

Contract and Consumption: Labour Agreements and the Use of Money in Eighteenth-Century Rural Ulster

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Abstract

Based on three long sets of farm accounts, this article examines the records of hire of 130 male and female servants to evaluate changes in contractual arrangements and in rates and methods of payment, and to consider commercial integration of hired labour and, by extension, financial agreements between employer and employee by assessing the nature and cost of items acquired by workers and set against their wages. The survey revealed distinct changes over time in the ways in which workers were hired and paid, apparent in the growing distinctions in the conditions offered to individual workers and, significantly, to male and female workers, suggesting that employers sought to maximize returns on labour through the imposition of increasingly money-defined and time-specific terms and conditions of service. Examination of items set against wages not only informed an inventory of material possession and purchase but also stressed the degree to which paid work was used to fund independent economic activity; while the transfer of debt and obligations between individuals highlighted both the role of employers and the perception of the family as an economic unit in enabling and underwriting a variety of commercial and financial transactions.

THE BROAD history of economic development in rural Ulster in the eighteenth century describes a region with a varied and energetic economic base, framed by the establishment throughout large swathes of the countryside of a valuable, export-orientated domestic linen industry, a general expansion in the market importance of both land and agricultural produce, and the widespread strengthening of local and national trade and communication networks.¹ These

developments did not occur evenly, but were expressed in marked internal variations in the nature and direction of commercial activity. Some regions, such as the 'linen triangle' of north Armagh, east Tyrone and west Down, became important for high-quality finished cloth production; others, like the Foyle valley hinterland of the port of Derry, relied more on the export of spun linen yarn. Where commercial agriculture was concerned, some regions, such as north Down, concentrated on market gardening; others, like west Tyrone, concentrated on beef production, whilst others, like the Lecale region of south Down, became key grain producers. In more economically-remote parts of Ulster where major specialization was more difficult, such as the comparatively resource-poor and increasingly marginal north-west, commercially-inspired enterprise may have been generally smaller in scale and greater in local diversity but was no less resourceful nor cash-dedicated for that.

The degree to which specialization

¹ Published work on this aspect of Irish history includes W H Crawford, 'The significance of landed estates in Ulster, 1600-1820', *Ir Econ and Soc Hist*, XVII, 1990, pp 44-61; *idem*, 'The reshaping of the Borderlands, c 1700-1840', in R Gillespie and H O'Sullivan, eds, *The Borderlands: Essays on the History of the Ulster-Leinster Border*, Belfast, 1989; *idem*, 'Change in Ulster in the late eighteenth century', in T Bartlett and D W Hayton, eds, *Penal Age and Golden Era*, Belfast, 1979; *idem*, 'Economy and society in south Ulster', *Clogher Rec*, 8, 3, 1975, pp 241-58; *idem*, *Domestic Industry in Ireland: The Experience of the Linen Industry*, Belfast, 1975; L M Cullen, 'Economic development 1691-1750', in T W Moody and W E Vaughan, eds, *A New History of Ireland*, IV, 1986, pp 159-93; *idem*, *The Emergence of Modern Ireland 1600-1900*, 1981; *idem*, *An Economic History of Ireland since 1660*, 1972; D Dickson, *New Foundations: Ireland 1660-1800*, Dublin, 1987; R Gillespie, 'The small towns of Ulster 1600-1700', *Ulster Folklife*, 36, 1990, pp 23-31; *idem*, 'The transformation of the Borderlands, 1600-1700', in Gillespie and O'Sullivan, *The Borderlands*; W Macafee and V Morgan, 'Population in Ulster 1660-1760', in P Roebuck, ed, *Plantation to Partition: Essays in Honour of J L McCracken*, Belfast, 1981.

became apparent signifies the deepening penetration of money-based economies throughout Ulster, and the subsequent creation of a commercial environment wherein even the most peripheral regions were driven to respond on some level or another. For the most part, the body of published work which informs this picture necessarily concentrates on the establishment, appearance and general outcome of economic activity during this period. This approach, and the evidence and arguments it yields, is of obvious importance and value, particularly in the case of Irish historiography, where our understanding of the underlying structures and circumstances of economic behaviour is still patchy and immature. At the same time, however, it feeds an analysis of the rural economy which, in contrast to the actuality of life in the Ulster countryside, is oddly underpopulated and impersonal. This is not to say that working people do not inhabit these surveys. It is instead to suggest that, while they may be called as witnesses or deployed as illustrations, in terms of the mechanics of their position within the prevailing economic climate and especially in terms of their relationships with other members of the economic matrix, they tend either to be regarded as anonymous, uniform groups or else ignored completely.

This situation has been some way balanced by localized case studies, such as Kirkham's investigations of the Magilligan region of north Ulster,² which have done much to fill in the detail of the annual round of finding and making a living. By identifying the extent of the dual economy in particular, they have indicated at least obliquely a much wider degree of commercial sophistication and involvement than is popularly supposed to have existed in mar-

ginal, pre-industrial rural societies. More significantly, perhaps, they have started to raise questions about the social and interpersonal criteria which fuelled commercial behaviour. For example, whilst its workings are not examined intimately, Kirkham's global identification of the existence of a 'family' economy is clearly of importance in our understanding of the human side of eighteenth-century entrepreneurial action and reply.

This understanding can only be strengthened by returning to contemporary sources and reading them in the light of current historical perspectives as documents which can illuminate the cumulative processes of getting and spending amongst ordinary people. Whilst general surveys offer a somewhat static description of commercial activity, specific evidence relating to rural Ulster in the eighteenth century – in the shape of estate papers, farm and household accounts, wage books and so on – can define more dynamically a pattern of material survival maintained as a matter of course by a considerable degree of commercial integration and consumer power.³ In many respects, this situation has strong parallels with interpretations of the rural economy in colonial America which present the rural population living within an enforcing commercial structure in which contractual arrangement was a necessary component of the economy, and where

² G Kirkham, "'To pay the rent and lay up riches': economic opportunity in eighteenth-century north-east Ulster", in R Mitchison and P Roebuck, eds, *Economy and Society in Scotland and Ireland 1500–1939*, Edinburgh, 1988, pp 95–104, and 'Economic diversification in a marginal economy: a case study', in Roebuck, *Plantation to Partition*.

