



NUI MAYNOOTH

Coláiste na hÉireann Má Nuad

**The Development and Consolidation
of the Gaeltacht Colony
Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath
1935-1948**

by
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Thesis for the degree of MLitt
Department of Modern History
National University of Ireland
Maynooth

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Supervisor of research: Dr Terence Dooley**

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Abstract

In 1935 a Gaeltacht Colony was created in the townland of Ráth Cairn, Co Meath, when twenty-seven Irish speaking families, comprising 182 individuals, arrived at their new homes on fully equipped farms. After Fianna Fáil had achieved an overall majority in the wake of the 1933 election, they turned to resolving the overcrowding and poverty in the west of Ireland. In the immediate post independent period the newly formed Irish state was anxious to establish an identity separate from the previous colonial power and language was one way to do it. By combining the land and language question, Fianna Fáil dealt with both of the significant political issues of the time. This new development in migration, established by Fianna Fáil, recognised that a huge political credibility would be achieved if they were to alleviate the congestion on farms in the western counties and spread the Irish language. Within the context of the wider land reform policies they perceived that migration was the most effective method of approach and they implemented a suggestion made some four years previously in the Gaeltacht Commission Report of 1927. This was ground breaking social engineering and against some opposition, fertile grasslands of the midlands were acquired and the land divided into small farms which would become the first Gaeltacht colony. Despite the expense and attention to detail the project, as this thesis will show, was fundamentally flawed.

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Suzanne Pegley, Maynooth 2007

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Abbreviations

CDB	Congested Districts Board
DA	Department of Agriculture
DT	Department of Taoiseach
EPO	Employment Period Order
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
LC	Land Commission
MCCA	Meath County Committee of Agriculture
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NLI	National Library of Ireland
NFA	National Farmer's Association
NUI	National University of Ireland
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
UA	Unemployment Assistance
UCD	University College Dublin

Introduction

Ireland her own- Ireland her own, and all therein, from the sod to the sky. The soil of Ireland for the people of Ireland to have and to hold from God alone who gave it- to have and to hold to them and their heirs forever, without suit or service, faith or fealty, rent or render, or any power unto heaven.¹

In 1935 a Gaeltacht Colony was created in the townland of Ráth Cairn, Co Meath, when twenty-seven Irish speaking families arrived at their new homes on fully equipped farms. After Fianna Fáil had achieved an overall majority in the wake of the 1933 election, they turned to resolving the overcrowding and poverty in the west of Ireland. In the immediate post independent period the newly formed Irish state was anxious to establish an identity separate from the previous colonial power and language was one way to do it. By combining the land and language question, Fianna Fáil dealt with both of the significant political issues of the time. This new development in migration, established by Fianna Fáil, recognised that a huge political credibility would be achieved if they were to alleviate the congestion on farms in the western counties and spread the Irish language. Within the context of the wider land reform policies they perceived that migration was the most effective method of approach and they implemented a suggestion made some four years previously in the Gaeltacht Commission Report of 1927. This was ground breaking social engineering and against some opposition, fertile grasslands of the midlands were acquired and the land divided into small farms which would become the first Gaeltacht colony. Despite the expense and attention to detail the project, as this thesis will show, was fundamentally flawed. However, in 1985 Ráth Cairn celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. The event, while significant for any community, was particularly remarkable for a tiny gathering of small farms created, in one of only five colonies, by the state, fourteen years after independence.

This thesis will address the setting up of the first Gaeltacht colony of Ráth Cairn in greater detail than previously. In the past, other scholars have only examined Ráth Cairn and internal migration on a general level, without the minutia of detail that will be included here. Research on this project has looked

¹ Fintan Lalor, quoted in *Fianna Fáil Ard Fheis pamphlet 1927* (University College Dublin Archive, P176).

Ráth Cairn is situated within the triangle of Navan, Athboy and Trim. (fig. I.1) Ordnance survey maps of the early twentieth century showed that there were very few dwellings in the townland of Ráth Cairn or the adjacent townlands. The field patterns were large, open and apparently used mainly for grazing, and as the aerial photo shows, unlike the classic patchwork arrangement typical of the western counties. (fig. I.2) For the most part, when the migrants arrived, they were welcomed into what was claimed to be a county where the ethos of the romantic Gaelic revival was well established. On the other hand, undercurrents of resentment, manifest in local newspapers, that the migrants were given the land in preference to the local farmers, were appearing. Angry letters to the editor appeared in both the *Meath Chronicle* and the *Irish Press* anticipating the redistribution of Meath lands and later, rowdy behaviour reportedly by Ráth Cairn migrants was gravely recounted.



Figure I.2 Aerial View of Ráth Cairn looking north west. Source: Raymond Potterton Estate Agents, Navan.

While the land itself was rich and fertile, with hindsight one can see that the average twenty-two statute acres each family was given would not prove sustainable. Initially before they became aware of the reality of the new situation the original twenty-seven families saw it as an opportunity to leave behind the poverty of Connemara, County Galway from which they had all come. If Dublin, along with Glasgow, was recognised as one of the worst slums in Europe, in the

1950s, the Congested Districts, counties along the western seaboard, were much worse in the 1930s. One can understand how the chosen migrants saw County Meath as *El Dorado* and 'Paradise'. On the other hand they would also leave behind members of their extended families and the dramatic landscape with which they were familiar. The flat lands of Meath offer rich grasslands and promised prosperity, but not however the type of landscape with which the migrants identified. For more than one migrant family, the separation proved too much and they returned to Galway.

II

Other Gaeltacht colonies would rapidly follow in succession, and over the next five years a further four colonies were created. This involved ninety-five Irish speaking families, in four townlands, all within a fifteen mile radius. But the experiment in this format would be effectively finished even before difficulties arose with the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939. It was becoming clear to many that colony migration was turning out to be prohibitively expensive. The final colony of Allenstown, with twenty-three families, was agreed upon in 1939 and put in place in 1940. After this, the policy of migrating Irish-speaking colonies of people would be scaled down in favour of group migration. Regardless of this planned reduction, World War II forced upon the Land Commission an even greater decrease in the whole working arrangement of land redistribution. By the time the various government departments were getting back to normal in 1945, it was agreed that the way the holdings were prepared for the incoming migrants would have to be radically altered. Although migration would remain, the financial contribution from the government would be in a greatly reduced form.

The other significant factor in the creation of the Ráth Cairn Gaeltacht colony and the four other settlements, was the Irish language. From the late nineteenth century the Irish language had become a symbol for Irish identity and, under the utopian ideals of Fianna Fáil led by Eamon de Valera, it demonstrated the highest expression of the desire to spread the language to the whole country. As this thesis will demonstrate by planting an Irish language seed in the midlands it was hoped that this would be a living example to all, and introduce Irish into everyday speech for everyone as an alternative way of imagining and confronting European modernism. The development of the nation state in this specific Irish type of social order would be played out in the

establishment of the Ráth Cairn Gaeltacht colony. This thesis, in its examination of the establishment of the Ráth Cairn Gaeltacht colony in 1935, will underline that the desire for land, by the people of Ireland, was to dominate politics from the moment Saorstát Eireann, the Irish Free State, became a reality.

Secondary Sources

There are a limited number of secondary sources that study the Gaeltacht colony process and fewer that deal with the topic of internal migration. There were a considerable number migration studies, and as well as a centre for Migration Studies at University College Cork, but these were directed toward the movement of people in and out of the country. The exceptions were the two books brought out in the recent past that deal with migration but place it in context of either the effects of seventeenth and eighteenth century or of more recent immigration. Paddy Duffy, in a collaborative book on emigration, *To and from Ireland: Planned Migration Schemes c. 1600-2000* (Dublin, 2004)³ examined the impact of the movement of people in and out of Ireland. In the chapter titled 'State sponsored Migration to the East Midlands in the Twentieth Century', devoted to internal migration, he and others described the migration schemes within the country from 1923 to 1973, including the Gaeltacht Colonies. However they did not deal in great depth with any one colony. Terence Dooley, in the chapter 'Reversing Cromwell's policy, migration schemes, 1923-1948' in his book on land reform, *The Land for the People, the land question in Independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004)⁴ deals with a history of migration placing the colonies in context. This notable book on land reform however only dealt with migration as part of the whole land question. Willie Nolan in 'New farms and fields: migration policies of state land agencies', in *Common Ground*, the earliest reference on the subject of internal migration, once again did not look at the development of the colonies in detail. These limited number of publications have been the only attempt to look at internal migration as a topic separate from immigration and emigration. Patrick Sammon in explaining the workings of the Land Commission as an insider *In the Land Commission a memoir* (Dublin, 1997)⁵ included invaluable appendices with regard to statistics. The book, by a

³ Martin Whelan, William Nolan, Patrick J. Duffy, 'State-sponsored migrations to the east midlands in the twentieth century' in Patrick J. Duffy (ed.) *To and from Ireland: planned migration schemes c. 1600-2000*, (Dublin, 2004), pp 175-196.

⁴ Terence Dooley, 'Reversing Cromwell's policy, migration schemes, 1923-1948' in idem *The Land for the People, the land question in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004), pp 132-155.

