

The Investment Behaviour of Irish Landlords 1850-75: Some Preliminary Findings

By CORMAC Ó GRÁDA

To have "an opinion about Ireland," one must begin by getting the truth; and where is it to be had in the country? Or, rather, there are two truths, the Catholic truth and the Protestant truth, the two parties do not see things with the same eyes. . . Ask about an estate, you may be sure almost that people will make mistatements, or will volunteer them if not asked. . . In the midst of all these sacred truths, attested with "I give ye my sacred honour and word," which is the stranger to select?"—*William M. Thackeray*

THE famous meeting that took place at Irishtown, County Mayo, on 19 April 1879, marked the real beginning of the Irish Land War. Though the main purpose of the meeting was the airing of some local grievances, the national press quickly took note and several speakers covered much more than the local situation in their contributions. The most radical speech was made by Thomas Brennan, an ex-Fenian, soon to be made secretary of the Land League; its key point, often raised during the following struggle, and also echoed somewhat later by James Connolly in an urban context, was the following:

This is no mere sentimental question. . . You may get a federal parliament, perhaps Repeal of the Union—nay, more, you may establish an Irish republic, but as long as the tillers of the soil are forced to support *a useless and indolent aristocracy*, your federal parliament would be but a bauble and your Irish republic but a fraud. . .¹

Of all "the wild and foolish ideas" floating around the Irish countryside during the 1880's, this, that the landlords were a parasitical class, had perhaps the greatest revolutionary potential. The landed interest did its utmost to defend itself. On the purely ideological front, arguments concerning property rights were avoided as a rule, but there was an insistence that landlords, as a group, did not rack-rent and did not evict at will, as was commonly alleged. More important, it was vehemently maintained that they were responsible for substantial productive investment in the land. However, peasant proprietorship was the result of the Land War, and the impression of relative inactivity on the part of landlords has largely prevailed. Only very recently has this come under attack again, this time from what has been called the "revisionist" school of Irish historians. The revisionists, who have questioned a wide variety of received ideas on the Irish past, see the traditional accounts as re-

¹ Quoted by Michael Davitt in *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland*, 1904, p. 149. Connolly's famous statement that "if you remove the English army tomorrow and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the Socialist Republic your efforts would be in vain," first appeared in the *Shan Van Vocht*, Jan. 1897.

flections of old-style Home Rule nationalism, and credit the landlords with a more enlightened role.¹

The present paper tries to introduce a new dimension into the discussion by looking at investment behaviour of landlords in quantitative terms. The study deals mainly with the post-Famine period, the Indian summer of Irish landlordism, though some comments are offered on other periods too. The information presented, while tentative, should be of use not only in assessing landlord and tenant claims retrospectively but also in examining the political economy of the Land War itself. Obviously, nearly all revolutions involve costs due to dislocational and expectational considerations: to the extent that the achievement of owner-occupancy meant investment foregone, this is certainly a factor to be taken into account. However, the long-run aspects are usually far more important. To pose the question at hand in counterfactual terms, would the retention of the old system have meant a stronger performance by Irish agriculture?

The paper is divided into three sections. Section I refers to some contemporary impressionistic evidence, and suggests an estimate of improvement expenditure, based entirely on such evidence and on aggregate statistical sources. Section II deals with some information from a selection of the available estate accounts, and Section III rounds off the paper with some tentative conclusions and interpretations.

I

For the post-Famine period there is broad agreement in the literature that landlords were not substantial investors in the land in the pre-Famine years. The weight of evidence presented to the Devon Commissioners in 1844 seems to support their conclusion on the subject:

It is admitted on all hands, that according to the general practice in Ireland, the landlord builds neither dwelling-houses nor farm-offices, nor puts fences, gates, etc. into good order, before he lets his land to a tenant. The cases in which a landlord does any of those things are the exceptions. The system, however, of giving aid in these matters is becoming increasingly prevalent.²

Different reasons have been adduced for such a state of affairs. Contemporary critics often put the blame on absenteeism, or on the short-sighted mercenary attitude of the typical proprietor. Such views were repeated by classical economists like Ricardo, who wrote of the landlords that they "will, for the sake of a little present rent, divide and subdivide their farms, until they receive from each tenant

¹ Strictly speaking, of course, there is no revisionist *school*, since the revisionists themselves disagree on certain fundamental issues. An early example of the new approach is P. Lynch and J. Vaizey, *Guinness's Brewery in the Irish Economy 1759-1876*, Cambridge, 1960, pp. 9-36, 161-76. L. M. Cullen, the most prolific of the new writers, has summarized many of his conclusions in *An Economic History of Ireland since 1660*, 1972. Barbara Solow, whose work on *The Irish Land Question and the Irish Economy 1870-1903*, Cambridge, Mass., 1971, is referred to below, also rejects the older interpretations. On landlord behaviour see Cullen, pp. 139-40; Lynch and Vaizey, p. 168; Solow, pp. 77-85.