³ In this context, two of the most informative sets of Ulster estate papers are those pertaining to the Downshire and the Abercorn estates, both held by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereafter PRONI), which also holds a wealth of material pertaining to smaller estates and individual householders. Published work relating to estate papers and household accounts includes L A Clarkson and E M Crawford, *Ways to Wealth. The Cust Family of Eighteenth-Century Armagh*, Belfast, 1985; A Gailey, 'The Ballyhagan inventories 1716–1740', *Ulster Folklife*, 15, 1977, pp 36–83; R Gillespie, *Settlement and Survival on an Ulster Estate. The Brownlow Leasebook 1667–1711*, Belfast, 1988; V L Pollock, 'Domestic consumption in early rural Ulster and America: the question of self-sufficiency' to be published in a forthcoming edition of papers presented to the Ulster-American Heritage Symposia, 1978–1990. Important general contemporary sources include W Harris, *The Antient and Present State of County Down*, Dublin, 1744; Revd W Henry, 'A natural history of the parish of Killesher', MS vol G 1 14, Armagh Public Library, Co Armagh; Charles O'Hara, 'Survey of the economic development of Co Sligo', PRONI, T2812/19/1.

farmers and country dwellers were driven to meet opportunity and need with an expedient and commercially directed mixture of subsistence activity and market enterprise.⁴

There is, however, a danger that in emphasizing this aspect of the rural economy we ignore the existence of other less prominent but no less potent forms of arrangement. In an important recent article Mick Reed criticized the widespread acceptance that even the nineteenth-century English agricultural economy was powered exclusively by entrepreneurial exchange and dominant central markets.⁵ In doing so, he stressed the survival, even into the twentieth century, of numerically significant groups of household producers or 'peasants', more actively concerned with making a living than with maximizing profit, and whose main interest was not selling but subsistence. However, because very few were able to achieve total self-sufficiency, 'exchange was always necessary and production had to be directed to this end to some degree'.⁶ Drawing heavily on analyses of economic development in North America, he subsequently presented a reinterpretation of the British rural economy which essentially stated that although circumstances may have forced many small farmers and tradespeople to adopt commer-

cial positions, the networks through which essential goods and services passed to, from and between these people did not constitute a market 'in any meaningful sense' but were instead part of 'a system of reciprocal personal obligations'.⁷

Reed was not calling for the reidentification in nineteenth-century rural England of a golden age of self-sufficiency and cash-untarnished mutual assistance. But he was pointing out the need for historians to develop a much greater awareness of the variety of ways in which people in rural areas may have organized their economic strategies, and for a greater sensitivity to the differing considerations which may have driven and defined their actions and responses. His arguments have been picked up by other historians of rural England. The polemic was continued in a recent article by Alun Howkins,⁸ which severely criticized the tendency to neglect evidence of the complex reality of actual economic behaviour in order to construct persuading general definitions of economic position and organization. Like Reed, Howkins' analysis focused on the character and structure of rural labour in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England and was concerned overwhelmingly with the need to assess more precisely the nature of the commercial and contractual relationships which bound individuals not only to one another but also to the wider social and economic frameworks which surrounded them.

This is, of course, much easier said than done. The types of people that these debates are concerned with – the small farmers, cottiers and labourers which made up the bulk of the rural population – left little that can be read as personal testimony to the living pattern of their daily existence. In the case of Ulster, the general dearth of

⁴ The most significant published work on this perspective is found in J T Lemon, 'Agriculture and society in early America', *Ag Hist Rev*, 35, 1987, pp 76–94, which refines arguments first presented in J T Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early South-Eastern Pennsylvania*, Baltimore, 1972. Other important published works include J J McCusker and R Menard, *The Economy of British America 1607–1789*, Chapel Hill, 1985; J T Main, *Society and Economy in Colonial Connecticut*, Princeton, 1985; M Merrill 'Cash is good to eat: self-sufficiency and exchange in the rural economy of the United States', *Radical Hist Rev*, IV, 1977; J Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier. Perspectives on the Early Shenandoah Valley*, Charlottesville, 1977; C Shammass, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America*, 1990; and *idem* 'How self-sufficient was early America', *Jnl Interdisciplinary Hist*, XIII, 1982, pp 247–72; B H Pruitt, 'Self-sufficiency and the agricultural economy of eighteenth-century Massachusetts', *William and Mary Quarterly [WMQ]*, 3rd series, XLI, 1984, pp 333–64; D Vickers, 'Competency and culture in early America', *WMQ*, 3rd series, XLVII, 1990, pp 3–29.

⁵ M Reed, "'Gnawing it out": a new look at economic relations in nineteenth-century rural England', *Rural History*, 1, 1990, p 83.

⁶ *Ibid*, p 84.

⁷ *Ibid*, p 91.

⁸ A Howkins, 'Peasants, servants and labourers: the marginal workforce in British agriculture, c 1870–1914', *Ag Hist Rev*, 42, 1994, pp 49–62.

what might be termed individually-specific sources, such as household inventories, probate lists and the like, especially for the first half of the eighteenth century,⁹ renders the material life of everyday people even more invisible. However, sufficient evidence does survive in the shape of farm accounts and records of farm labour to open a window on at least part of their world.

I

Three sets of farm accounts have been chosen for close examination here. Two refer to County Down – those of the Orr family of Glasdrummond on the coast of the county, which run from c 1730 to c 1780,¹⁰ and those of the Martins of Ballyvooley near Banbridge, which cover the period c 1779 to c 1818.¹¹ The third set refers to the Holmes family of Moyar near Benburb in County Tyrone and runs from c 1753 to c 1822.¹²

In Ulster terms, the Orrs were medium farmers, whose holding was assessed in 1753 as containing 33 acres, 1 rood and 30 perches. Although very little of their routine farming activity is revealed in their accounts, we know they kept cattle and sheep, grew barley and flax, practised some level of commercial dairying and had some involvement in leather tanning. They also dealt in nets (presumably hempen herring nets), had interests in linen yarn production and by 1745 had apparently sub-let several small parcels of land. Between 1730 and 1780 records were kept on a total of thirty-

eight hired servants, of whom thirteen were women and twenty-five men.