⁵ Patrick Sammon, *In the Land Commission: a memoir 1933-1978* (Dublin, 1997).

retired member of the Land Commission, concerned the work carried out by the Land Commission, demonstrating their contribution to land redistribution.

There have been two significant Irish language books on the topic of Ráth Cairn, the first, *Gaeltacht Ráth Cairn* edited by Micheál O'Conghaile (Conamara, 1986),⁶ for the fiftieth anniversary, in 1985, of Ráth Cairn's founding included the personal stories of the migrants themselves. Some of the contributors have since died and this makes their accounts even more poignant. Now out of print, this book is an important contribution to the story of Ráth Cairn, but is not widely known, perhaps because having been written in Irish, it has not reached as wide an audience as it deserves. It is a record of the colony in the early years, making the most of first hand recollections, with the eminent historian Gearóid O'Tuathaigh contributing an opening chapter. While the chapter by O'Tuathaigh, 'Aistriú pobail Ghealtachta go háiteanna eile in Éirinn: Cúlra an pholasáí' was a history of internal migration in Ireland from the nineteenth century, the political detail in the setting up of the Ráth Cairn colony was not covered.⁷ Four years later, the editor O'Conghaile addressed an Irish Studies conference in Canada on the subject of the Ráth Cairn colony, and the university, St Mary's Halifax, Nova Scotia, provided a copy of his paper, which provided additional material not included in the book. The second book was a memoir, *Stairsheanchas Mhicil Chonraí On Maimin go Rath Chairn* (Conamara, 1999)⁸ edited by Conchur O'Giollagáin, this book used Chonraí's personal chronicle to carry out an assessment of the Irish language. This book was very helpful in the corroboration of information in more detail than was obtainable in other sources. Again O'Giollagáin did not look into the political background of the establishment of the colony.

Primary Sources

In order to assess the development of the Gaeltacht colonies, particularly Ráth Cairn, the activity of the Land Commission ideally should have been examined but because of restricted access to the Land Commission records this had to be approached indirectly. The largest and most significant of the alternate sources were the government department files in the National Archives. Of

⁶ Micheál O'Conghaile, *Gaeltacht Ráth Cairn, Léachtaí Comórtha* (Conamara, 1986).

⁷ Gearóid O'Tuathaigh, 'Aistriú pobail Ghealtachta go háiteanna eile in Éirinn: Cúlra an pholasáí' *ibid*, pp 13-31.

⁸ Conchur O'Giollagáin, a chuir in eagar, *Stairsheanchas Mhicil Chonraí on maimin go Rath Chairn* (Conamara, 1999).

these, the Department of Taoiseach files were the most functional as they showed the workings, on a general level, of the government machine as each department reported to the An Taoiseach's department. However, by far the most rewarding were the Department of Agriculture files as they related to the establishment of Ráth Cairn. Recently deposited with the archive, it is unlikely that anyone had examined them after cataloguing as they could not be found by the staff on the desk and the printed index compiled after cataloguing had been lost. Eventually, using the original index cards, the files provided a wealth of information offering an insight into the overview presented by the Irish Land Commission annual reports. The Land Commission endeavour was superficially reported annually in the Land Commission reports issued through the Department of Agriculture and available in both the National Library and National Archives. These reports were invaluable in chronicling the stages of the migration process throughout the second half of the 1930s and although limited in fine detail, signposted the avenues of research to develop. These markers were then pursued through Dáil Éireann Debates and newspaper accounts in local papers, for example, the Meath Chronicle, and national papers, like the Irish Press. The statistics presented with the reports regarding the migration process were very constructive and compensated for the lack of individual detail.

An examination of the Fianna Fáil papers in University College Dublin contextualised the establishment of Ráth Cairn particularly in the Ard-Fheis pamphlets. However, while migration was an important issue to a large and active vocal group, the personal papers of various Ministers of Agriculture or Lands and other contemporary politicians did not include any mention of this brief but significant development in the newly independent country.

On the other hand the Cancellation books in the Valuation Office were an invaluable source. Without access to the Land Commission records it would have been difficult to establish the changes in ownership and the redistribution of land had it not been for the information obtained from this department. Linked to the information in the Cancellation books were the Ordnance Survey maps, which were primary in seeing how the land was divided before acquisition by the Land Commission. After division the maps established the location of the holdings assigned to the migrants. Although the Cancellation books indicate the ownership of land holdings an important complimentary source of Land Commission acquisition was the weekly publication, initially titled the *Dublin*

Gazette and later *Iris Oifigiúil*, held at Trinity Library and the National Library. This proved invaluable in establishing the extent of the acreage of the former owners of Ráth Cairn, the price paid by the Land Commission and how the payment had been made.

The key to understanding land reform in Ireland ideally, as mentioned previously, should be through the Land Commission, and which represents arguably the greatest untapped resource, is the records branch of the Land Commission housed on the ground floor of the National Archive building. Admittance was requested, within specified areas, to avoid sensitive material relating to the establishment of the colony; however the staff in the records office searched for the material specified and personal admittance was blocked. Through a request, in relation to the papers of the Department of Lands, the ministry that controlled the Land Commission, it came to light that the Department of Lands files were a separate entity from the Land Commission records and lodged with the Department of Agriculture. While they are, in theory, available for examination, those for the 1930s have not yet been found. They could prove to be enormously revealing concerning the scope of migration and the work carried out by the Land Commission.

Through the historical debates of the Oireachtas in the Séanad and the Dáil the climate of local political opinion regarding migration and land division was established and again offered clues to events that were then used as pointers. Separating conjecture, on the part of a speaker, from the reality was commonly a difficult process. These often lengthy debates revealed the popular misconceptions abroad at the time and the stance taken by Fianna Fáil on the various criticisms leveled at the government.

Contemporary newspapers were a very practical source particularly in the area of pictures, interviews and anecdotal stories. The *Meath Chronicle* gave, in its broad coverage of events, a helpful insight into the looming prospect of a Gaeltacht colony in the months before the migrants arrived and during preparations for their arrival. It continued to report on the coming of the migrants and to occasionally mention the colony throughout the following years. Other newspapers, some in Irish such as *An tEireanna*, were more reactive to the events as they unfolded. Through a steady trickle of articles the progress of the colony was followed throughout the 1930s and 1940s. However, at this time,

journalism tended toward light magazine type articles and none approached the topic as might be expected of today's investigative journalism. Not until 1969 was there a more in-depth look at the colony in the *Irish Press*.

Content

In Chapter one a wide overview of migration is described, setting Ráth Cairn into perspective, using the Land Commission reports as a skeleton to apply the flesh of detail concerning the set up of Ráth Cairn and the subsequent colonies. Chapter two highlights the proactive role Fianna Fáil took with its land acts to further its political survival and how this was enacted regarding Ráth Cairn. Chapter three reveals the available material about Ráth Cairn from its initial conception to the end of the 1940s. The impact, taken from contemporary sources, on both the local and migrant populations has been shown in a sharper focus than heretofore. Chapter four shows the evolutionary nature of the migration plan and the reaction to the scheme by other political parties. This chapter also describes the reports on the colony process carried out in the 1940s, the eventual fate of the scheme and the legacy of the forward looking idea.

From the late nineteenth century the ownership of land has been radically altered. The rural population has undergone a massive reordering. Redistribution and changes in communities, as well as farming practice, led to cultural adjustment. The combined changes in the social structure and alteration of the cultural dynamic were having a detrimental effect on the Irish language. Increasingly, despite attempts within the school system to save it, the Irish language was slipping away. This was a concern because the language was considered to be an important component in the newly independent country. This study examines in detail the attempt by Fianna Fáil to safeguard the language and deal with agricultural poverty and will clarify many aspects of the effect of their policies, on both the political and social participants, within the wider land reform picture. Despite a number of books on the subject, the gap that remained was the historiography in a political context of the setting up of the colony. By looking at the founding of the colonies from a new perspective, inside the government departments, a greater appreciation of the internal dynamics of the beauraucratic workings of the government machine has emerged. As the first detailed

study of the establishment and conclusion of the Gaeltacht colony experiment a greater knowledge of the migration process is now available to other researchers to develop the area of study.

Chapter One

Migration and the historical context of land division

When the Free State was established in 1922 with Cumann na nGaedheal in office the resolution of the land question was uppermost in the concerns of the government. Before independence however a considerable amount of work had already been done in this regard. When Fianna Fáil came to office ten years later the establishment of a colony, in the case of Ráth Cairn, was the culmination of a number of social and economic problems that Fianna Fáil sought to resolve in the first period of their time in government. The two issues that concern this thesis and Fianna Fáil were the Irish language and uneconomic holdings. Of the uneconomic holdings the most serious problems centered on the western counties.