² Report from H.M. Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of the Law and Practice in Respect to the Occupation of Land in Ireland (the Devon Report), B.P.P. 1845 (605), XIX, p. 16.

the merest trifle of rent."¹ However, a better generalization might be that a substantial majority of the tenants benefited in no way from any improvement that went on. In the 1840's, just before the Famine, two-thirds of all Irish landholders held less than 15 statute acres; it was these tenants, many of whom perished when the potato failed, who constituted the real problem in Ireland, and it was to their condition that a voluminous literature, as well as the Devon and Poor Inquiry Reports,² were addressed. Few landlords were likely to have drained, or built houses, or introduced new crops or rotations, for these people. Indeed, even when there was a will, there was little scope. The landlords, by facilitating subdivision and subletting earlier in the century, were probably the main contributors to the existing state of affairs; however, "improvement" could have meant little to the small tenant on the eve of the Famine, and the landlord was unlikely to be a gainer by it either. The absence of landlord investment in the smaller holdings was a reflection of the intractability of the rural crisis, and, at the same time, another reminder that the cottier economy was doomed. It is certain, though, that some landlords, particularly proprietors of larger estates, did support their more substantial tenants during those years. The middle tenant or farmer, scarcely affected by the Famine, was relatively secure in his tenure throughout the century, and, given a modicum of ambition and good fortune, could persuade his landlord to contribute to a variety of improvement expenses. To say this is not to take from the useful generalization of the Devon Commissioners: it is just to recognize the rather complex web of social relationships existing in rural Ireland at the time. We would still argue that most of the improvement that went on in the pre-Famine period was the tenants' own work: this consisted largely of the reclamation of previously extra-marginal land during the post-Waterloo decades. Perhaps over a million acres were put into use in this way, to feed the rapidly increasing population.³ However, such "improvement" was not permanent; most of the land fell back into its uncultivated state after the Famine, and was used afterwards for grazing purposes only, or not at all. In terms of subsistence for several hundred thousand people for twenty or thirty years, the value of such improvement, no matter how temporary, was enormous, nevertheless.

It seems safe to say that there was more landlord investment in the 1850's and 1860's than in preceding decades. Assessment of the qualitative evidence is not easy, though. Both landlord and tenant used a series of royal inquiries as platforms on which to argue their cases, and there were scores of publications. Disinterested comment was less frequent, and more difficult. Curiously enough, relatively little was written about land improvements until the late 1860's, and it was only when Gladstone decided to act on the Irish question that the claims and the counter-claims became really vocal. In the next few paragraphs, I present some seemingly

¹ Ricardo to Trower, 24 July 1823: Piero Sraffa (ed), *Works*, ix, Cambridge, 1952, p. 314.

² *Report from H.M. Commissioners for Inquiry into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland* (the Poor Inquiry), B.P.P. 1835 (369), xxxii.

³ The population of Ireland increased by about three million between 1800 and 1841; we merely assume that the extra mouths required a million extra acres of tillage for subsistence.

objective contemporary assessments, which I have disentangled from the mass of more partisan statements.

A few passages from the minutes of the Select Committee of Tenure and Improvement of Law Act (Ireland), dating from 1865, will serve as a useful starting-point. One of the most important witnesses to appear before this body was Mountfort Longfield, for a long time professor of political economy at Trinity College, and later chief executive of the Encumbered Estates Court and its successor, the Landed Estates Court. The Encumbered Estates Court was created after the Famine to ease the transfer of insolvent properties. Longfield was questioned at length, but only a few of his replies need be given here:¹

56. In Ireland what is the custom as a rule?—As a rule the tenant takes the land in any condition in which it happens to be in, and makes the most he can of it, and a few landlords give help towards buildings, and sometimes, though more rarely, they give some help towards drainage.

57. But as a rule, it is the tenants who improve the land, is it not?—As a rule, it is the tenants who improve the land.

58. Whatever improvements are made?—Yes.

258. I want to define what you understand by the word improvement; in the first place, it means buildings?—Yes.

259. In the second place drainage?—Yes, drainage chiefly.

260. Fencing?—Fencing is sometimes the reverse of an improvement; taking down a fence is as often an improvement as making one.

393. We are getting rapidly beyond “only a few estates are well kept-up in Ireland?”—If I said “only a few,” I should have said “in proportion to the number of badly-kept estates”; one man may say that twenty is few, and another may say the same of fifty.

Longfield also spoke of the landlords who had purchased encumbered estates through his court. There has been some controversy among historians about these, who they were, how they compared with their predecessors, and so on. The traditional view, which has not so far been successfully countered, is that many of the purchasers were of native Irish stock, former *gombeen-men* (usurers), and professional men with some idle capital. In all, well over £20 million was spent through these courts on up to a sixth or a seventh of the lettable land of the country. Neither Longfield nor anybody else has ever argued that the native owners were great improvers: the only query is as to their number. Longfield's own opinion of the new landlords was that “they were more intelligent men generally, and had something more than the capital which they had made themselves; but on the other hand, I think they were too harsh on the tenants; they were men who had not the old traditions of negligence and indulgence combined.”²

¹ *Select Committee on the Tenure and Improvement of Land (Ireland) Act*, B.P.P. 1865 (402), XI. In 393 the questioner was Sir Robert Peel, who seemed afraid that Longfield might be taken to show the landlords in an unfavourable light.

² *Ibid.*, Q. 28.