The Holmes' accounts are far more extensive in terms of the range of commercial farming they describe. Itemized work sheets of the men they employed reveal precisely a mixture of tillage farming, while the inclusion of breeding records for both cattle and horses suggests a keen interest in livestock management. Holmes was also involved in interest-bearing money-lending activity, had substantial dealings in beef and yarn, and devoted a considerable amount of land to sub-letting. Between 1778 and 1820 he kept accounts with twenty-two hired servants, of whom nine were women. In addition, work records indicate the existence of a further nine labourers whose payment was assessed at a daily rate, while accounts against individuals reveal the existence of a further five women servants and one male servant.

Whilst a vicarial tithe of £9 12s payable on the harvest at Ballyalmore in 1782 points to fairly extensive commercial operations on at least part of their holdings, little of substance regarding the size or working of the Martins' farm is revealed in their accounts. Scattered references to the nature of work received against debts – shearing at harvest, threshing, drawing dung and lime – confirms the tillage side of their agricultural activities, while notice of the provision of such goods and services as 'little pigs', 'cows bulled', milk, cheese, and horse work is testimony to a range of livestock farming. Enough potatoes were grown to be sold commercially – in May 1792 a total of 112 bushels were listed to nine named individuals. Potato ridges were also sold, and there are also several references to riggs being included as part payment of wages. Whilst no mention is made of the sale of linen cloth or yarn, the hiring of women specifically for spinning, references to the payment of individuals not only in the form of flax and flax seed but also in weaving and stamping cloth, and

⁹ Apart from those pertaining to the Ballyhagan Quakers, surveyed by Gailey, 'The Ballyhagan inventories', only two other household inventories relating to eighteenth-century Ulster are so far available, one describing the contents of Springhill House, Moneymore, Co Tyrone (1787) and the other the contents of Ballynewport House, Lecale, Co Down (1731).

¹⁰ PRONI, T3301, Accounts of the Orr family, Glasdrummond, nr Kilkeel, Co Down.

¹¹ PRONI, D2722/1, Accounts of the Martin family, Ballyvooley, nr Banbridge, Co Down.

¹² PRONI, D1782/3, Accounts of the Holmes family, Moyar, nr Benburb, Co Tyrone.

the bringing in of what appear to have been weaving apprentices, indicate an involvement in linen production which went beyond the mere growing of flax. Only one reference exists to a formal sub-letting agreement – that of Rupert Murdock for a rental of 4 gns a year in the early 1780s and paid in sums of £2 3s 7d 'in full' for terms due in May 1781 and November 1781, and 2 gns in March 1783 for the term due in May of that year. No information was given to the size or nature of this letting. Apart from obtaining potato ridges of varying lengths, there is no mention of employees receiving payment in the form of land or houses and gardens or of setting payments for work against rent. This does not mean that sub-letting was not part of the framework of land use on the Martins' holdings. But it does suggest that this arrangement was not part of the direct financial relationships which bound the Martins and their servants and hired labour.

The vagueness of the Martin accounts in terms of the nature of the family's business activity is offset by the wealth of information they provide in other respects. The bulk of their records comprise detailed named accounts of the payment of no less than forty-four male and twenty-one female servants, plus payment to two partly-named servants – one male and one female – and notice of hiring (but no record of payment) of a further two servants, again one male and one female. Added to these are records kept on Will Martin, who took his 'dyet' for one year at 4 gns in May 1780 and on John Martin, who came to the farm in November 1790 and who was reckoned to be worth 28s in 1793–4; reference to Tom Martin, reckoned to be worth £4 over four years; passing reference to payments made to Margaret Martin 'when she was living in John Martin's'; and a short note of payments received in 1792 and 1793 'for the

use of Margaret Martin's children from Samuel Jordan'.

In all, therefore, these three wage books give us details of over 130 male and female members of the rural employed, a sample of sufficient size to allow some fairly detailed conclusions to be drawn about the nature of the economic arrangements which existed between those who sold and those who bought labour in eighteenth-century Down and Tyrone. The first area to consider concerns the range of agreements under which servants and labourers came to work for their employers. The most common, undoubtedly, was that whereby skills and labour were exchanged for a set period for a set reward. The length of agreed employment was usually six months – a 'half-year' as this was generally written – reckoned from 'Old May', that is 1 May and 'All Saints', 1 November. These were highly significant dates in the farming calendar, signalling the end and beginning of summer and winter and the productive and preparatory processes associated with these seasons. They were also, traditionally, the dates when rents and other demands calling for some form of cash reckoning fell due. In the case of men, any variation of half-yearly winter and summer employment generally occurred within the framework of May and November limits: for example, Miles McDowell agreed with the Martins for a third-year (that is, one-third of a year) from July 1798 and a quarter-year from February 1799, giving conclusion dates of 31 October and 31 April respectively. Women's agreements, however, whilst mainly upholding the May/November principle, were more prone to move away from the norm: for example, Peggy Young agreed with the Orrs for a quarter-year in April 1751, Peggy Lennon with the Holmes for a quarter-year from June 1796, Molly Kerr with the Martins for one year from 1 January 1808, and so on.

Much greater variation occurred in sys-

tems of payment, in respect of both differences between individuals and differences over time. In the earliest of the wage books – that pertaining to the Orrs – work agreements in the 1730s and 1740s tended to describe a method of payment where individuals received a set sum, plus goods and plus ‘arles’, or ‘earnest’ money. Thus, John Stirling was hired ‘half a year for 12s 6d and a pair of brogues and old stockings and 1d in earnest’ while Art O’Sloan settled for 20s ‘plus half soles of my own leather’. Sometimes the material part of the bargain could be translated into cash, as in the case of Frank Sloane, hired for 18s and a shirt ‘or two shillings, which he pleases’ or Alex Douglas, hired for ‘12s 6d and a pair of brogues or 13s 6d’. Sometimes it actually was cash, as in the case of Molly O’Neal, who agreed for 8s 6d and 14d to buy pumps. The material or non-money part of the bargain may, therefore, have been little more than a formal itemized statement of money up front or cash in kind, a suggestion perhaps strengthened by the apparent rarity of this feature in bargains struck by the Orrs in the 1780s and by the Holmes and the Martins. This is not to say that non-money rewards were never there documented, but they tended to take the form of promised services – such as the ten-weeks’ schooling on top of the guinea Atty Harkin accepted in 1794 or the testament and one day’s work with the horse on top of the 16s 3d agreed with Hugh Smith in 1798. And whilst isolated references to the provision of such items as shirts, shoe mending, pieces of cloth and so on do still occur, in general it is arrangements specifying the exchange of work for a reward described only in terms of money which dominate the later contracts.