I

Focusing attention on the counties along the western seaboard the Congested Districts Board (CDB) had worked to deal with the uneconomic holdings. Although not all of the western counties were overcrowded, in some areas the problem was overwhelming. In its *Nineteenth Report of 1903-1911* the CDB gave the population for the entire Congested Districts in 1910 as 1,122,144 which covered a total of 7,658,114 acres.¹ (fig. 1.1) The nine counties were: Donegal, Galway, Kerry, Leitrim, Mayo, Sligo, and parts of Clare and Cork.² These counties in particular were where the worst problems of poverty and unemployment existed and where the majority of Irish speakers lived. At the heart of the CDB solution lay the redistribution of land and the method employed was to buy up large untenanted estates allowing the holdings of the small farmers in the immediate area of the estate to be enlarged. However, with little untenanted land available this involved rearranging land holdings in an area after a strong farmer had moved out, exchanging his land for a new farm elsewhere. This allowed the CDB to accommodate farmers within a few miles of where their original uneconomic holding lay. While this short distance move was a form of migration the term was not yet applied in this situation. The first short distance moves began in 1897, but here, allottees or congests as they were known, did not leave the congested districts. It was not until the Land Act of

¹ Elizabeth Hooker, *Readjustments of agricultural tenure in Ireland* (North Carolina, 1938), p. 227.

² The nine Congested Districts counties as defined by Section 46 (1) of the Irish Land Act, 1909.

1903 that the Congested Districts Board was allowed to acquire land outside its jurisdiction and to begin moving families further afield.³ Initially only large farmers and landowners were migrated but later the small farmers were encouraged to move to larger more economic holdings in the east.⁴

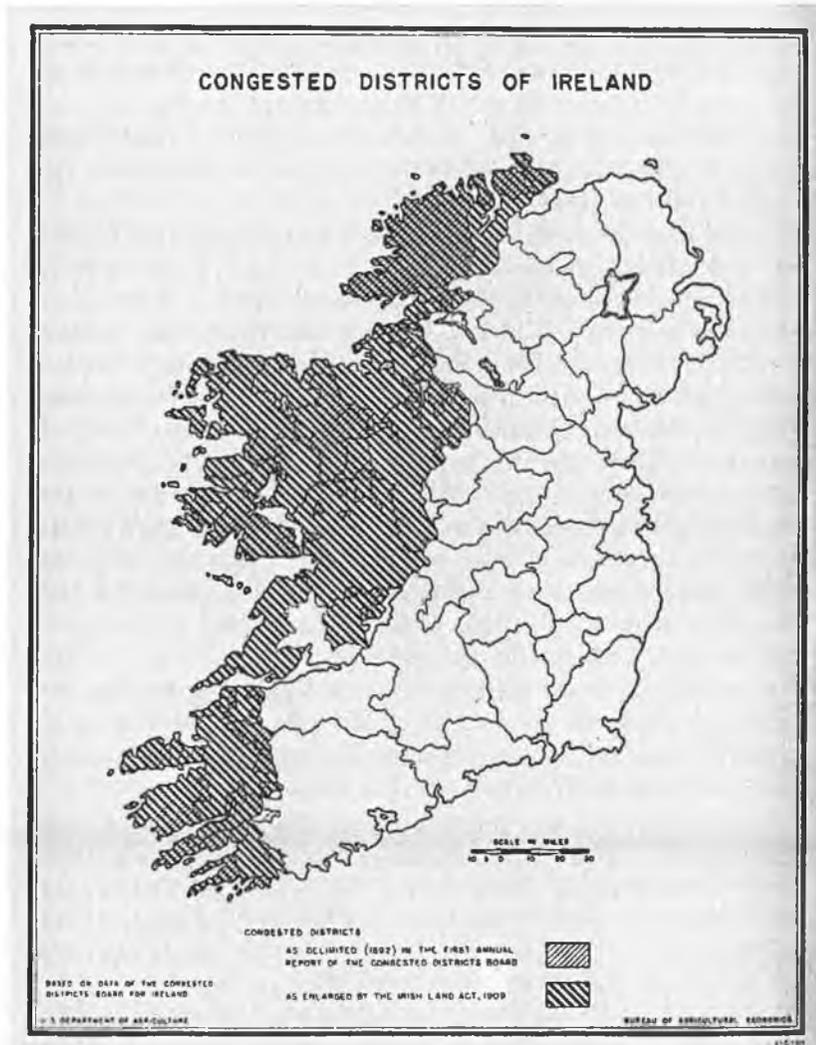


Figure 1.1 Congested Districts 1909. Source: Elizabeth Hooker, *Readjustments of Agriculture Tenure in Ireland* (1938), p. 128.

II

Historically migration has existed in one form or another either rural-rural, or rural-urban when people perceived that greater prosperity was to be found elsewhere. Migration in Ireland, beginning several centuries ago, reflected either individual decisions or migrations organised into groups, which were sponsored by a political or economic agency and usually took the form of

³ Duffy, 'State sponsored migration', p. 177.

⁴ Dooley, *The Land for the People*, pp 133-135.

emigration.⁵ Beginning in the late nineteenth century the Congested Districts Board instigated the both the short and long distance movement of farmers. With independence the nature of internal migration, while for a time mimicked the Congested Districts Board, but later evolved into an altogether different arrangement.

Before independence the Congested Districts Board experienced a great deal of resistance to migration on the part of the overcrowded population. The attachment to their home place was an important mitigating factor and poor information about their prospective destination in the eastern counties often led the potential migrant to refuse to accept migration. As Dooley has shown, people were often more willing to travel to America or to the United Kingdom, where members of their families were already resident, rather than consider moving to Meath. 'From the known to the known' was an explanation offered by the Commission on Emigration as late as the 1950s and meant that emigration was often the preferred option to the internal migration offered.⁶

III

After independence the theoretical idea of moving individuals out of the congested districts was suggested in 1923, by Joseph McBride along with others, among them William Sears⁷ and Patrick Hogan, a Labour deputy from County Clare.⁸ Farmers were migrated by the Land Commission to the east throughout the 1920s for the relief of congestion and a figure of seventeen farms allotted to migrants in County Meath emerged in the 1930s.⁹ Earlier in 1927 a heated debate had taken place in the Dáil between the then Minister for Lands, Patrick J. Hogan,¹⁰ and County Meath, Labour Deputy, David Hall. The debate revealed that Cumann na nGaedheal had already relocated a considerable number of migrants up to County Meath and, according to Mr Hall, at a loss to the local people: 'They are coming in such numbers that they are 'scrooging' out the people of Meath who have just claims for allotments of lands....' and he went on to ask are the 'lands of Meath to be utilised to meet the needs of all the congests

⁵ Patrick J. Duffy, 'Placing migration in history: geographies of Irish population movements' in Brian S. Turner (ed.), *Migration and myth, Ulster's revolving door* (Down Patrick, 2006), p. 33.

⁶ Dooley, *The Land for the People*, p. 141.

⁷ William Sears (1869-1929) Sinn Féin, Mayo South.

⁸ Dooley, *The Land for the People*, pp 137-8; Patrick Hogan (1886-1969), Labour, Clare, Leas-Cheann Comhairle 1927-1938, 1948-1951

⁹ *ibid.*, p.140.

¹⁰ Patrick J. Hogan (1891-1936) Cumann na nGaedhael, Galway, Minister for Agriculture 1922-27, 1931-32, Minister for Lands and Agriculture 1927-1930.

that there are in Ireland?.....Everyday in the week we have migrants coming in.’¹¹ The Irish Land Commission informed the Dáil that when the additional powers amended to the 1929 Land Act came into play the Land Commission anticipated substantial increases in the allotment figures for 1931.¹² In the early 1930s indications were that individual migration was continuing. In the Dáil in March of 1930 the Parliamentary Secretary for Fisheries Martin Roddy,¹³ speaking for the Minister for Lands, replied to a question about the number of farms allotted in Meath, and made known that there had been seventeen. He gave the figure of 160 acres for the majority with seven over 100 and six exceeding 200 statute acres.¹⁴

Surprisingly, in light of the later policy of allocating twenty-two acres for migrants in the mid 1930s, this amount of acres was rather generous. Roddy had in the same month informed the Dáil that 8,800 acres were in the process of being acquired in Meath and that there was a potential 40,000 acres that were suitable for acquisition.¹⁵ Further evidence was shown in answer to a question in 1932 about congestion in Co Meath when Patrick J. Rutledge,¹⁶ the next Minister for Lands and Fisheries, revealed ‘over 31,000 acres have been divided among some 12,000 allottees and in addition 10,000 acres’ are ready to be dealt with and ‘a further area of some 38,000 acres’ are currently being investigated for possible acquisition. Reference was also made to twenty large farmers from County Mayo who had been allocated land in County Meath in the previous twelve months.¹⁷ This demonstrated that there was a good deal of rearranging going on in the county even before it was decided to introduce a Gaeltacht colony. Up until this stage however, the point of migration had been the relief of congestion within the western counties. With later changes in policy Fianna Fáil would consider the uneconomic holdings of small farmers outside of the congested districts.

¹¹ Dáil Éireann deb., díospóireachtaí páirliminte (parliamentary debates); tuairisg oifigiúil (official report), xix, 1200-1201 (07 April 1927) (Dublin, Stationery Office)

¹² Dáil Éireann deb., xxxiv (22 May 1930).

¹³ Martin Roddy (died 1948) Fine Gael, Leitrim, Sligo, parliamentary secretary to the Minister for Fisheries 1927, 1930-1932.

¹⁴ Dáil Éireann deb., xxxiv (29 March 1930).

¹⁵ Dáil Éireann deb., xxxiii (12 March 1933).

¹⁶ Patrick J. Rutledge (died 1952) Fianna Fáil, Mayo North, Minister for Lands and Fisheries 1932-1933.