Two landlord witnesses to this committee made several seemingly impartial statements about improvements, and their contributions may be mentioned very briefly. McCarthy Downing, a County Cork landlord, stated that he was unaware of any improvements made in Ireland "except by those landlords who had borrowed money for the purpose of drainage."¹ Lord Devon's Limerick agent, one Edward Curling, was content to go along with the old pre-Famine generalization, that in England all improvements were the proprietors', but that in Ireland it was "entirely opposite."²

One of the best-known surveyors of Irish agriculture in the 1880's was James Caird, the chief ideologue of "high farming" in Britain. Caird was not over-impressed with what he saw. He had been to Ireland previously, at the time of the Famine, when his friend, Sir Robert Peel, had sought his advice, and he published a pamphlet at the time. His second visit also resulted in a publication, and we quote his conclusions on the subject of improvement:

After an interval of twenty years I cannot say that . . . agriculture presented much evidence of general improvement. The people are better clothed, better housed and better fed, not because the produce of the ground has been materially increased, but because it has become of more value, and is divided among two-thirds of the numbers who shared it then. . . Most of the wet land is still undrained, except in Ulster and the eastern seaboard of the country, there is little appearance of any investment of capital in cultivation. To this general rule there are many exceptions. But the exceptions only bring into darker contrast the common rule.³

Caird does not attempt quantification, but his judgement cannot be treated lightly. As a general assessment, it is in line with Longfield's.

Another valuable contemporary source is the reports of the Irish Poor Law Inspectors on landlord-tenant relations, prepared in 1870 on request from London.⁴ Barbara Solow, who has written an excellent book on the Irish land question,⁵ relies heavily on these for her discussion of landlord investment behaviour. In my opinion, her treatment of the material, while challenging, is not entirely satisfactory, though here again it is a question of balance. She relies on the reports of Samuel Horsley and Dr Brodie, two inspectors who stated that all important improvements, at least on the larger estates, were the joint creation of both landlord and tenant. As against this, one might quote Mr Robinson, inspector for much of Leinster, who wrote: "it appears . . . that the dwelling houses, offices, fences and other works existing on the farms in this district, have been mainly created at the cost of the present tenants and their predecessors." Another inspector, Mr Hamilton, who worked in the north, wrote as follows:

¹ *Ibid.*, Q. 2880. ² *Ibid.*, Q. 3983.

³ James Caird, *The Irish Land Question*, 1869, p. 19. Caird's earlier pamphlet was *Ireland and The Plantation Scheme; or, The West of Ireland as a Field for Investment*, Edinburgh, 1850.

⁴ *Reports from Poor Law Inspectors in Ireland to the Existing Relations between Landlord and Tenant in Respect of Improvement on Farms*, B.P.P. 1870 (31), xiv.

⁵ Solow, *op. cit.*

On the whole, after carefully going through all the papers and answers submitted to me, and from the inquiries I have made, I have come to the conclusion that throughout my district the great bulk of the improvements (excepting the re-arrangement of the holdings on the estates in mountain districts) has been executed by the present and former tenants themselves, entirely at their own cost, without guarantee of any kind, and that this is, and long has been, the custom of the country.

Mr Bourke, inspector for an area stretching from Laois to Kerry, could sum up:

Upon the general subject of land improvement, it may be observed that it remains in much the same position as 1845 when the report was issued of Lord Devon's Commission. A large portion of the country continues in an unimproved state; and though some advance has been made in cultivation, yet there has been no adequate capital expended in permanently beneficial works, either by landlord or by tenant. Of whatever has been done, the chief part is undoubtedly due to the tenant.

Thus, evidence is by no means as clearcut as might seem from a reading of the Horsley or Brodie reports alone. A cautious and moderate assessment of all twelve reports might be that landlords were responsible for most of the permanent drainage that went on, that on the larger estates they sometimes contributed to buildings and outhouses, but that on the whole, the amount of improvement going on was rather small and insufficient.

Regarding the larger estates, on which landlords are reputed to have often been more liberal, in the 1870's there were only 300 properties of over 10,000 acres in Ireland, but these accounted for a third of the country's total area. These figures imply that landownership in Ireland was even more concentrated than in Britain.¹

What of the evidence presented to the Royal Commissions? Literally scores of witnesses to the Bessborough Commission, the most ambitious undertaking of its kind since the Devon Commission, dwelt on improvement; each side made emotive claims, and replied at length to the points of their class adversaries. Much of the evidence is probably of limited value to the economic historian, but there are still some passages by recognized authorities, which are worth repeating here. One of Ireland's leading experts on agriculture, Professor Baldwin of Glasnevin, made the following statement to the Commissioners:

It is important, I think that the Commission would have clear, convincing proof on that point (improvement), because I see there has been a good deal of discussion about it. . . If you take the Down Survey, you can see, for instance, at the time of that survey, what state Ireland was in. Take the ordnance survey maps,

¹ See the return in B.P.P. 1876 (1492), LXXX, 61, and J. H. Clapham, *An Economic History of Modern Britain*, II (Cambridge, 1938), p. 253, and the sources listed by him.

as I have done. I contend that the bulk of that improvement has been done by the tenants, and I value it at upwards of a hundred millions of money. Wherever you go there is the clearest evidence who made the improvements. There are improvements on a large scale by some landlords, but it is a mere drop in the ocean compared with what the people themselves have done.¹

While Baldwin was far from being an advocate of the Land League or of peasant proprietorship, he clearly saw the landlords' part in improvements as a subsidiary one, and was concerned to have it seen in its right perspective. Other witnesses saw the matter in the same way, in response to questions asked.

95. As a rule, according to your experience in Kilkenny, who makes the improvements in the land when they are made—is it the tenant or the landlord?—The tenant, except on particular estates—those of the larger proprietors.