A further variation over time which should be noted here relates to the growing tendency for exchange agreements to become time-specific. As noted before, most arrangements were based on a division of the year into winter and summer

terms of six months, with these broad divisions generally holding true regardless of the actual length of employment agreed. As the eighteenth century progressed, however, it became increasingly common for an exact description of the time to be worked to be included as part of the initial contract. Thus we find Mick Campbell hired by Martin for £1 14s 1½d for a half-year in November 1782 ‘to be five days in the week with me and one day with Peg Martin’. In November 1792 Martin hired Barney McQuaid for four days in the week for a half-year at 5d per day; in May 1799 he hired Sam Magill for four days in the week for a half-year for £2 5s 6d. Felix Maloney, hired in November 1805 for a half-year for £3 8s 3d, continued his hire in May 1806 for a further half-year at half-time at 7d per day. Whilst Nat Holmes also moved towards a system of payment involving the calculation of wages on a daily basis, in his case this shift was associated with an expansion in sub-letting agreements whereby certain individuals received homes and gardens in return for working for Holmes ‘when called’ at a given rate per day. There is nothing in any of Martin’s records to suggest that his new reliance on daily paid labour was associated with work which might be set against rent, or work which was an integral part of a rental agreement.

The shift towards reckoning rewards for hire solely in terms of money and solely in terms of specific amounts of paid work within the period of hire not only indicates the growing commercial precision of the relationship between farmer and farm worker, it also implies the development of a distinctly monetarist attitude to that relationship on the part of rural employers. Something similar can be seen in the way in which many present-day employers have arranged to reduce actual labour costs by translating into wages the gross commercial value of non-money rewards such as cars and creches, and by adjusting contracts so

that wage payments refer as minutely as possible to the time requirements of the services they wish to buy.

It is impossible to take this argument further in the case of the eighteenth-century male workers we are concerned with here, whose hire agreements generally make no formal reference to production goals. But we can see it underpinning the contracts of some of Martin's women workers, for example that of Mary McCullough, hired for 16s 8d to spin four and a half hanks a week for half a year from November 1789. Later agreements are even more explicit: for example, Margaret Johnston was hired in May 1803 for £1 4s to spin five dozen of yarn a week and six of tow, and in November 1804 for only 20s to spin five dozen of yarn. Molly Cubison, brought in in May 1805, and Molly Kerr, brought in in June that year, were both hired for half a year to spin four and one-half dozen of yarn per week. But Molly Cubison, hired first, was to receive only 20s for this, whereas Molly Kerr, hired later, was to receive £1 2s 9d. These examples suggest that not only the quantity but also the quality of yarn produced was a determinant of wage rates. In doing so, they introduce the concept of performance-related pay into the equation, thereby underlining further the apparent desire of the rural employer to extract to the fullest the value of his investment in the skill and time of others.

The idea of performance-related pay was, of course, not new. The records of several of the individuals brought in by Martin reveal that the level of their reward was determined in hindsight by his judgement of the value of their contribution. In the case of Tom Martin, for example, Martin wrote that he thought he was worth 'in the first year nothing, in the second £1, in the third £1 5s and in the fourth £1 15s'; John Martin, on the other hand, was considered to be worth only £1 8s in the fourth year of his engagement. As these

individuals may well have been kin apprentices, their records should be read with a certain amount of caution. It is unlikely, however, that Sally McBurney, hired for a half-year in May 1802 for '£1 2s 9d, or £1 4s if she pleases the mistress' enjoyed the power of negotiation that blood may have brought. She had, nevertheless, an apparently more secure agreement than her sister Nancy, who came in in 1806 with no reference to remuneration made other than Martin's note to 'allow her £1 9s 9d in wages and rather more if she is a good girl'.

Further elaboration of the financial relationship between employer and employee is highlighted by Martin's systems of accounting for missed time and missed work in his allocations of payment. One method was simply to shift forward the starting date of a new contract to accommodate any absences under the old one. Thus Pat O'Neal, hired for a half-year on 27 November 1815 and again for the following half-year, was said to have started his next contract not on 27 May 1816 but on 4 June 1816. Another method was to allow extra days worked against the number of days owed. Thus Martin wrote of Hugh McCormick that 'during the last two half years he was absent ten days of which I got two in Harvest. He is therefore due eight days [so] having at first entered Nov. 21st I say now he entered Nov. 29th'. Just how Hugh was able to produce an extra two days work on a contract which expected him to work every day in the first place is not explained. A third method, which also throws up visible anomalies, was to deduct time owed in the form of cash due. Thus Molly Kerr lost 2s 3d - 5d per day - from half-year wages of £1 14s 1½d for being absent ten days, while Pat O'Neal, hired for £4 for the half-year, was docked 11s 7d for three weeks' absence - equivalent to 3s 10d per week or about 6½d per day. At the same time, Hugh McCormick lost 10d per day's

absence from half-year wages of £3 8s 3d – as did Mick Grimes from half-year wages of £5.

The loss of 10d a day for being absent seems unnecessarily punitive when day labourers were being hired for 7d per day in the case of Martin's contract with Felix Malone, or 6½d per day as was usual with Nat Holmes' hired men. And it seems equally unfair that Peggy Morrow, hired for half a year in 1792 for only 15s, should have had her wages reduced by the comparatively large sum of 3s 8d from being behind in spinning a mere eleven dozen of yarn. Closer examination of these figures indicates that Molly was fined 4d for each hank of yarn unspun – the going rate per hank for outside spinners – while being paid the equivalent of only 2d for each hank she spun as an inside worker. This extrapolation suggests that some deductions for missed time or short work may have been calculated on the basis of the theoretical cost to the employer of replacing goods or labour rather than the real cost of wages over-paid to penalized workers, a sophistication of accounting which would not only explain the glaring inconsistencies in the relative weight of fines imposed on absentee male workers but which also further exposes the increasing ingenuity of the exploitative strategies imposed by rural employers.