¹⁷ Dáil Éireann deb., xlii, 615 (7 June 1932).

IV

After Fianna Fáil's election victory they then drew into the emotional mix of land the potent ingredient of the Irish language. The use of language as part of nation building and the nationalising of a population had its origins in the nineteenth century. Across Europe countries were establishing or choosing a specific vernacular language to link it to the emerging nation states. Energetic professional intellectuals, politicians and academics, were shaping the language to a national identity. The idea that language was the property of specific groups became accepted and the defining ideology of nationalism.¹⁸

The Gaelic League, inaugurated in 1893, grew more popular and the casual use of Irish became increasingly accepted. Newspapers in the 1920s and 1930s show evidence of this popularity with the incidence of shop names in Irish and the notices of traditional dances advertised as ceilis. A growing concern with the loss of Irish as a first/native language as spoken by 'authentic' Irish populations in the west was beginning to be articulated.

During the years the Congested Districts Board operated, preserving the Irish language had not been part of the policy in the relocation of western farmers. The same was true in the first six to eight years of independence before a definite migration policy was in place. If Irish speakers were moved about it was simply that many residents in the Congested Districts and those most in need were Irish speakers. Irish was not the first language for the whole population in the western counties, known as Gaeltacht areas, as the statistics for the early 1930s show. English was the majority language and poverty was not restricted to Irish speakers.¹⁹

V

Part of the developing policies of the Irish government after independence was the attempted Gaelicization of Ireland from the mid 1920s. At its most fundamental this was a wish to prevent the decline of the Irish language, mainly in the southern and western counties, where the bulk of native Irish speakers lived.²⁰ The Irish Constitution, adopted in 1922, defined the Irish language in tandem with English as 'the national language'. In an early response

¹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, 1991), p. 71.

¹⁹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xlii, (31 May 1932), see appendix one.

²⁰ R. V. Comerford, *Ireland (Dublin, 2000)*, p. 146.

to the concern about the revival/loss of the Irish language the Cumann na nGaedheal party established the Gaeltacht Commission in 1925. This was a comprehensive study of the language that would be presented in 1926 and debated at length. Liam Cosgrave, first President of the Executive Council and leader of Cumann na nGaedheal wanted to set out the commitment of his party to the language and establish that the Gaeltacht would have a critical role. He stated that 'the future of the Irish language and its part in the future of the Irish nation depend on its' continuing in an unbroken tradition as the language of Irish homes'. For this reason the Irish people rightly value as a national asset their 'Gaeltacht', the scattered range of districts in which Irish is the home language.'²¹ The resulting report, among eighty three proposals put forward, categorised by introduction, promotion and protection of the language, recommended the migration of Irish speakers into areas that no longer spoke the language.²² All was not plain sailing however and putting a new language structure in place would not be achieved without much effort. The Gaeltacht Commission observed in its report of 1928 that the western counties contained only 16% of the population but were the most remote and represented the greatest complexity of economic hardship.²³

The Irish language functioned on two levels in Ireland, first the language as spoken as an everyday language mainly by the marginalized farming/fishing population in the western counties and secondly, as a statement by those who wanted to become more autonomous, not necessarily independent, from England. In the early twentieth century with the language reduced to large pockets in the west the urgent need to re-establish it as an important source of cultural heritage was coupled with the romantic literary revival and a rising militant nationalism. The desire to promote the Irish language was shown when in 1910 the Senate of the newly formed National Universities of Ireland voted to place Irish as a compulsory matriculation subject. With the result, in 1913 the requirement of Irish for entry into the Catholic universities was imposed.²⁴ This decision was not achieved without heated debate concerning the Protestant

²¹ Tony Crowley, 'The languages of the island of Ireland' in idem *War of Words The politics of language in Ireland 1537-2004* (Oxford, 2005), p.169.

²² Report of Comisiun na Gaeltachta [Gaeltacht Commission] (Dublin, 1926), p. 42; *Seanad Éireann deb., díospóireachtaí páirliminte (parliamentary debates); tuairisg oifigiúil (official report)*, vii, (10 March 1927) (Dublin, Stationery Office)

²³ *Seanad Éireann deb.*, vii, 477 (10 March 1927); Pádraig O'Riagain, 'Development of Irish Language Policy' in idem *Language policy and social reproduction Ireland 1893-1993*.(Oxford, 1997), pp 3-27.

²⁴ Reg Hindley, *The death of the Irish language* (London, 1990), p. 24.

community whose schools did not teach Irish. Consequently the two 'Protestant universities' of Trinity and Queens were not part of the rule. The compulsory condition reflects the political influence of Gaelic League members on university authorities. Not all were in favour of this move however, most notably a previously staunch Gaelic League supporter, John Dillon, who also opposed compulsory Irish in schools.²⁵ The hope was that the next step would establish the language in businesses and professions. This aspiration, while it effectively succeeded in introducing Irish into the school system, had little impact on the greater establishment. It was at this juncture that deference to Irish as the national language was required of any politician wanting to cultivate national support.²⁶

The first Dáil began to legislate for the use of Irish in official government circles and the entire school system of the twenty-six counties following independence. The school system under the British authorities had begun to introduce Irish into schools as early as 1911 following the vote by the Senate of the National Universities. Immediately before independence one-quarter of primary schools and two thirds of secondary schools were teaching Irish.²⁷ Significantly the Gaelic League president, Eoin MacNeill, was Minister for Education. However, despite the favoured position of Irish in Cumann na nGaedheal policies, very little was being done economically by the state to support or promote the language. Even in the schools, as Michael Fitzsimmons points out, only 5% of teachers were capable of teaching Irish.²⁸

VI

The Gaeltacht Commission Report, presented in 1926, was still being amended and debated in 1928. In a Dáil Debate in May of that year the various speakers expressed doubt that this report had sufficient policy suggestions to successfully save the Gaeltacht and its native language. Some areas had achieved consensus, educational suggestions concerning the facilities for primary and secondary education were welcomed. There was, however, a resistance on the part of the government to set up a separate ministry, preferring instead to deal with the Gaeltacht under the umbrella of the various Departments of State but

²⁵ Paul Bew, *Ideology and the Irish question, Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism 1912-1916* (Oxford, 1994), p. 86-7.

²⁶ Comerford, *Ireland*, p. 141.

²⁷ Hindley, *Language*, p. 24.

²⁸ Bew, *Ideology*, p. 88.

mainly the Dept of Lands, Fisheries and Agriculture.²⁹ The Gaeltacht Commission recognised that the poor economic conditions were a factor in the decline of the Irish language and strove to recommend improvements in the Gaeltacht areas which held the majority of Irish speakers.³⁰

Previously, as mentioned above, a limited migration policy within the Congested Districts had already been underway; however the Gaeltachta Commission, among eighty-three recommendations, suggested a more radical approach; that in order to deal with the twin problems of land and language that Irish speaking farmers be moved up to the untenanted fertile counties in the east. It was proposed that counties within the Congested Districts, Galway, Donegal, Sligo, might even be suitable along with Wicklow, Kildare and Meath, which are the more plausible, to be recipient counties. Here the commission felt several issues could be resolved simultaneously the elimination of uneconomic holdings and as a consequence do away with 'poverty and degradation'. Migration would also take away the dependence on emigration leading to the preservation of the 'living language'. They urged the break up of grasslands in the midlands and the migration of not just individual families but colonies of Irish speakers of, 100 families upwards, into economic holdings.³¹

The suggestion of migrating Irish speakers was greeted with derision in the Dáil. Richard Mulcahy,³² however, rebutted the deputies' criticism and referred to the opposition's denunciation of the commission's proposals as 'absurd and ridiculous and that they [had] made no attempt to solve the problem' in the Gaeltacht areas ³³ when they were in control. On the specific question of the migration of Irish speakers, Eamon de Valera spoke at some length in support of the human problem in the Gaeltacht but was essentially against the proposal as it stood, and commented: 'as far as establishing colonies at such a distance from the Gaeltacht is concerned, that is no system as far as the language is concerned. It is obviously very much better, if you have to plant Irish speakers, that you plant them so that they will be extending the language.' He went on to suggest that the fringes of the Gaeltacht the *leath-Gaeltacht* would be

²⁹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xxiii, 1023 (4 May 1928).

³⁰ The Irish speaking areas in the western counties, which under the previous authority were known as the Congested Districts, were later designated Gaeltachta.

³¹ *Report of Comisiun na Gaeltachta* (Dublin, 1926), p.42, 45-6.

³² Richard Mulcahy (General), (1887-1961) *Cumann na nGaedhail*, Dublin North, Fine Gael, Tipperary, Minister for Local Government and Public Health 1927-32.

³³ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xxiii, 1015-1016 (04 May 1928).

better for the establishment of colonies and acknowledged that with a will it could be done but it would be costly. Later in his speech he became philosophical: 'We are at the crossroads and we have to make up our minds what we want and whether we do want to save Irish.' The motion to allocate money and formulate a scheme to put into operation the recommendations of the Gaelic Commission was declared lost.³⁴

On the one hand, the Gaelic Commission advocated relief of congestion in the west and on the other, to provide a sustainable lifestyle for uneconomic small farmers, where both could be packaged up in the revival of the Irish language. It would be another six years before Fianna Fáil agreed with their assessment. In a sense what the commission advocated was that missionaries of 'real Irish' society be planted in the rich soils of the east to nourish the diluted society that had supplanted the original traditions.