96. But isn't it the practice that the tenant makes the improvements?—Yes; and especially where land is reclaimed.

315. As a general rule, who makes the improvements in your district, the landlord or the tenant?—The invariable rule throughout Ireland is that the improvements are made by the tenant. In some cases advances are made by good landlords, to assist improvements, but improvements are seldom made wholly at the expense of the landlord.

9042. All the improvements are made by the tenants?—Yes; I am not aware of any by landlords in that neighbourhood.

9043. What do the improvements generally consist of?—I remember for twenty-five or thirty years, and during that period draining and subsoiling to a considerable extent and at a heavy expense, were effected. The fields were much smaller than they are now. Threshing machines have come into operation, and they are building a better class of farms and houses generally.

The reader may find these impressions repeated by several other relatively disinterested witnesses. But it is now time to be more concrete.

While it is clear that landlords, in some parts of the country, were in the habit of providing tenants with timber and slates when a house was being built, or iron gates when a field was being refenced or enclosed, such gifts can hardly have absorbed much of their money. The number of new houses with slate roofs built in the 1850's and 1860's was not large, and thatched houses were still common at the end of the period in rural Ireland. At any rate, landowners rarely boasted about being seriously out of pocket as a result of expenditure under this heading. Dr Knox, one of the poor-law inspectors reporting in 1870, has left two different estimates on the proportion of total expenditure on dwellings and outhouses incurred by the landlords. The first figure is only 2 per cent of the total, the second still only a moderately impressive 25 per cent. And these came from an area where such landlord help was

¹ *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Working of the Landlord and Tenant (Ireland) Act, 1870, and the Amending Acts* (Bessborough Commission), B.P.P. 1881 (2779), xviii, xix.

supposedly most common. However, the general information on housing and out-offices is extremely sketchy.¹

We can be more precise when it comes to drainage. When post-Famine landlords referred to improvements they usually meant drainage. This was also the case in England. Indeed, as some of the passages, which are now quoted, indicate, some landlords seem to have regarded thorough drainage as *synonymous* with improvement. Fortunately for our purposes, it is possible to make a good guess at the amounts of money involved in drainage schemes. This is so because most of the drainage was carried out with the help of money which the landlords borrowed from the Board of Works. It is quite obvious from a number of replies to the Bessborough Commissioners that this was the case: rarely, it seems, did a landlord supplement a loan obtained with substantial funds of his own:

4484. Is the landlord improving?—The land is improving at the tenant's expense. Landlords seldom spend anything. Lord Templeton has drained largely, but he has done it with money borrowed from the Board of Public Works, and he charges the expense to the tenant in the rent. If he builds a house he does the same.

7040. As to improvements in your district, are they made generally by the landlords?—What I call estate improvement, such as arterial drainage or reclamation of bog, I borrow money from the Board of Works, and I proportion the amount to each tenant.

23017. Has much been done in the way of reclamation and permanent improvement of late years in your neighbourhood?—Very much.

23018. By the landlord or by the tenant?—Generally speaking, by the landlord, for the Board of Works would not lend to a tenant having a lease only for lives.

37748. When we were starting the drainage works . . . I got the inspector of the Board of Works to go with Lord Landsdowne and visit fields that would be suitable for drainage. . . .²

The loans made by the Board of Works were quite generous, at 3½ per cent, and repayable in twenty-two years. But the readers impressed by landlord claims will probably be surprised when they examine the actual sums involved. These are given in the annual reports of the Commissioners of Public Works, published in the Parliamentary Papers, and as seen from Tables I and II the amounts involved are really rather small. Between 1847 and the close of the 1868/9 financial year only about £1·3 million had been spent on thorough drainage under the Land Improvement Acts, about 235,000 acres at an average of somewhat over £5 per acre.³ By

¹ We do know, however, that the number of first-class and second-class houses increased by about 150 between 1851 and 1871. See A. Schrier, *Ireland and the American Emigration 1850-1900*, Minneapolis, 1958, p. 167. Also, *Reports from Poor Law Inspectors*, p. 138.

² Bessborough Commission, *op. cit.* See also QQ. 23693, 22186.

³ *Third Annual Report of the Commission of Public Works (Ireland)*, B.P.P. 1868/9 (4174), xvii.

1880 about 270,000 acres had been drained at an average cost of £7 an acre. Money was also handed out for other purposes, mainly towards dwellings and labourers' cottages. In all, loans of £3.1 million were granted between 1847 and 1880, but of this, over £2 million was given during 1847-51 on improvements which were, in effect, closer to being relief schemes. Requests for drainage money fell off after the late 'sixties, but loans for farm buildings and cottages increased after then.

A Treasury Committee on the Board of Works in 1878 frankly emphasized that the level of improvements left much to be desired. The report deals in turn with different categories under the Board's responsibility. As regards the Land Improvement Loans, it says:

From the return in Appendix D [see Table III] it will be seen that, though the loans under these Acts have of late years increased in the aggregate, yet the amounts sanctioned for advances towards *drainage* have been sensibly falling off. The high rate of wages and the scarcity of labour in recent years, as compared with twenty or twenty-five years ago, have, no doubt, in great measure caused

TABLE I

APPLICATIONS AND AMOUNTS ISSUED IN EACH YEAR SINCE THE COMMENCEMENT
OF OPERATIONS UNDER THE LAND IMPROVEMENT ACT, 1847
TO THE CLOSE OF THE FINANCIAL YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 1880