Whilst lack of specific information regarding the actual nature of contracted work makes it impossible to construct a detailed picture of differentials in wage rates between individuals and differences in rates of pay over time, the number of cases available for survey does allow some broad conclusions to be drawn. The first concerns the general increase in labourers' pay indicated by a comparison of the Orr accounts and the Martin accounts. The highest wage recorded by Orr in the 1730s was that agreed with Brian Digeny, hired in November 1732 for 25s 6d plus 1 lb of wool and 1d in arles. This compares fairly

well with the rate paid Art O'Sloane, hired in 1733 for 20s and half soles, and William Cuning, hired for four months from Midsummer 1733 for 15s and 1 lb of wool. In contrast to this, Martin's top rates in the 1790s were £2 3s agreed with Bryan McQuaid for the half-year beginning November 1792 and £2 5s 6d agreed with Dan Kennedy for the half-year beginning May 1795. Wage rates then appear to increase significantly until the turn of the century, with Martin agreeing to pay Sam Magill £2 5s 6d to work four days in the week for a half-year in November 1798 and in May 1799. But there are still acute discrepancies in these records. Whereas Miles McDowell's wages of £1 14s 1½d for four months in 1798 and £1 5s for three months in 1799 suggest a rate of just over 8s a month, in 1800 he agreed to work five months for only £1 8s apparently accepting a drop in pay of almost 3s a month. The records of another of Martin's regulars, Mick Grimes, suggest, however, that whilst wage rates may have dipped sharply as the century opened, they then took a distinct turn for the better. Grimes first appears in the accounts in November 1802 when he agreed £3 for the winter half-year; in 1806 his pay had increased to £2 5s 6d for working half-time for the half-year from December; in November 1811 he agreed for £5 for the half-year, a rate he kept without change until December 1814 to make him the highest paid of all the labourers Martin counted with.

The apparent improvement over time in the wages of the top-paid did little to reduce the marked differentials in payments to male employees. If anything, these expanded during the eighteenth century, with differences of less than two-fold recorded by Orr to about 1750 increasing to differences of up to five-fold seen in the Martin records in the early 1800s. We may assume that in large part these differentials represented differences between adult and

child rates, with men invariably paid significantly more than boys. We may also assume that different types of work and different qualities of worker attracted different rates of payment. At the same time, evidence suggests that levels of reward were also influenced by other, less immediately obvious, factors. Otherwise why should Thomas Harken have been able to pay off dues of 10s accruing to Martin on his son's account at a rate of 6½d per day for work such as potato digging at the same time that this employer was agreeing a daily rate of only 5d per day for contracted adult workers such as Thomas Harcourt and Barney McQuaid?

There is a temptation here to suggest that work which might be translated into cash payment as part of a long-term contract tended to be credited at a lower rate than work performed on an *ad hoc* basis as part of a short-term arrangement. In other words, reduced reward may have been accepted by workers in return for security of reward. The other factor to be taken into consideration is, of course, that payments for long-term hire included a measure of board. The accepted historical view of payments for hired labour holds that summer wages were generally depressed to take account of the increased cost of feeding servants during the hungry months before harvest. There is some limited evidence of this in the early records of James Orr: for example, Sanders Morris worked for 15s in the winter half but for only 9s for the summer half of the year May 1758 to May 1759. In general, however, changes of this type appear as part of a more prolonged upward curve. For example, Molly O'Neal hired with Orr for four half-years from November 1755 and received 15s and a shift for the first two periods of six months, and 18s and a shift for the second two. In similar fashion, Barney Monaghan hired with Martin for three consecutive half-years from November 1801 for wages of 11s 4d for

the first, 14s 6d for the second and 15s for the third. The apparent absence of seasonally-weighted payments suggests that a much more general mechanism than actual calculated cost was applied to include the benefit of keep in wages. If this was so, the tendency to rely more and more on daily paid labour may have been fostered at least in part by the inability of employer or employee to make direct references in rewards negotiated over time to either the true cost of hiring or the true value of being a live-in servant.

Differences in the payment of male workers, while striking in their individual extent, are not as visibly clear-cut as those which existed in the payment of male and female workers. Payments agreed with women are revealing on a number of counts. Firstly, differentials between individual female workers became nowhere near as intense as differentials identified between individual men. In general, payments to women varied by just over two-fold, but rarely further. In other words, whereas some men were eventually paid as much as five times other men, no women were paid more than three times other women. A second clear distinction was the much lower rate of increase in women's wages. Payments to the two women hired by Orr in 1733 stood at 13s and 4 lb of wool and 17s for the half-year, and compared well to those agreed with the two men he brought in, which stood at 20s and leather soles and 15s and 1 lb of wool. By the 1750s the top wages of the women Orr employed had increased to between 18s and £1, plus goods – again comparing well to his top wages for men. By the late 1770s, however, women were still receiving between £1 and 1 gn in top half-year payments, a rate which shows no sign of significant increase until after the turn of the century, when top wages of between 1 and 1½ gns began to be recorded. This was far below half-yearly top rates for men, which were by then reaching £3 and

more. Further evidence of this imbalance in the payment of men and women is found in rare references to female daily rates. Again, these were well below those accorded men. For example, Thomas Harkin's two days 'in mud' counted for 13*d* against his son's dues to Martin, while Mary Harkin's two days 'on land' reduced the debt by only 6*d*. And we have already seen how Molly Kerr's absence from employment was valued at only 5*d* per day, whilst male absences were deemed to be worth 10*d* per day.

It was, however, extremely unusual for women's work to be given a daily value, and at no time were women contracts expressed on a daily basis by any of our three farmers. It appears, therefore, that the shift towards the recruitment of farm labourers working from their own home, so visible where men were concerned, occurred to a much lesser extent in the case of women. To echo a previous point, women may have survived longer as live-in farm servants simply because they were cheaper to feed than men, and their hire as such subsequently less exposed to commercial strain from begrudging employer-hosts and resentful worker-visitors. It is, however, more probable that the unusually strong continuation of this type of hire in the case of women derived from the nature of female farm employment which, if also bound to the day-through-day maintenance of farmhouse and farm family, would have been extremely difficult to separate into individual values of stated tasks and time. Certainly, the fact that employers brought home as live-in servants even women nominally hired only to spin, whose agreements uniquely referred to set payment for set production, suggests that women generally had in practice a much wider domestic work brief than that expressed in their formal agreements.