VII

In terms of the Celtic revival, the received rhetoric was that the *real* Irish were living in the western counties, having been moved there under Cromwell's draconian action 'To hell or Connaught'. The Gaeltacht Commission included the following opinion that in the 'traditions of the Gaeltacht there is preserved an uninterrupted Gaelic culture which constitutes the very soul of the Irish language'³⁵ Today it is recognized that the ethos of the new state was based on this idea that 'the West of Ireland [was] a unique cultural reservoir.'³⁶ The symbolic creation of Irish-Ireland defined by Gaelicism and Catholicism remained in place as a cultural myth for many years and was only starting to be dismantled in the 1960s. It excluded the Protestant and the urban and in this way alienated those who were urban and non-Irish speaking from the traditional Irish construction of identity.³⁷

The romantic myth of the west of Ireland was an accepted ethos by those who stood on the political platform or were learning Irish in the cities of the east but the attitudes of the small farmers were far from romantic in the 1930s. The small holders' attachment to their own land as a cultural landscape was one

³⁴ *ibid.*, 1033.

³⁵ *Seanad Éireann deb.*, vii, 484 (10 March 1927).

³⁶ Nuala C. Johnson, 'Building a nation: an examination of the Irish Gaeltacht Commission Report of 1926' in *Journal of Historical Geography* 19, 2 April 1993, pp 159-160.

³⁷ Brian Graham, (ed.), 'Ireland and Irishness, place, culture and identity' in *idem In search of Ireland: a cultural geography* (London, 1997) pp 6-8.

thing but the economics of life in the west of Ireland was intolerable. The social realities were such that the west was described as a rural slum. The slogan 'Connaught men are returning to the soil of Meath from which they had been evicted by Cromwell' was a declaration by those who were willing to migrate to the eastern counties.³⁸ Without the outlet of emigration due to the world wide depression the possibilities within Ireland had to be explored. Young people were not just staying at home they were also returning from America, increasing a restless demographic. The problem was also compounded for many families because significantly less money was being sent home from immigrant sons and daughters. Thinking had changed after eastern migrations were underway and by 1937 the difficulty of getting people to leave the western counties had reversed. In the Dáil, Deputy Bartley³⁹ observed 'From my experience for the past twelve months, I can say that there is a growing number of people in the Gaeltacht districts who are now anxious to go. He reported that people said to him 'Let the Land Commission make the offer and they will find how many will be prepared to go.' I believe the Land Commission would be surprised at the response if it invited applications or if it sent around some of their local representatives to make inquiries.'⁴⁰

VIII

The annual Land Commission report of 1934/35 contained the first mention of the Irish-speaking colonies. Migration was described as having occupied 'our special attention' while the issue of land resettlement, which lay at its heart, and was the driving factor, was not mentioned. The unnamed area of Ráth Cairn and the second colony Gibbstown, as yet only in the planning stages, were alluded to and it was hoped that 'every effort had been made to settle the migrants comfortably [and to] assist them in the initial stages of cultivating their new holdings and to establish cordial relations with their new neighbours.' Ráth Cairn was considered 'now practically complete [and] we are reasonably satisfied that it shows every promise of success'. In this first report concluded with the information that 'several other areas have been selected to serve the same purpose.'⁴¹ This would indicate that the concept was fully developed and that they were confident enough not to wait to see how the first worked out.

³⁸ Interview with Pádraic Mac Donncha of Ráth Cairn, Co Meath (18 Jan., 2006); Historically the untenanted lands of Meath were more likely due to clearances and evictions in the nineteenth century.

³⁹ Gerald Bartley (1889-1974) Fianna Fáil, Galway, Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Agriculture 1951-54, Minister for the Gaeltacht 1959-61.

⁴⁰ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xvi, 1714 (27 April, 1937).

⁴¹ *Land Commission Report 1934-1935* (Dublin Stationary Office), pp 6-7.

IX

The first Gaeltacht colony, Ráth Cairn, planned in 1934 and put in place in 1935, provided fully equipped and prepared holdings for the chosen migrant families. On the twenty-two acre holdings, each of the twenty-seven Connemara families were provided with a three/four bedroom house including out offices. The lands were fenced and wells dug, livestock and farm implements were provided and a portion of the farm was tilled. Before their arrival a supply of turf was provided at a reasonable distance from the settlement. In fact the turbary plots were three miles away but reports indicated that a new road network was already constructed to allow for access to the area. A playing field was also provided and a school was to be ready the following year, built by the Office of Public Works. Consideration for older children was in place with vocational training available locally. A rather curious complaint appears in a Dáil debate in 1936 that the houses in general being built by the Land Commission were not 'artistic' enough.⁴² The Minister for Lands at the time, Senator Joseph Connolly,⁴³ agreed that with additional money available a more artistic house would be better, but these were of good quality construction making up for what they lacked in other areas. He would personally have liked to see a percent of traditional thatched roofed houses built but this was too expensive.⁴⁴

X

In the second report of 1935/36 the two colonies were named and the first crop raised by the migrants at Ráth Cairn had been deemed excellent and abundant.⁴⁵ The report also described the Ráth Cairn colony as a compact area of 776 acres of excellent land. The establishment of the colony was given as costing approximately £27,000 but this did not include the purchase of the land, which was not given. The report indicated that the price had been £300 more expensive per holding than preparing a holding for 'local landless men'.⁴⁶ This category referred to those who were agricultural labourers and/or discharged employees on lands acquired by the Land Commission.

⁴² Artistic may have meant a more vernacular or traditional style building.

⁴³ Joseph Connolly (1885-1961), Senator first Seanad, Minister for Lands and Fisheries, 1933-36.

⁴⁴ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lxi, 2380-1 (7 May 1936).

⁴⁵ *Land Commission Report 1935-1936*, pp 6-7.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

The issues that surrounded the question of the landless preoccupied Fianna Fáil when they first came to dominance. In their attempt to deal with the problem of congestion uneconomic holdings and unemployment in the Gaeltacht, the party accepted the landless as suitable persons to receive holdings. While this may buy votes commented Deputy Patrick Hogan, it made 'rotten economic and rotten national administration'.⁴⁷ The landless were being given insignificant and uneconomic holdings and thus the congestion problem was being compounded. In addition, within the agricultural community, 20% were labourers not farmers and therefore would not benefit for the most part from the land resettlement schemes.⁴⁸ The landless into which the sons of farmers and agricultural labourers would fall became a large issue with the government over the following fifteen years.

In 1935 Dr Ryan,⁴⁹ speaking on behalf of Minister for Lands listed those categories laid down by Section 31 of the Land Act, 1923, which were eligible for land: uneconomic holders, persons willing to exchange holdings, evicted tenants or their representatives, ex-employees on lands acquired, trustees of turbary or pasturage and any other person or body approved by the Land Commission. He further qualified this list, 'drawn up in the heyday of Fianna Fáil radicalism' with the explanation that ex-employees had first claim, next evicted tenants and uneconomic holders in the locality followed by suitable landless.⁵⁰ The very last to be considered, he concluded, should any land remain, would be migrants who had surrendered land to relieve congestion. Finally he explained that the criteria to receiving land was 'competence to work the land and importantly not to sell, let or assign it' to anyone else.⁵¹ This list showed that the government was doing everything they could to mitigate trouble in the areas where migrants were eventually placed. Indeed the following day when Connolly spoke he explained that every attempt was made to create a friendly atmosphere in the area the migrants were to go. For the 'safety, security and peace of the migrants.....to ensure that they would not be coming to an area where there would be any hostility of feeling of resentment.'⁵² The question of eligibility of the old IRA was also raised in the course of clarifying the order of preference of entitlement.

⁴⁷ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xlvi, 2400 (13 July 1933).

⁴⁸ Joseph J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 115.

⁴⁹ James Ryan, (1891-1970) Fianna Fáil, Wexford. Minister for Agriculture: 1932-33, 1937-47.

⁵⁰ Paul Bew, Ellen Hazelkorn, Henry Patterson (eds), 'Fianna Fáil hegemony, 1932-1966' in idem *The dynamics of Irish politics* (London, 1989), p. 78.

⁵¹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lv, 21 (27 February 1935); Memorandum of Minister of Lands, 21 August 1936 (NAI, DT, S6490 A).

⁵² *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lv, 272 (28 February 1935).