Year	No. of applications	Amounts issued	Year	No. of applications	Amounts issued
		£			£
1847*	1,354	72,790	1864	132	58,439
1848	571	356,160	1865	90	46,215
1849	643	379,836	1866	98	26,295
1850	436	250,324	1867	145	39,180
1851	280	145,653	1868/9	179	64,973
1852	164	88,542	1869/70	166	83,775
1853	154	55,454	1870/1	159	77,980
1854	123	49,293	1871/2	160	82,555
1855	98	35,180	1872/3	223	76,290
1856	108	32,510	1873/4	224	99,572
1857	114	31,674	1874/5	245	102,005
1858	112	35,524	1875/6	265	98,730
1859	111	29,334	1876/7	218	121,405
1860	135	26,902	1877/8	278	121,345
1861	154	36,656	1878/9	319	125,370
1862	184	61,375	1879/80	463	147,035
1863	138	58,830			

*June to September (inclusive)

Source: P.P. 1880 (XIX), c. 2646

TABLE II
SCHEDULE OF LOANS AND SUMS ISSUED IN THE SEVERAL COUNTIES IN IRELAND
UP TO 31 MARCH 1880

<i>Name of county</i>	<i>No. of loans</i>	<i>Amount issued</i>	<i>Name of county</i>	<i>No. of loans</i>	<i>Amount issued</i>
		£			£
Antrim	159	111,813	Wicklow	186	98,226
Derry	108	53,513	Carlow	158	84,359
Donegal	175	121,901	Kilkenny	140	52,976
Fermanagh	107	66,570	Wexford	216	101,800
Tyrone	237	114,785	Kildare	201	101,260
Armagh	51	15,498	Sligo	143	73,502
Down	92	60,924	Leitrim	111	49,995
Cavan	101	36,291	Mayo	325	144,704
Monaghan	78	38,589	Roscommon	295	126,043
Longford	169	78,601	Galway	540	207,697
Louth	65	25,555	Clare	197	78,246
Meath	258	150,025	Limerick	510	227,861
Westmeath	163	65,458	Tipperary	357	130,652
Dublin	155	57,087	Waterford	103	45,035
Offaly	121	35,528	Cork	639	200,270
Laois	256	128,235	Kerry	430	233,188
			Total	6,844	3,117,187

Source: as Table I

proprietors to decline proceeding with improvements which will not yield them so quick a return as formerly. It is not impossible too, that since the passing of Vict. 26 and 27c. 88, proprietors have been turning their attention to arterial drainage; while the operation of the Landlord and Tenant Act (33 & 34 Vict., c. 46) may possibly have given a temporary check to land thorough drainage. But whatever the cause may be, it does not alter the fact that large extents of land are still in want of the application of the Land Improvement Acts.¹

This discreet passage could hardly be taken to imply feverish activity on the part of landlords. However, the Board of Works had even greater problems in getting landlords interested in arterial drainage. Since the More O'Ferrall Act of 1831, which permitted the landlords to form joint-stock companies for the purpose, the British Parliament had been seeking ways of promoting arterial drainage. This piece of legislation was a dead letter, and so was subsequent legislation by Peel—until the Great Famine struck. As the crisis worsened in 1846 and 1847, there were demands for public works to alleviate the distress. The Government's choice fell on

¹ Report of the Select Committee on the Board of Works, B.P.P. 1878 (2060), xxiv.

TABLE III

SCHEDULE SHOWING THE NUMBER OF LOANS GRANTED UNDER THE LAND IMPROVEMENT ACTS, WITH THE AMOUNTS SANCTIONED AND THE DESCRIPTION OF WORK, FROM 31 MARCH 1860 TO 15 NOVEMBER 1877

Years	Drainage and other land works		Farm buildings		Labourers' cottages		Scuth mills		Totals	
	No. of loans	Amount £	No. of loans	Amount £	No. of loans	Amount £	No. of loans	Amount £	No. of loans	Amount £
1860-1	72	42,100	13	4,450	—	—	—	—	85	46,550
1861-2	98	70,350	20	7,050	12	7,150	—	—	130	84,550
1862-3	136	82,300	12	4,500	15	7,200	—	—	163	94,000
1863-4	107	66,300	11	3,650	6	2,100	1	250	125	72,300
1864-5	72	61,685	16	6,380	10	3,160	2	520	100	71,745
1865-6	57	43,430	18	5,400	6	2,600	2	340	83	51,770
1866-7	37	24,050	15	9,180	11	7,160	1	100	64	40,490
1867-8	78	67,690	35	13,545	14	7,900	1	400	128	89,535
1868-9	93	86,905	42	19,010	30	13,970	1	350	166	120,235
1869-70	76	48,850	60	38,245	15	15,065	—	—	151	102,160
1870-1	50	38,485	58	29,980	15	14,150	2	775	125	83,390
1871-2	41	28,260	76	45,140	33	13,380	1	1,320	151	88,100
1872-3	62	41,955	69	34,810	39	19,985	—	—	170	96,750
1873-4	80	60,110	86	58,290	35	20,970	—	—	201	139,370
1874-5	80	48,260	104	52,930	31	9,520	—	—	215	110,710
1875-6	70	43,060	113	59,865	34	22,675	—	—	217	125,600
1876-7	61	45,770	84	51,435	44	32,105	—	—	189	129,310
1877-8	52	38,625	67	51,960	25	13,250	—	—	144	103,835
Totals	1,322	938,185	899	495,820	375	212,340	11	4,055	2,607	1,650,398

