

**THE LAND FOR
THE PEOPLE
OUTBREAK OF THE
LAND WAR**
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Until the end of the last century the ownership of farmland in Ireland was confined to a tiny minority of the population. Rural society consisted almost exclusively of two classes: an upper class consisting of land owners and large farmers, and an impoverished tenantry.

A rapid increase in the peasant population in the first half of the nineteenth century created such demand for land that tenant farmers were forced to subdivide their holdings in each generation until the farming population was reduced to subsistence level. Then came the Great Famine of 1847 which reduced the rural population through disease and the advent of emigration. The land made available for renting as a result of the Great Famine was generally rented to large scale graziers. Consequently the condition of the tenantry improved little in the period 1850 to 1880.

The national movement for the reform of land ownership commenced in South Mayo. It changed the course of modern Irish history.

PART 1.

THE RURAL ECONOMY IN THE 1870s

The land of Mayo, like the land of the rest of Ireland in the 1870s, had two principal uses: grazing and tillage.

THE LANDLORDS

Historically, the ownership of land by individuals was introduced to Ireland by the Normans in the 1200s. Prior to that, each sept held its land in common and the chieftain assigned it to individual families as required. The landlords of Ireland had

various origins; Irish, Norman, Elizabethan and Williamite settlers.

By the second half of the 19th century only a small percentage of land owners actually farmed their lands. They derived their income instead by renting their land to others: well-to-do graziers and subsistence-level tenant farmers.

The vast majority of the landowning class of Ireland saw themselves primarily as loyal British subjects. They intermarried with socially similar families, received a British education and, for the most part, were unionists in politics. They visited their Irish estates only for voting, rent collection and sporting purposes.

In 1870 twenty percent of landlords held estates of over 20,000 acres, thirteen percent of landlords held estates in the 10,000 to 20,000 acre category and fifty five percent of landlords held between 500 and 10,000 acres each. *Fig. 1* illustrates land use in the not untypical south Mayo parish of Taugheen in 1856.

Fig. 1 Taugheen in 1856