During this Dáil session Dr Ryan was questioned about the IRA issue and he confessed he didn't know the definition of the old IRA.⁵³ The following day the Minister, Joseph Connolly, stated that pre-truce IRA had a definite claim over the man who was not pre-truce IRA, but that the ultimate character type wanted was a man who showed any likelihood of making good.⁵⁴ Criticism as to the priority of categories saw, in 1936, the landless and the migrants changed in order, with the landless loosing out and relegated to last position. A tougher criterion was also imposed on the landless being defined as 'of a good type who have experience and capital to work the land'.⁵⁵

Professor Smiddy, Professor of Economics at University College Dublin and formerly the first Irish diplomat to the USA, addressed the continuing landless issue in the 1940s in a report to the government, which looked at the amount of land available for distribution. The report, rather surprisingly, also included the professor's personal interpretation. He was of the opinion that the landless had a poor record of working their land efficiently and that the only implement they were familiar with was 'the ash plant'. He wrote of speaking to Mr Deegan of the Land Commission who 'stated to me', that as a result of local opposition to the settlement of colonies from the Gaeltacht in County Meath the local landless claimants were placated with 4,000 acres for the 600 acres they gave to the migrants. In the future he said the proportion of land given to ordinary migrants will be increased compared to the landless.⁵⁶ The statistics presented by Patrick J. Sammon show that the figures for the landless category from the years after 1940 were less than fifty allottees per year and by the end of the decade were down to ten. The total acres for landless allottees from a high of 11,277 in 1938 to 83 in 1949 was 30,744 compared to 55,933 that other types of migrants received.⁵⁷

While the landless continued to be the most contentious applicants where land holdings were concerned, Fianna Fáil had not ignored their plight entirely. In 1932 the party had put in place the Cottage Scheme intended to cater for landless agricultural labourer. The agricultural worker was seen by de Valera, in partnership with the small holder, to 'epitomize the cultural and economic

⁵³ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lv, 21 (27 February 1935).

⁵⁴ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lv, 273 (28 February 1935).

⁵⁵ Bew et al, *Irish politics*, p. 78.

⁵⁶ Land division and enlargements of holdings. April 1942 (NAI, DT, S6490 A).

⁵⁷ Sammon, *A memoir*, p. 261.

values of the rural idyll', and he hoped that the cottage scheme would deter the mass emigration of the agricultural labourer.⁵⁸ It was hoped that the combination of housing and the work offered with the push into tillage would encourage many more workers to remain on in rural Ireland. Although large numbers of cottages were built, which may have slowed the decline of the labouring classes ultimately it could not 'withstand the forces of emigration, mechanisation and urbanization.'⁵⁹

XI

As late as 1939 there was still a lively debate in cabinet as to who had priority for a holding. A revised list was eventually drawn up to come into effect by 1 Jan 1940 and at the top were the land stewards, who with a high social standing were, rather predictably, given a larger share than anyone. Their share of 'divided estates may be extended to 33 1/3% above ordinary standard.' The remainder of categories in order of priority were herds, discharged employees, genuine evicted tenants competent to work land, adjacent congests and migrants were all to receive ordinary standard holdings. The landless category, which included farmer's sons, were to be given 'land not suitable for migrants who have sufficient capital to work land.' The landless could be offered to take up left over parcels and could also be brought into an area where locals refuse to take allotments. The landless, it seemed, were less emotive migrants than those from the western counties. Although married men in all categories were preferred 'where depopulation of an area is serious unmarried men may be brought in.'⁶⁰

As to the type of allottee chosen a serious consideration was their ability to successfully farm a new holding. Recognizing that there was a difference in agricultural practices between east and west, and in order to assist the migrants with new cultivation practices, the 1934/35 Land Commission report indicated that an Assistant Agricultural Overseer (AAO) was allocated to the Athboy district for the exclusive use of the Gaeltacht migrants. After some lengthy discussions between the Department of Agriculture and the Meath County Committee of Agriculture (MCCA) it had been agreed that it would be expedient to have an Irish speaking overseer and this was accomplished. Initially however

⁵⁸ Anne-Marie Walsh, 'Root them in the land: cottage schemes for agricultural workers' in Joost Augusteijn (ed.), *Ireland in the 1930s* (Dublin, 1999), p. 50- 51.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 66.

the MCCA was not disposed to agree with the Department of Agriculture to pay for the second overseer for the new colony.

To understand the refusal of the Meath County Committee of Agriculture to fund an AAO, which was their area of responsibility, a brief appraisal of the membership of the Meath County Committee of Agriculture follows. County Committees of Agriculture (CCA) were set up in all twenty-six counties of Saorstát Éireann and the members drawn from a number of categories. The categories were legislated for in the Agricultural Act of 1931. 'No person will be appointed [to a County Committee] unless he⁶¹ has practical, commercial or technical knowledge of land or has an estate or interest in agricultural land in the county or has special knowledge of agricultural matters.' A considerable percent of the members in all counties were county councilors. Some committees were appointed for one year but others including Meath were in place for three years. In 1934 there were twenty members of the Meath CCA drawn from the areas of Dunshaughlin, Kells, Navan, Slane and Trim. Of the total, four had practical, commercial or technical knowledge of land, fifteen had an estate, or interest in agricultural land and the remaining eleven had special knowledge of agricultural matters. Eleven members of those listed were also county councilors. The fifteen who had an estate, or interest in agricultural land may have been farmers, graziers or members of the landed families who were resident in the county. A chart for 1928 which broke down all CCA in the twenty-six counties into occupations, showed that in Meath fifty percent were farmers while the other half were of mixed occupations. These men would have a great deal to lose if the Land Commission were to compulsorily purchase any of their lands for migrants. Major Gerrard, the Chairman of the Meath County Committee of Agriculture in 1928, saw his land at Gibbstown taken over in 1936 but by this time he was no longer a member of the MCCA.⁶² The local Deputy Captain Patrick Giles,⁶³ the sitting Fine Gael TD for Meath and Westmeath, described this estate along with Allenstown as one of the best worked farms in Europe. Hyperbole notwithstanding, his statement in the Dáil demonstrated that Gerrard was an efficient manager; who gave constant employment and,

⁶¹ Women appeared as members in both the 1920s and the late 1930s.

⁶² Membership of Committees of Agriculture (NAI, Department of Agriculture (hereafter DA) G3511-1934).

⁶³ Patrick Giles (Captain), (born 1898), Fine Gael, Meath-Westmeath.

according to Giles, provided houses for his workers, grazing for their animals, to some he gave pensions and to others, on retirement, he gave fuel.⁶⁴

The roles of the County Committees of Agriculture were set out in an article, suggested by the Department of Agriculture, by John Kelly for a French Agricultural Journal. He wrote that County Committees of Agriculture were truly representative of the farming community and commanded public confidence. The article described how the committees were financed through the local rates, remitted by the various County Councils and that this would have included an annual grant from the Department of Agriculture. He explained that their role was to conduct winter agricultural classes, deliver lectures in rural centers, set up demonstration plots, conduct agricultural experiments, supervise livestock breeding schemes, supervise sales of seeds manure and feed of various kinds to animals, and finally they conducted an intensive system of farm visiting throughout the country.⁶⁵ The instructors were paid £760 per annum and the agricultural overseer £430 which included the expenses incurred in their jobs.⁶⁶ An overseer remained for two years to coordinate the training of new agricultural techniques with the instructors provided by the Meath County Committee of Agriculture.

XII

With the implementation of the first colony successfully completed, the following year 1936/37, the Land Commission report indicated that a further experiment had been carried out. Gibbstown, about fifteen miles from Ráth Cairn, comprised fifty migrant families brought from various parts of the Gaeltacht and it was anticipated that with nine additional holdings being prepared this figure would rise to fifty-nine families. The migrants were described as; 'a good type of intelligent and industrious people; sixteen from Kerry, two from West Cork, six from South Mayo, twelve from North Mayo and fourteen from Donegal.' The report was pleased to indicate that with the experience gained with colony one that colony two had lessened in expenditure. The cost to the Gibbstown settlement had been £725 per holding and for the Ráth Cairn settlement, £980 (not including the cost of the land).

⁶⁴ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lxx, 1732 (7 April 1938).

⁶⁵ John Kelly, 'Agricultural conditions in the Irish free state 1933', in *Les Travaux des chambres d'agriculture* no. 7, 10 July 1933 (NAI, DA, 1188-1935).

⁶⁶ Meath County Committee of Agriculture (MCCA) Minutes 1946, (NAI, DA, E1716-35).

The 1936/37 report mentioned that the precautions taken to preserve the use of the Irish language at Ráth Cairn were also being observed at Gibbstown. What these precautions were however were not indicated. A note of caution was included in the conclusion on migration.

'The expense involved in such colony migrations is of course a deterrent to pursuing them on a large scale but the experiment is being carefully watched with a view to deciding to what extent it would be practicable to continue or extend it.'⁶⁷

It was important to end on a positive note and the report reminded the reader that one to four uneconomic holdings in the west were improved for every one family that migrated east.

In the 1937/38 Land Commission report another colony, Kilbride, had been put in place which increased the 'settlements' to three. A breakdown in the form of a chart (Table 1.1) was provided in this report indicating holdings, acreage and cost of improvements, and reproduced below.

Migration from the Gaeltacht

Colony	No. of holdings provided for Migrants	Total acres of holdings	Acres per holding	Cost of the Land per holding	Cost of housing per holding	Cost of roads fences drains etc per holding	Other costs per holding *1
(1) Rathcairn	27	589	21 3/4	£431	£497	£188	£295
(2) Gibbstown	50	1.142	22 3/4	347	357	104	350
(3) Kilbride	13	290	22 1/4	305	402	168	362
Total (or average)	90	2.021	22 1/2	364	406	138	335

*1 A large portion recovered on resale

*2 Rising price of stock and implements supplied to successive colonies

Table 1.1 Migration from the Gaeltacht: Land Commission Annual Report 1937-38

The report for this year was more positive than previously. 'The present indications point to the success of the experiment...' More than 600 people, often comprising large families represented a valuable addition to the sparse agricultural population of County Meath. The migrants were reported to have been adapting well to the new environment and the modern farming methods. They tilled from six to seven acres, about one fourth of their holdings, raising excellent crops of wheat, potatoes and root crops.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Land Commission Report 1936-1937, pp 6-7.