The growing definition of these differences in the payment and hire of men and women – the much lower payment made

to women generally, the much smaller rate of increase over time in women's pay, the much smaller differentials in the pay of different women, and the apparently greater uncontracted informality of women's work – not only indicates the gathering presence of gender-based bias in calculating the exchange value of human activity, but by highlighting the comparative weakness of women in pay negotiations, it also serves to confirm the comparative strength of men. And the development of this inequality is, it is suggested, further sign of the increasing desire of rural employers to strike the most financially effective balance between payment and production, and the adoption by them of increasingly competitive strategies of reward and exploitation as a means to this end.

II

The farm records reveal that, for the people who worked for the Orrs, the Martins and the Holmes, ways of ensuring access to the means of material survival, as articulated in the relationship between farm employer and hired servant, were much more complex, much more commercially directed and much more explicitly divisive than traditional views of pre-industrial rural societies would suggest. This interpretation is supported, with certain key qualifications, by the information they extend on patterns of consumption defined within this relationship – the spending side of equations of economic reality in eighteenth-century Ulster.

The list of expenditure set against wages is certainly remarkably diverse. In the first place, for a sample of consumers largely made up of farm labour receiving subsistence, the number of entries featuring food, household utilities, tools and other items of production, and employing other people is somewhat unexpected. Meal and potatoes are perhaps the commonest pro-

visions cited, but wheat, butter, beef, fish, apples, pork, cheese and milk are also mentioned. Flax and flax seed, hemp, bark, seed oats and barley, honey and malt are recorded in varying degrees, while the purchase of wheels, parts of wheels, wheel repair and toothed 'hacks' figure regularly in women's reckonings. Hired servants bought pigs, big and little, and geese; they paid for shearing, harrowing, ploughing, drawing dung and, in one instance, drawing lime. Nails, locks, oil, soap, boxes and bands for boxes and chests, candles, cream of tartar, ginger, hooks and spade shafts are other acquired commodities which fall into this category.

A second category consisted of payments for professional services and taxes: these included sums accounted to weddings, christenings, funerals, religious devotion, doctors' services and medicines such as physicks [sic], blisters, emetics and, presumably, liquorice and liquorice balls (all of the last invariably bought by women); and cess, tithe and hearth tax. Several mentions of stamping were made in the accounts of female servants by all three employers, whilst Martin inscribed the only reference to a male servant using this service in his note that Dan Mulree had been debited with 2s 8½d 'to pay his stamper for marking'. The Martin notebook is also interesting in terms of the large numbers of entries made in respect of education. While agreements with several of his employees included a set number of weeks schooling as part of their initial contract, additional notices are found in respect of Jack McCall, John Martin, and Mick Grimes. Not only men paid for or received education. Peggy Lennon devoted 10d of her wages in 1792 'to schooling for Margaret', while Molly Kerr and Sally McBurney both diverted 1s 1d of their summer wages 'to the singing master' in 1805. Expenses such as the 6½d Art O'Sloan used for a 'pilgrim's progress' and the 1½d Hugh Harvey spent on 'ink and

an ink bottle', together with the purchase through wages of books, either for the employee personally or, in the case of Molly O'Neal, 'for her brother' should perhaps also be included in this category.

The next category refers to luxury goods and leisure. These included the two staples of extravagance – tobacco and brandy, with the former featuring much more prominently than the latter and revealing very little bias in terms of sex or, from what we can assume, age – but other items, such as nuts, whiskey, rum, ribbons and shoe buckles, are also mentioned. Interestingly, no reference to the purchase of either tea or sugar is made in any record. The regularity with which cash was advanced to attend fairs and markets confirms the importance of these occasions in the social and commercial life of the countryside. Some of the money brought by servants and labourers may well have been spent frivolously, particularly the small sums of pennies and halfpennies often referred to in such notices. But the frequent inclusion of relatively large sums indicates that major expenditure was also planned. The other much-frequented social occasion was racing, mentioned in connection with the withdrawal of money from wages in all three account books. Unlike fairs and markets, this appears to have been the exclusive preserve of male servants. Christmas and Easter Sunday and Monday are also frequently nominated as the reason for cash advances. The practice of naming both the event and the venue of expenditure also reveals the degree of mobility customary among the labouring population. The Orr records refer to regular trips to Kilkeel, Dundrum, Rostrevor and Newry; the Holmes' servants travelled to Dungannon, Moy, Armagh, Charlemont, Killy and Belfast, while Martin's Ballyvooley contingent went even further afield with trips to Dromore, Banbridge, Newry, Rathfriland, Moira, Tandragee and

Belfast, as well as regular visits to the 'Ban' fair, the 'Con' fair and the 'Bann' market.

The commonest named purchases at fairs and markets were clothes and shoes. Indeed, items of apparel appear as by far the most money-exhausting category of consumption, representing the bulk of goods set against wages in many accounts. The acquisition of clothing was reckoned in a number of ways. One of the most common was to count the cost of materials and making, but new clothes were also bought from local shops or suppliers. In the case of Martin's employees, this appears for the most part to have involved an establishment run by a Mr and Mrs Kerr — one account actually cites a sum of 3½*d* 'spent in Mrs Kerr's shop'. At the same time, references to sums paid 'to the tailor' and to payments for clothing to other named individuals, such as Mr Hanning, indicate that the Kerrs did not have the Ballyvooley monopoly in outfitting. Small items of apparel, such as caps for women and hats for men, gloves, stockings and kerchiefs also appear regularly and, in terms of wages, were also relatively costly. Margaret Johnstone's account in 1803 included sums of 1*s* 4*d* and 1*s* 7½*d* described as 'cash to the hosier', while the ubiquitous kerchief, in reality a type of linen neck square, seldom cost any of Orr's female servants less than 3*s*.

A high standard of dress is revealed not only in the cost of finished items, but also in the range of textile used in clothes-making, which included fine and imported materials such as shaloon, muslin, white linen, cambric and chenille as well as more serviceable stuff, plaiden, drugget, frieze and serge. Further evidence of the weight of investment demanded by clothing is found in references to the cost of 'old' items, such as the 'old coat and breeches' acquired by Michael Grimes for 2*s* 8*d*, or the 4*d* for an old hat recorded beside the 1*s* 5*d* for a new hat in John Martin's account in 1793. But perhaps the clearest

indication of the value of clothing is made by Martin's deliberate inclusion of a gift of old stockings in his reckonings with Will Morrow in 1795 and Hugh McCormick in 1796. In both cases the cost of these stockings was carefully noted as 0*s* 0*d*, as if the entry should stand as clear evidence of transfer of title of the items concerned. And why should people not want to keep such lines of possession firmly registered at a time when new stockings could cost as much as four or five days' wages?