Source: Report of the Committee appointed by the Treasury to inquire . . . the Board of Works in Ireland (P.P. 1878, c. 2060, p. 259).

arterial drainage, and close on £2 million was spent by the Board of Works on a long list of schemes during those awful years. Of course, in line with the ideology of the times, it was hoped that this work would be "productive," but as soon as the worst was over the Government panicked at the amounts spent, and ordered that every effort be made to close the works. There were immediate complaints from proprietors that much land was still flooded because of unfinished work, and, more generally, that uneconomic schemes had been forced on them during the crisis. As a result of these complaints, over £1 million was remitted to the landlords by a sympathetic administration, a gift which implied much about the true "productivity" of the Famine drainage works. Even at that, there was a widespread feeling among landlords that this sum was not enough. Arterial drainage came to a standstill again in the 1850's, and was still at a low level in the 1860's:

If more effectual measures are to be taken for the prosecution of arterial drainage in Ireland (and we think the requirements of the country demand them), we are of opinion that such measures must have as their basis the Act of 1863. . . . Partly owing to the number of absentee landlords and partly owing to a want of interest in drainage displayed by some of the resident proprietors, difficulties as well as delays are at times experienced in obtaining the required assent of the owners of two-thirds of the land of a district. . . . New works were practically suspended after the Famine time. This was to be ascribed partly to the comparative difficulty of procuring labour, and partly to the apathy of proprietors after the great exertions they made during the crisis. For some years in fact, the duties of the Board in connexion with arterial drainage seem to have been practically confined to completing the works already commenced, to making the final awards, and to giving information and advice to trustees, to whom the works were gradually being handed over. In 1862 the importance of providing further means of prosecuting arterial drainage forced itself on the government. . . . There have been fifty applications made under the Act of 1863, for the formation of drainage districts. Eight of these have fallen through at the instance of the promoters; and for one the Board refused a Provisional Order, because it was a scheme that clearly would not pay. The sum advanced by the Government between 1863 and the 31st March 1877 was £262,426 4s. 1d. In twenty-four districts the work has been completed. The number of acres improved in those districts is estimated at 32,833, at a cost of £5 3s. 1½d. per acre. . . . No considerable advance, it will be observed, has been made under the present system towards extending the benefits of arterial drainage to the country. . . .¹

The Treasury Commission put the blame squarely on the landlords and not on the 1863 legislation, to which it recommended only trifling amendments.

In all, then, what kind of figure do the aggregate sources suggest for landlord investments for the period between the end of the Famine and the late 1870's?

¹ *Loc. cit.*, pp. xxiv ff.

Adding together the sums spent under the Land Improvement Acts and, say, £500,000 for arterial drainage, one obtains a total of about £3·5 million. Assuming, very generously, that the proprietors spent an equivalent amount on other improvements, we would guess that they were responsible for £7–8 million worth of improvements at the outside. In proposing this order of magnitude, no deduction has been made from the Land Improvement Acts loans for schemes associated with the Famine times, though as has been mentioned such a deduction is probably warranted.

Elsewhere, I have calculated that agricultural rents in Ireland increased from less than £9 million in the early 1850's to over £12 million in the late 1870's.¹ Much of the increase took place in the 1850's, so that landlords' gross receipts from tenants between 1850 and 1875 must have been well over £260 million. This figure implies that landlords invested only 3 or 4 per cent of their income from the land on improvements.

Before proceeding to the records of a number of individual estates, we cannot let pass by a piece of evidence given great publicity in 1880–1, and most recently used by Barbara Solow.² In those years a group of Irish landlords, fearful of what recommendations the Bessborough and Richmond Commissions might make, formed the so-called Irish Land Committee for the purpose of collecting and disseminating information favourable to the landlord interest. They issued a questionnaire, and claimed to have received replies covering almost 1,300 estates (out of a total of perhaps six to eight thousand). The answers suggested that these landlords alone had spent £3·5 million on improvement since 1840. Supposing for a moment that they were representative of the generality of landlords—the Irish Land Committee were at pains to stress that they were—a total expenditure of £15–20 million is implied. However, the Irish Land Committee witnesses to the Bessborough Commission admitted, when pressed, that most of the money came from the Board of Works:

40149. First of all, give the names of the owners who are included in the total, and if you could give as many as possible of the different amounts represented by each name.

40150. You have not separated the moneys borrowed from the Board of Works, and the money expended on the landlords' own—have they made that distinction?

Colonel Tottenham—Probably most of the money put down there is money that has been borrowed. The greater part of the landlords have kept no record of the money spent out of their own pockets.

40151. We may take it that most of the money is borrowed money?—Yes.

Since we have already pointed out that the Board of Works loaned out less than £4 million in all over this period, we can say that the Land Committee's evidence is a distortion. Reliance on it weakens Barbara Solow's argument.

¹ 'Pre-Famine and Post-Famine Rents', *Economic and Social Review*, vii, April 1974.