⁶⁸ Land Commission Report 1937-1938, pp 6-7.

The 1938/39 report indicated that a penultimate colony, Clongill, had been put in place. This was quite small compared to the previous settlements and consisted of only nine families who are given 261 acres. In the same manner that Kilbride was adjacent to Ráth Cairn, Clongill was an addition to Gibbstown. Because of its size the cost was less than other colonies at £7,769 and in this instance the price for the land of £2,852 was also included. The report sums up the costs thus far: a total of ninety-nine holdings consisting of 2,286 acres had cost £38,288 increasing the population by 660. In addition roads, drains, wells, fences, buildings and equipment brought the figure to £54,616. An additional sum of £31,792 spent on stock, fodder, implements, seeds, manure, tillage, provisions, fuel, transport expenses and one year's maintenance had not been added to the previous figure to give the actual total. This may have been to avoid alarming the casual reader. The sum of the two, £86,408, was therefore the total cost for the four colonies as of March 1939. This section of the report concluded with an expression of satisfaction with the experiment but concedes that it had been 'somewhat costly'.⁶⁹ A short section in this report indicated that a new approach to migration was soon to be implemented that would be known as group migration. The report described thirty-four holdings in County Meath given to migrants from Kerry, Mayo and Sligo. However, the details are scarce and there was no indication of how many families a group would in future consist of and no costings were provided.⁷⁰ The report in the following year would be more forthcoming.

The papers of the Department of An Taoiseach, corroborated the Land Commission reports of 1938/39, and showed that the colony schemes were being allowed to lapse, for the new Group Migration scheme being formulated.⁷¹ A memo, submitted in August of that year by the Department of Finance, gave approval to the Land Commission for a large scale migration scheme from congested areas. This approval was given, subject to a number of conditions: that the scheme should be restricted to a five year program and during the five years the Department of Lands should be required to furnish an annual report to the Department of Finance regarding progress and giving details of expenditure. They had estimated that it would require an out lay of £8 million of which £7

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Land Commission Report 1938-1939*, pp 6-7.

⁷¹ Report of 'Proposed group migration to eastern counties' (NAI, DT, S10764).

million would go to free grants. ⁷²Distinguishing it from the Gaeltacht migrations at this time, a proportion of the cost of the buildings erected on the migrant's holding was to be treated as an advance. The price would be negotiated between Department of Land and Department of Finance. Concern for the rising cost of the migration schemes was shown when the Land Commission was asked that every endeavor should be made to 'restrict expenditure on transfer expenses stock etc. to an average of £120 per migrant.' In a second memo dated, 19 August 1939, the Minister for Finance, again concerned about cost, recommended not committing to a full scheme until an experimental three years have elapsed. The Land Commission, in response, stated that the three year period was not sufficient and that five years was a better length of time and during that time 1,500 migrants' holdings could be provided. Eventually a test period of five years accompanied by an annual report was agreed.⁷³ An awareness of problems arising out of the migrations schemes was shown when the two departments agreed that any public announcement would be banned. It was thought that 'it is not unlikely that the planting of migrants, to the disadvantage of local applicants, may give rise to controversy and agitation. There is also the doubt as to whether sufficient number of suitable landholders can be persuaded to migrate which may lead to difficulty in carrying the scheme to completion.'⁷⁴

The 1938 Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Seasonal Migration to Great Britain had recommended the provision of holdings for migrants from the Congested districts. The migration schemes were part of a report that offered a solution to the large numbers of young men leaving Ireland for work in the United Kingdom. The report suggested that 6,000 holdings outside Congested Districts should be provided at all reasonable speed for allotment to migrants from the scheduled Congested Districts. But within the Congested Districts some 2,000 holdings were also needed. It was considered that the living conditions of 40,000 families in the Congested Districts needed to be improved and this would take twenty to thirty years to complete. ⁷⁵ With these figures, even after seven years of migrations of one sort or another, Fianna Fáil still had a long way to go to solve the problem of rural poverty.

⁷² Patrick Commins, 'The impact of land redistribution in Ireland 1923-1964', *Michael Dillon Memorial Lecture* (Dublin, 1993), p. 12.

⁷³ Cabinet Minutes, 28 August 1939 (NAI, DT, S6490A).

⁷⁴ Department of Finance memo 'Provision of holdings for migrants' (NAI, DT, S6490A).

⁷⁵ Report of the interdepartmental committee on seasonal migration to Great Britain, 1938, p. 51 (NAI, DT, S6490A).

In the 1939/40 Land Commission report, Allenstown the final colony was described. This was only slightly smaller than Ráth Cairn with twenty-three families who, like the Ráth Cairn migrants, were all from Connemara. The 642 acres of their settlement however are several miles distant from any of the established colonies, eight miles from Ráth Cairn and five miles from Gibbstown. The cost was given as £10,648 and £11,673 for the other expenses indicated in other years. There was however, a new element introduced regarding Allenstown; these migrants were being asked to pay for improvements. Previously the cost of improvements, carried out before the families arrived, was absorbed by the Land Commission but now the annuities would be higher in order to recoup some of the cost. This colony was the cheapest of all to establish costing £212 as compared with a previous average of £321. Compared to the first migrant colony, set up in the euphoria of the new experiment, these migrants were to feel the effect of the Department of Finance's questioning of expenses. This was the last time the Land Commission reports detailed the progress of the 'Migration from the Gaeltacht' in a separate section.

On the other-hand, for the first time in the 1939/40 report, a separate section with the term 'Group Migration' was used for the smaller numbers being allotted holdings. The explanation was given that the 'Group Scheme is ancillary to ordinary individual migration' which had been going on for some time. In this report the cost of the new version of migration was first given. For the 100 'Group Migrants' accommodated in the last two years 2,717 acres cost £42,744. The cost of improvement was £37,332 and special assistance came to £140 per holding. This came to a total of £94,076 with £7,677 'recoverable by annuities'.⁷⁶ This figure alone would indicate that the larger migration schemes were not economically sustainable. In the following year, 1941, the group migrants had a separate section reporting a further twenty-nine families installed on holdings raising the total to 129 since the beginning of the scheme. In the years to follow all references in the Land Commission Reports to migration in whatever form would be included in the section titled *The Gaeltacht* and included similar details as have been given above with one hiatus, in 1942, when very little information was supplied.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ *Land Commission Report 1939-1940*, pp 6-7.

⁷⁷ *Land Commission Report 1941-1942*, pp 17-18.

XIII

In a separate report on Group Migration in c.1943 indications were that from 1939 a decision had been taken to initiate the group scheme 'as ancillary to ordinary individual migration and less expensive, troublesome and unwieldy than the large colony migrations.'⁷⁸ The group migrations were destined not only to Meath but also to Westmeath, Kildare and Dublin and this summary puts the group migration at 168 totaling 1,008 individuals.⁷⁹ The cost was given as: land £438, improvements £370 and assistance £130 per holding. The total came to £938 (fifty-four percent was recoverable through annuities) which does not appear to be significantly less than that of the Gaeltacht colonists.⁸⁰

The 1942/43 Land Commission report also summarized the colony migration scheme, stating that a total of 2,924 acres had been surrendered for the new 2,820 acres in Meath. Compared to the group migrants, 3,658 acres in exchange for 5,146 acres, showed this was not quite as equitable as the colony migrants. In the report the Land Commission reiterated their mandate for establishing the colonies: the relief of congestion in the west and the preservation of and expansion of the use of the Irish language, stating that 'every facility and encouragement was given...to preserve the use of the Irish language as their habitual tongue in a way which might not have been possible in smaller groups.' However the section also offers an insight into how much they value the Irish language despite their earlier statement on resettlement policies. It was explained that the group migrants were not required to be 'tested' for Irish but that coincidentally 'a large portion' were Irish speakers as they came from the Gaeltacht areas. What this revealing sentence demonstrates was that the diffusion and preservation of Irish as a by-product of migration would no longer be a deliberate part of the process in the future.⁸¹

This account of the series of Land Commission reports show that the concept of colony migration as government policy was in place for only a short period of time. Or at least in the form they had initially planned. From the moment it was announced in the Dáil by Fianna Fáil the idea was greeted with derision and viewed with scepticism. In the wake of the Gaeltacht Commission

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Report on 'Group Migration' c.1943 (NAI, DT, S10764).

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ *Land Commission Report 1942-1943*, pp 17-18.

report of 1926 a number of individuals were cynical that the Irish language could survive the 'crushing influence of the English language'⁸² From the start with the presentation of the Gaeltacht Commission Report in 1926 for debate the opinion that migration was nonsense prompted deputies in the Dáil to speak against the concept among them Martin Roddy.⁸³ Under pressure from both the Department of Finance, and members of the Fianna Fáil's own party, not to mention the opposition, it was not surprising that as policy, colony migration came to an end in 1939.