If covering the legs was expensive, clothing the feet was even more so. Whilst the cost of footwear varied considerably according to type and presumably size, gaining possession of even the lightest leather pumps meant an outlay of at least 1*s* in the 1730*s* with 'double' pumps, that is, pumps made with a double skin of leather around the foot, costing about 2*s*. Brogues then cost up to 3*s*, rising to a height of 8*s* 8*d* for a man's pair in 1806. A number of purchases of 'shoes' are recorded in the Martins' accounts: these cost as much as brogues and sometimes significantly more, as in those bought by Molly Kerr for 5*s* 2*d* for leather and a further 1*s* 7½*d* for making. It is, therefore, not surprising that more shoes were mended than made, with soles, half soles, top pieces, heels, wedges for heels and leather nails all commonly cited, together with the expense of putting them on or in. But even this did not come cheaply, with soles for brogues recorded at 1*s* in 1790 and rising to over 2*s* by the turn of the century; and neither by then did second-hand shoes, as witnessed by the 4*s* 0½*d* paid for a pair by Michael Grimes in 1803.

The final category of expenditure set against wages consists simply of cash. It is clear that employees demanded and got as a matter of course numerous cash subs from their employer. James Martin was especially precise in this matter in his habit of noting that one or another person had received cash 'to him- or her-self', or

appending such explanations as 'cash from my father', 'from the mistress', 'from Eben' (his brother) and so on against deductions. Several of his entries consist of aggregates of halfpennies – for example, Margaret Johnstone's wages were reduced by 6*d* in respect of 'halfpence from the mistress' – or refer to change returned out of money advanced, as in the note written beside the sum of 9*d* due from Lawrence Lavery which explained 'in Dromore gave 1*s* 1*d* of which he returned 4*d*'.

Another type of cash advance, common to all three record books, consisted of sums to named individuals, presumably for goods received or services rendered outside the employer/employee nexus. It was also common for family members – usually but not always a mother or father – to be given or sent cash sums on account. At times this act may have taken the form of an employee accepting the debt of a family member, as in the case of James Duff, whose wages were reduced by 11*d* 'for cash due by his sister which he undertook to pay' or Bryan McQuaid, who paid 7*s* 6*d* 'by his father's note' in 1783. A further type of cash advance, also common in the Martins' accounts, consisted of top-up payments to outside suppliers and creditors. Thus, Molly Magill received 1*s* 1*d* 'to help pay for shoes', Patrick Kennedy 12*s* 5*d* 'per account of Mr Kerr', Michael Grimes 2*s* 7*d* 'to his rent', Brian McQuaid 1*s* 1*d* to 'cash given on a potato rigg' and so on.

The existence of these types of cash advance suggests that rural employers adopted, or were certainly expected to adopt, a quasi-banking role, in which employment with them was used to secure goods and service either on personal credit or in the knowledge that the employer would pick up the bill and hold it against future wages. This service ran in tandem with their role as direct distributors of cash. As we have seen, money was regularly advanced for local fairdays, holidays and special occasions, sometimes in large sums

but more often in terms of pennies. And, of course, some employees 'spent' very little during their terms of employment, leaving them with almost all their wages to collect as cash when their contracts expired.

Rural employers also acted as direct suppliers of goods and services, houses and land. Was there any difference in the cost of items obtained from outside sources, and those obtained from the employer and their value deducted from pay? In other words, was there any measurable financial benefit in receiving wages in kind? One is tempted to say not a lot, although this judgement must immediately be qualified by reference to the points made earlier regarding the increasing preference of employers to articulate initial contracts in money alone. A distinction should be drawn, however, between formal agreements promising specifically named goods as part of an overall wage, and the practice whereby the money values of goods received informally during a term of employment were set against wages.

Discriminating between the employer acting as direct supplier and the employer acting as agent or debt collector for an external supplier is not easy. However, the fact that it was almost unknown for the exchange of meal, potatoes and butter to be described as 'cash' transactions between farmer and servant allows us to assume that such goods generally came 'from the farm'. Examination of the prices charged for these provisions revealed considerable differences in deducted value. These differences sometimes reflected the difference between retail and wholesale price. For example, James Orr felt able to sell a half-piece crock of butter weighing 59½ lb for only 2½*d* per lb, while invariably charging his employees 4*d* per lb for the much smaller amounts which they obtained from him.

The price of meal and potatoes, on the other hand, does not seem to have been

much influenced by the quantities involved. Fluctuations in the amount charged for these commodities appear instead to relate to the time of transaction. The price of oatmeal especially was particularly prone to seasonal variation. For example, Holmes' account with Robert Shannon describes the cost per score rising from 3s 4d to 3s 8d, then falling to 3s 5d over a period of, apparently, three months, while Martin's account with Owen Campbell in 1789, especially instructive by virtue of its inclusion of actual dates, shows the cost of a score of meal falling from 2s 6d to 2s 2d between 27 June and 30 June, and then falling further to 1s 10d on 20 November. Even more striking is the change in price revealed in Martin's reckoning with Mick Campbell in 1782, which records a charge of 2s 8d per score on 12 June and 2s 4d on 13 June – a variation in cost over one day equivalent to almost the whole of the daily wage of the purchaser. Although the cost of potatoes shows a greater degree of stability, in terms both of seasonal and annual variations, than the cost of meal, similar rapid shifts in price are visible – as witnessed by Owen Campbell, who was able to buy potatoes from Martin at 6½d per bushel on 5 April 1789, but was made to pay 8d per bushel for those he obtained on 20 April.

The extent of these short-term swings in the cost of meal and potatoes makes it impossible to compare the prices charged to our labourers with the more broadly-based price series which exist. Indeed, it throws the value of these constructed series severely into question. Evidence relating to prices charged by Holmes, Martin and Orr to individuals who were not their employees, however, suggests that, apart from ensuring access to regular supplies, being a hired servant made very little difference when it came to paying for provisions. Rather than enjoying the benefit of buying goods at long-term cost price, or being granted the pre-industrial

equivalent of a worker's discount, farm employees appear to have been treated like any other customer in being expected to pay the going market rate which applied to the goods they received.