² Solow, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

TABLE IV

<i>Estate</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Percentage of rents received spent on improvement</i>	<i>Rents received (annual average in £1,000s)</i>
1. Monteagle ¹	1862-70	12	9
2. Devon ²	1850-75	15.8	40
3. Lord Ashtown ³	1872-74	5-6	13.5
4. Fowler ⁴	1853-67	1	7.5
5. Boulick ⁵	1863-71	1.6	1
6. Crofton ⁶	1862-80	5.5	6
7. Ashtown ⁷	1852-73	14.1	10
8. St George ⁸	1850-70	8.3	6
9. Cloncurry ⁹	1860-80	4-5	12
10. Devonshire ¹⁰	1848-66	5	60
11. London Companies ¹¹	1850-70	20	30
12. W. Bence-Jones ¹²	1850-80	10	8
13. Muckcross ¹³	1853-79	8-9	13
14. Powerscourt ¹⁴	1861-63	8-9	20
15. Robert French ¹⁵	1860-80	5	4

II

Our treatment of estate accounts is partial and tentative, but probably sufficient for the purpose in hand. A definitive assessment must await the detailed study of all records still available. Table IV is based on examination of a number of accounts and on some other relevant data, reproduced from previous work. The figures are

¹ National Library of Ireland, MSS. 581, 583. These accounts deal, in effect, with four different estates belonging to the Spring-Rice family. Much of the money was spent on the two estates around Foynes; the others, at Castlemaine and Cahirmoyle, were less cared for. Lord Monteagle managed an insurance club and presented annual prizes at Mount Trenchard. I have assumed that aggregate expenditure on drainage and major building works averaged £500 a year during the period in question; an exact figure is impossible to work out, given the partial and overlapping nature of the records.

² NLI, MSS. 6929, 6978-89. Devonshire's Irish properties were situated in Counties Waterford and Cork.

³ NLI, MSS. 5826-7. County Limerick. ⁴ NLI, MS. 11414. County Meath.

⁵ NLI, MS. 5916. County Tipperary. ⁶ NLI, MSS. 4074-4100. County Roscommon.

⁷ NLI, MSS. 1765-8. Counties Offaly, Tipperary, and Galway.

⁸ NLI, MSS. 4001-22. Counties Dublin, Cavan, Leitrim, and Roscommon.

⁹ NLI, MSS. 12818-909. Counties Kildare and Limerick. In this case also the percentage is rather approximate: I have assumed, on examination of the work books, that £500 was spent annually on improvements, besides other specified charges.

¹⁰ W. A. Maguire, *The Downshire Estates in Ireland 1801-1845*, Oxford, 1972, pp. 76-7.

¹¹ O. Robinson, 'The London Companies as Progressive Landlords in Nineteenth Century Ireland', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser. xv, 1962-3.

¹² W. Bence Jones, *A Life's Work in Ireland by a Landlord who Tried to do His Duty*, 1880, p. 113. We assume that Jones's property yielded him £2 per acre.

¹³ Evidence of H. Herbert to the Bessborough Commission, *op. cit.*, QQ. 25448-50.

¹⁴ NLI, MSS. 4889, 4893.

¹⁵ Evidence of owner's brother to the Bessborough Commission.

based on a working definition of landlord investment which includes drainage expenditure, as well as money spent on housing, fences, afforestation, roads, agricultural societies, and the like; expenditures on luxury items, and donations to religious and charitable bodies, are left out. Such a categorization is indispensable, but ambiguities remain in the treatment of individual items. Thus, for instance, the contributions of Mrs St George, a south Donegal proprietor, towards the construction of a market-house in the town of Carrick-on-Shannon in 1868, has been counted as an investment, but the costs of beautifying her family's pleasure gardens have not. Similarly, the enormous sums spent on the reconstruction of Lismore Castle by the Duke of Devonshire in the 1850's, and the less substantial sums spent on the manorial gardens at Powerscourt in Wicklow, have been omitted. Such expenses are considered to have been *faux frais* of the Irish landlord-tenant system.¹

A weighted average of the results implies that about 10 per cent of rents received on these estates was spent on capital formation, and a simple arithmetic average implies 8 per cent. These figures must be treated with extreme caution though. Inevitably, most available accounts belonged to exceptionally active landlords and their agents: the vast majority of proprietors did not keep more than a rent toll, and many probably relied on agents with a good memory for figures. Remembering Longfield's and Caird's conjectures about the relatively small number of improvers, and previous remarks about the size distribution of estates, we would suggest that about a third of the land was managed by proprietors who spent 8 or 10 per cent of rents received, another third by those who spent nothing, and the remainder by owners who occupied an intermediate position. Such a conjectural breakdown implies an average proportion of 4 or 5 per cent of the rental being devoted to capital formation; a rough guess, certainly, but one indicative of the order of magnitude involved. While examination of other sources should remove some uncertainties, I cannot see how the role of inferences like this can be substantially reduced.²

III

Both approaches towards an estimate of landlord investment indicate answers of the same order: proprietors seem to have ploughed back from 3 to 5 per cent of their rental incomes in improvements related to agriculture. Such a figure belies

¹ Between 1851 and 1858, about £40,000 was spent on the renovation of the Devonshire Castle at Lismore. For this and other information, see the accounts listed in footnotes to Table iv.

