound idealism of the Irish Free State stood in stark contrast to the reality of the continued rural depopulation of the west. In August 1927, a reporter for the *Galway Observer* captured the emotive pain of these departures.

I saw heartbroken fathers and mothers with the snows of many winters on their heads and tear bedimmed eyes take their last farewell of strapping sons and splendid specimens of womanhood at the railway station on Wednesday. The young people were bound for America. It was a saddening, a never to be forgotten sight. One old man who I was told had come all

the way from a remote district of Connemara to say goodbye, embraced his daughter. He was assisted out of the station while the tears sparkling like summer sun stole down his wrinkled brow. A pearl of great price had passed out of his life forever.¹³

Here lay the emotional tragedy for those too poor in purse, Galway's silent exports, the sons and daughters of small farmers and landless men, the remnant of Irish history whose economy had passed them by and whose remittance cheques sent home from abroad would become of infinitely greater assistance to their local community than had they themselves stayed behind. In 1924–25 a government survey of fifteen west Galway districts found that only three areas had greater financial input from livestock than remittances.¹⁴ Commenting on the number of eligible bachelors in the county in 1931 and the effect emigration was having on local society, Frank Fahy, Fianna Fáil deputy for Galway, stated:

Of course, there were in every parish a few crusty old bachelors who keep a tight grip on the purse strings and refuse to get married for fear that they would have to spend a little in buying silk stockings for the ladies. But the average young man would get married if he could afford to do so. The large percentage of bachelors is one of the greatest indications that we are not as prosperous as members of the Government Party would lead us to believe.¹⁵

The book begins to build an image of regional political and social life in the immediate post-revolutionary period. With an unresolved land question, a tradition of radical agrarianism, pockets of extreme poverty and sectarian violence, a language question, a sense of distance from the capital, an east–west economic variance, and a divided political society, the Galway experience raises important questions concerning our understanding of the achievements and disappointments of the first decade of Irish independence. The establishment of the new state brought new expectations and new frustrations when these were not met.

The first part of the book discusses the turbulent years of 1922 and 1923, the local electorate's endorsement of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the beginning of domestic Irish politics in what was a vastly altered post-treaty world. Part II examines four major themes in rural agrarian society – land, poverty, the Irish language, and law and order – and establishes the level of deprivation in local society that the Cumann na nGaedheal government had to confront. Part III is more political in tone and it attempts to relate the political record of the county to the existing socio-economic realities of local life. Particular emphasis is placed on the election campaigns, the issues involved, and the voting patterns and trends that emerged in Galway. Why did the people vote for pragmatism

over radicalism in 1922? Why did Cumann na nGaedheal fail to capitalise on this position over the next decade? How did the Cumann na nGaedheal government address (or fail to address) Galway's social and economic difficulties? Were the criticisms of local Cumann na nGaedheal party supporters justified? Was the party abandoning its republican past? Was the government becoming too removed from the communities it governed? Was it ignoring vital local issues? Did the political opposition offer any viable alternatives? Why did the west have to wait? These are some of the fundamental questions addressed in the book. Selectivity is inevitable. It is not a comparative text. The historiographical neglect of other comprehensive socio-political regional studies of the Irish Free State period makes such an extensive brief altogether impossible. Only with further research will the complete range of regional experiences be recovered and the fuller picture of the impact of the revolution and the civil war on post-revolutionary Irish society become discernible.

On 6 December 1921, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed in London and confirmed dominion status on a twenty-six-county Irish Free State. The settlement represented a significant advancement on earlier offers of Home Rule, but it failed to secure an Irish Republic. On 7 January 1922, the Dáil approved the treaty by a narrow margin of 64 votes to 57. Among the citizenry there endured a blithe belief that an Irish government with its own autonomous legislature would help solve the pressing social and economic problems of the west. The pro-treaty government now had an opportunity to test the strength of this assumption on the creative potential of political independence. Galway, along with the rest of the country, waited with much anticipation and, in certain cases, apprehension. What follows is a study of a people and its government in one of the key problematic areas in the nascent Irish Free State.

Notes

- 1 Robert Lynd, 'Galway of the Races', in Seán McMahon (ed.), *Robert Lynd: Galway of the Races: Selected Essays* (Dublin, 1990), pp. 64–5.
- 2 *Thom's Directory 1923* (Dublin, 1923), p. 1163; a phrase Henry Inglis attributed to Galway on his visit to the city in 1834. Cited in M. A. G. Ó Tuathaigh, "... the air of a place of importance": aspects of nineteenth-century Galway', in Diarmuid Ó Cearbhaill (ed.), *Galway: Town and Gown 1484–1984* (Dublin, 1984), p. 136.
- 3 David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life 1913–1921: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution* (2nd edn, Cork, 1998), p. xiii.
- 4 *Census of Ireland 1926* (Dublin, 1927), Population, Area and Valuation, vol. I, pp. 19–29. According to the census County Galway measured 1,467,639 acres and, as noted, had a land valuation of £448,276. County Mayo (also in

Connacht), a similarly poor region, measured 1,333,941 acres and recorded a land valuation of £338,321 and County Clare (in Munster) measured 787,768 acres and had a land valuation of £325,243. By way of comparison, County Meath (in Leinster), which measured 577,816 acres, had a land valuation of £555,904 and County Cork (in Munster), an area of 1,843,590 acres, recorded a land valuation of £1,316,117.

- 5 *Ibid.*, Occupations, vol. II, pp. 20, 21.
- 6 *Ibid.*, Population, Area and Valuation, vol. I, p. 5; R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600–1972* (London, 1988), p. 538.
- 7 *Commission on Emigration and Other Population Problems, 1948–1954, Reports* (1955), p. 137. Cited in Terence Dooley, *The Land for the People: The Land Question in Independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004), p. 135.
- 8 Horace Plunkett, *Ireland in the New Century* (London, 1904), p. 49. Cited in Dooley, *The Land for the People*, p. 135.
- 9 Máirtín Ó Cadhain, ‘The year 1912’, in *The Road to Brightcity and Other Stories*, translated by Eoghan Ó Tuairisc (Dublin, 1981), p. 7.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 11 David Fitzpatrick, *Irish Emigration 1801–1921* (Dublin, 1984), p. 42.
- 12 AE (G. W. Russell), *Cooperation and Nationality* (Dublin, 1912), p. 66. Cited in J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 376.
- 13 *Galway Observer*, 13 Aug. 1927.
- 14 Micheál Ó Fathartaigh, ‘Cumann na nGaedheal, the land issue and west Galway 1923–1932’, *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, vol. 60 (2008), p. 158. For many uneconomic holders who had survived on credit all year, the remittances sent at Christmas enabled them to settle their debt with the shopkeeper for another year. In 1927 the *Connacht Tribune* reported that a sum estimated at £20,000 was sent to County Galway from emigrants in North America during the Christmas season.
- 15 Speech by Frank Fahy at a Fianna Fáil meeting in Glinsk (Connemara). *Connacht Tribune*, 7 Mar. 1931.