This may, of course, sometimes have worked to their advantage, in that goods 'bought' when market prices were low continued to be costed at that rate, regardless of the price which prevailed when the bill was finally settled, it being quite common for accounts to run for numbers of years, and to grow to lengths which seemed far to outpace wages. Tom Kennedy's record for the winter half of 1796, for example, showed an aggregate debt of £4 3s 6d to be set against a payment per term of £2 10s. Eleanor Hughes and Elizabeth Richardson ended up owing Nat Holmes £4 16s 1d and £6 5s 11d respectively in 1807, while Felemy Sloan amassed a bill of 31s with Orr in 1746 against agreed wages of 15s. This type of borrowing appears never to have been translated into a formal money debt – in the shape of, for instance, a signed agreement of debt or separate IOU – nor to have attracted penalty in the shape of interest. But both these arrangements were made to account for and to exploit money lent to other individuals. Several IOUs for sums ranging from 1 gn were signed with James Martin, while Nat Holmes was certainly careful to charge interest on sums extended as part of his money-lending activities – one such account with Robert Holmes, which charged £1 3s on a payment of £11 10s 5d, suggests the application of an interest rate which reached almost 10 per cent.

The ways in which our employers were accustomed to account for money owed and money received confirm their experience in the complicated world of eighteenth-century finance. Robert Holmes' part-payment of the £11 10s 5d referred to above was recorded as comprising £4 19s 7½d in notes, £1 14s 1½d in cash and £1 10s in six-shilling pieces. When

James Martin bought Robert Kerr's field, his receipt named two cash sums of £6 5s 1½d and £2 5s 6d, 12s in respect of oats supplied, and £18 4s 7½d promised in notes. His account of money in from David Hanning, a local draper and retailer, was divided into a deliberate, long list of sums given in cash and sums given in banknotes. Orr's records of outstanding debts show a similar degree of complexity and carefulness. In 1742, for example, he counted with David Candlice, again one of the local suppliers, and noted that 'all is clear, only he oweth James Orr 1s 11d and the remainder of the cow's price 12s and 18s for his daughter's wages, which comes to one-third of the cow's price'. In 1746 he counted with Mary Reed to record that 'she is owing me 18s 4d ... of the above account received 8s, more 3s 4d, 3 days shearing 1s, and Peggy for spinning on the big wheel 7½d'. Similar articulations of debts cleared and obligations met with a mixture of work, notes, cash and commodities appear throughout all three sets of records. One of the most interesting of these is an account of a marriage contract of £20 between James Martin and David Shaw. Payment of this was made entirely in goods, save two payments of 11s 4½d recorded as 'cash per Eben' and 'cash per myself'. The range of goods described – from a horse at £10 4s 9d, a bed and furniture at £5 13s 9d and a pillion at £1 10s, to a stone of flax and ten bushels of potatoes at 10s 10d each, to 'drugs to Mr Manning and Mr Fleming 1s 5d' and 'stamping a handkerchief 10d' – proves that no sum was too small and no commodity too common to be brought to formal account between two equals.

III

Examination of these three sets of wage books reveals a world that, even for small farmers and their servants, was commercially sophisticated and financially literate.

While continuing to be framed by traditional limits and timing, patterns of hire displayed a high degree of discrimination and flexibility in the relationship between employer and employee and the increasing tendency for this relationship to be articulated and rewarded in terms of its effective money equivalent. Patterns of payment define a multi-faceted role for employers acting as distributors of cash, credit, commodities and service both to individuals directly, and as underwriters of exchanges between individuals, and between individuals and external suppliers and providers. Patterns of consumption describe the variety of these exchanges, showing the extent to which not only material but also social behaviour was shaped by cash-bearing participation in the market place. The commercialization of the daily life of labourers and servants was most visible in their standards of dress, but is also apparent in their purchase of schooling and education, of professional services and medicines, of treats and seasonal luxuries and, perhaps obliquely but no less conclusively, by their reluctance to attend gatherings such as races and fairs without at least a few pennies to act as spending money.

They also describe a society where individual freedom within the market place was secured at least in part by the ability of workers to provide for and exploit a measure of independent materially-productive activity within the employer-employee relationship. Moonlighting – either for oneself or another employer – was frequently named as reason for absence from work. And the acquisition through wage labour of key items of production – seed, tools, livestock, agricultural services, flax, spinning wheels and, as is suggested in some cases, even looms – acts as a more explicit assertion of economic autonomy. At the same time, evidence of the easy transfer not only of these resources but also of debt and credit, goods, provisions, cash and land between close family members

indicates that the struggle for material survival was also vitally supported by kin acting in concert.

It is this aspect of the economic behaviour of our farmers and farm labourers which most matches Reed's identification of systems of reciprocal personal obligation within networks of commercial exchange. However, apart from all three employers' lack of elaboration with interest or with formal statement of the long outstanding accounts of their servants and tenants, no other sign of the existence of these non-exploitative exchange arrangements can be found to support his argument. On the contrary, changes in hire payments and especially in hire agreements suggest that the economic relationships which are portrayed in the wage books studied here tended to become much more commercially perceptive and financially loaded as the eighteenth century progressed.

It should, of course, be stressed that these documents focus for the most part on economic relationships between unequals. Although patterns of consumption suggest a certain democracy of market acquisition in terms of items purchased and

labour dispersal, the fact remains that these patterns are defined in records which deal exclusively with contracts between masters and servants. The mutuality that they imply, therefore, cannot but be overshadowed by the hierarchy they state. There is, nevertheless, little reason to believe that material recording the dialogue of getting and spending between unrelated social or economic equals would reveal a much greater informality of effort and exchange. The relationship between production and consumption, and the transfer of goods, skills and services between those who had and those who wanted, necessarily demand a balancing of account by some means or other. The written record of rural life in pre-industrial Ulster indicates that, for the most part, these accounts were balanced by translating the value of exchange into its cash equivalent. Families may have helped each other out without counting the cost too exactly, but they did so within a society whose economic framework was shored up by commercial considerations and underpinned by the use of money.