² The difficulty with reliance on estate material has been frankly explained by B. A. Holderness in 'Landlords' Capital Formation in East Anglia 1750-1870', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser. xxv, Aug. 1972. Regarding the landlords who invested little or nothing, there are quite a few who, rather surprisingly, admitted as much before the Bessborough Commission of 1881. See, for example, M. O'Flaherty of Tuam (Q. 19414), Robert Reeves of Killimer, Clare (Q. 23332), Thomas Lambert of Galway (QQ. 19522-4), Martin Hart of Clifden (QQ. 19922-5), and Joshua Jackson, Lord Arran's superintendent (QQ. 14875-6). The latter pointed out that "Lord Arran did lay out something in draining and subsoiling in 1847 and 1848," but that "the tenants do all on their farms." Another agent, W. U. Townsend, who looked after twenty estates worth £40,000 a year in total, suggested that landlord investment on those properties amounted "formerly to £1200 a year"; this suggests a proportion of 3 per cent or less (see QQ. 22183-5). Charles O'Hara of Collooney, Sligo, was spending 3-4 per cent of his rental income of £6,000-£8,000 on improvements (mostly one drainage scheme) in 1879-81 (NLI, not catalogued).

more extreme generalizations such as that of the Duke of Newcastle, that "in England and Scotland the landlords let farms; in Ireland they let only land." Nevertheless, the proportion is very low when compared to estimates for Britain during the decades of "high farming," though probably better than the pre-Famine performance.¹

Our analysis suggests some parallels with the British experience, however. The more substantial landlords' behaviour was not too different from that of their counterparts across the Irish Sea; they invested most when there was a danger that the tenants might not make the rent. Thus, they spent more heavily in the late 1840's, and again in the early 1860's, periods of crisis in Irish agriculture. In Britain, Thompson informs us, "typically, the landowners' outlays were expended at times of depression in an effort to ward off or mitigate rent reductions."² Indeed, the very buoyancy of Irish rents in the post-Famine period may explain in part why so many landlords felt no compulsion to invest more impressively.

Though agricultural output fell somewhat, total rent payments rose by almost a third between the early 'fifties and 'seventies.³ The important increases in agricultural prices, particularly livestock prices, were responsible for this. With rents being paid up promptly, landlords preferred to invest in railway and government stocks than in the land, and they may have been wise in this: the English experience seems to suggest that investments in "high farming" rarely paid.⁴

An examination of some of the estate accounts mentioned suggests that certain landlords invested as much proportionally in the immediate pre-Famine years as they did in the 1850's and 1860's. Mrs St George spent 8.2 per cent of her receipts on improvement in 1842-6, expenditure on the Devonshire estates was not far short of 15 per cent, and both the Downshire and London Companies' estates saw about as much improvement in the early 'forties as they did in the later period. More significantly, however, neither estate accounts nor the Board of Works statistics support the common claim that landlord investment reached a standstill after Gladstone's Land Act of 1870. Landlords predictably argued that line, but the figures contradict Barbara Solow's claim that this piece of legislation "put an abrupt stop to landlord improvements."⁵ Only an undue reliance on secondary sources can explain this conclusion.

Thus, the suggestion that the tenants were cutting themselves off from a valuable source of potential funds by rejecting the old system of social relations remains to be proven. It is suspect for a number of reasons. Firstly, it assumes that landlords invested substantially in the post-Famine period—but we have shown above that this is not the case. It also assumes that all such investment suddenly ceased after

¹ For a summary of such estimates see Holderness, *loc. cit.*, p. 439.

² F. M. L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*, 1963, p. 247. On the Irish data see the sources listed in Table IV.

³ C. Ó Gráda, 'Irish Agricultural Output in 1840/5, 1852/4, and 1869/71' (unpublished). On price movements, Thomas Barrington, 'A Review of Irish Agricultural Prices', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 1927, pp. 249-80.

⁴ J. D. Chambers and G. E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750-1880*, 1966, pp. 167-8.

⁵ Solow, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

1870: again this is not so, though a fall-off is likely to have occurred during the 1880's. Thirdly, it assumes that Irish agriculture suffered from a capital famine after the Land War, whereas, in fact, after the bad years of the 1880's, bank deposits throughout Ireland increased markedly, and there was relative prosperity on the land.¹

While proper estimates are still unavailable, it is admitted on all sides that Irish agricultural output stagnated in the late nineteenth century. Acreages under the main crops fell, and there was little increase in either livestock numbers or crop yields. These developments are unrelated to the question of landlord investments; another factor—this time directly related to the Land War—may have been the dominance of older farmers, produced by the decline of a market in land.² But the larger issue of the economics of the Land War deserves comprehensive treatment elsewhere.

¹ Bank deposits rose from £33 million in 1890 to £60 million in 1913. The enormous increase in the number of creameries, both private and cooperative, during this period, testifies to the ability of tenants and former tenants to generate capital without the help of the landlord. Between 1893 and 1902 the number of co-operative creameries rose from 30 to 236. See J. Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society 1848-1918*, Dublin, 1973, pp. 13-14, and L. M. Cullen, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

² On the role of price movements, Hans Stachle, 'Statistical Notes on the Economic History of Irish Agriculture, 1847-1913', *Jour. Stat. & Soc. Inq. Soc. of Ireland*, 1950-1, pp. 444-71. The role of the land market was first raised by Raymond D. Crotty in his brilliant *Irish Agricultural Production*, Cork, 1966, ch. iv. Crotty's thesis, that the landlord-tenant system by purging the inefficient made for a more dynamic agriculture, has yet to get the attention it deserves. Personally I have reservations: the average age of landholders began to increase from 1860 on, and the extent of land transfers after the Famine was by no means spectacular. One of the great merits of Barbara Solow's book is her emphasis on landlords' reluctance to evict or to increase rents incessantly in the past-Famine period. See Solow, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-77.