Additionally the economics of providing a farm able to sustain a family on only twenty-two acres was rapidly becoming a problem that the policy, based on de Valera's utopian ideal, was unable to ignore. The last colony was already underway before the policy change came into place, as evidenced in the Land Commission reports above, to be replaced by group migration. A senior inspector in the Land Commission, Michael Deegan, wrote in 1943 informing the Taoiseach that the land division proposed by Fianna Fáil in 1926-36 for the Congested Districts was essentially completed.⁸⁴ Further land division would now be concentrated outside the congested districts as the government considered that congestion in the western counties had been resolved. This would contradict contemporary reports that will be quoted later that the problems of uneconomic holdings were an insurmountable difficulty that would not be solved for twenty or thirty years. The standard holding at the time was twenty-two/twenty-five acres for each of the migrant families. However by the 1940s the twenty-two/twenty-five standard size had become an issue with many more Dáil deputy's than had originally felt this size as inadequate and uneconomic. Surprisingly, none of the Land Commission reports except the chart in the 1937/38 report, (table 1) gave the acreages of holdings.

XIV

The Department of Agriculture laid down guidelines as to what comprised a small holding and its viability and it was on that course of action the Gaeltacht colonies after 1937 would be based. The principals of the department were laid out in the first paragraph.

'A small holding to be economic must bring in sufficient income from the sale of live stock, live stock products and crops produced on the holding to pay for the cost of

⁸² Dooley, *The Land for the People*, p. 139.

⁸³ Gaeltacht Commission Report, *Seanad Éireann deb.*, vii (10 March 1927).

⁸⁴ NAI, DT, S6490 (A).

production and to leave such a margin as will enable the farmer to pay rent, rates and taxes; to educate his family and to keep them in fair comfort'⁸⁵.

It was estimated that the quality of land was important but with good land the minimum size capable of supporting a family was twenty-five statute acres. The memo listed numbers of live stock and tillage crops with the relevant acres necessary for production. This ideal however totaled thirty acres which the Department of Agriculture gave as an average holding, five acres above their accepted minimum size.⁸⁶ The Ráth Cairn colony established earlier gave only twenty-two acres to each allottee and as quickly as two years later this was seen as too small. In 1942 a confidential report by Eamon Mainseal, Private Secretary to An Taoiseach, accessed the land division policy. This highly opinionated report supported the status quo with regard to the twenty-two acre allotment. He stated specifically that the twenty-two acres given to the Ráth Cairn was more valuable than sixty acres of average land.⁸⁷ In the section titled 'Migrants Have Got the Equivalent of More than 25 acres of Good Land' he referred to Gibbstown and Clongill and maintained that the monetary value of the land was not passed on to the migrants in the form of annuities, which were only about one-sixth of the entire cost per holding.⁸⁸

XIV

The Department of Agriculture began an assessment of the migration scheme in the 1940s and the proliferation of information was considerable. A confidential report gave the history of migration with personal observations by the author, possibly the department's chief civil servant or the private secretary to the Minister.⁸⁹ The report was addressed to the Minister and came straight to the point: 'At the outset I must state frankly that land division like native government was initiated under conditions apparently intended to ensure its failure and that traces of the bad tradition still impede success' He went on to document the clearances and evictions on the fertile farms where, in the second half of the nineteenth century, half a million people were evicted.....in such a ruthless fashion as no English publicist would dare to defend. He also gave a figure of 60,000 alone 'cleared off the Diocese of Meath'. There was no

⁸⁵ Report of 'Size of Small Holding', January 1937 (NAI, DT, S6490 (A)).

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ Report on 'Land division- its' past and present', 1940/42 (NAI, DA, G14399).

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

recognition of a difficult job carried out under complex circumstances by the CDB and throughout the preamble his criticism was sweeping and dripped with nationalist rhetoric. He pointed out later in the document: 'It seems that by defining the Congested Districts the Purchase of Land (Ireland) Act of 1891 protected the fertile plains of Meath. This ensured that the pretence of undoing the nineteenth century clearances would not encroach on the flocks and herds of the midlands.' Indeed he wrote that they had been protected 'from the polluting presence of the Gael by legal and administrative barriers as if they were surrounded by a *zariba*⁹⁰ of British bayonets.' In his opinion Land settlement, when it came to the Congested Districts by and large, added 'to each poor holding a further area of poor or mediocre land, usually the least desirable even in an area where there was little fertile or attractive [land].' The CDB left the tenanted estates alone and created with their mathematically straight fences and drains, agricultural slums on almost worthless land. Without any concession he carried on in this vein including both traders and *gombeen* men when he accused them of receiving a percent, a rake-off, of the grant money offered to allottees. The author felt that the only course was to take the whole island and deal with congestion: 'Acquire the unused or misused fertile land deal with all reasonable local claims and use the remainder for migrants.' Contrary to the apparent criticism of land redistribution, the author stated that he had advocated extensive migration from the outset within reasonable expense. Holdings he stated should be improved from the surrounding lands where possible and strong local claims considered especially those with strong natural claims or because of evictions.⁹¹

The report writer was also critical of the misguided practice of dividing worthless land in an attempt to increase the value of the holding. 'Worthless land will not improve in value except on paper and the Banking Commission reports have fallen into this by using statistics that are misleading.' He has included tables that demonstrated that most of the land divided had been 'concentrated on the districts where the land is inferior and the low prices paid emphasize it.'⁹²

⁹⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary*: a pen or enclosure.

⁹¹ Report on 'Land Division' (NAL, DA, G14399).

⁹² *ibid.*

Another memo indicated an examination of the size of holdings and pointed out that in order to provide a holding with a valuation of £20, an average for the whole of Ireland, an average of forty acres must be given.⁹³ Broken down into provinces this changes, of course, in Leinster twenty-nine acres comes to £20, in Munster forty-one acres, fifty-seven in Connaught and forty-six in Ulster. The Land Commission inspectors' reports indicated that twenty-seven acres should comprise a holding in Meath at fifteen shillings an acre in order to achieve a valuation of £20, but as has been shown this amount was above the standard holding laid down by the Land Policy.

The writer also looked at the Gaeltacht Colonies specifically and referred to the holdings that the migrants had been allotted. The figures given indicated that, in Gibbstown at least, the migrants with twenty-three acres each were doing well since their land was valued at £27. Clongill with twenty-four acres each brought the average up and the value for the fifty-nine holdings increases to £29. The author was critical of the use of statistics to prove a point but his own figures fall into this category.⁹⁴ Despite five pounds in the difference twenty-three acres was still twenty-three acres regardless of the paper value.

The writer compared different circumstances in justification of his stance. He pointed out to the reader that while the Gaeltacht colonies may not have had very large holdings, consider the families in Rush who, with endeavor have continued to farm on small plots with poor sandy soil. He went on to give an account of the hard work by families on 'miserable little holdings at Ballincorty near Dungarvan and the area that could have improved their lot slipped through the Land Commission fingers for a golf course.' He described that near Glencullen, there was rundale with miserable hovels and that 'if they had been in Conamara would have been long since dealt with.'⁹⁵

The author concluded, despite his earlier approval of migration, with a condemnation of the migration scheme and the migrants in a direct manner. 'The tendency to make the migrant holdings larger, in effect model farms must be repressed in the interest of the greater community who must foot the bill.' In fact he put forward two risks where the migration schemes might be stopped

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

altogether, one was that the migrants, in the perception of many, have been treated too generously and there was 'lavish state expenditure.' He felt that the unconsidered support of the migrant schemes in the face of opposition had galvanized the application for migrant holdings and pressed the Land Commission into action, thereby damaging the success of comprehensive schemes of migration. The second risk was

'the recent elevation of migration into a fetish to the exclusion of all suitable local applicants. I am fearful that the new zeal or the pretended zeal of former bitter opponents of migration will result in its proving and extravagant luxury which the country cannot afford. There is no occasion for the elevation into heroes whose unreasonable demands must be met, migrants who recently quitted the desert for the Promised Lands.'⁹⁶

He also wanted the migrants to be more aware of the reality of their situation.

'The Meath migrants must calmly survey the situation, they must see that the extensive graziers around them are almost all sunk in debt, that they cannot live on 100, 200, [or]300 acres of the most fertile land and that their representatives are now seeking huge interest free loans from the community to shake off the banker and to help them to stock and equip 'so-called' farms where there is no tillage equipment whatever and little stock that does not belong to the thrifty and intelligent men from the mountains.'⁹⁷

In conclusion he apparently had some consideration for those small farmers who would eventually come to Meath. 'Migrants require much more sympathy and help when even eastern farmers often find it difficult.' In order to increase the possibility of the new migrants learning more quickly he suggests that 'one or more allotments should be given to outstanding applicants who are experienced agriculturalists.' These farmers will be 'certain to give light and leading to the general body of allottees.'⁹⁸ This scathing report did not stop migration but changed the way it was approached, requiring the migrants to become more self-reliant and withdrawing the paternalistic support of the State.

XV

As late as 1957 the concern remained as to the elimination of congestion and the report by the National Farmer's Association (Na Feirmeoiri Aontuithe)

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

suggested that it would 'require 2,000,000 acres and would cost between improvements and capital £120 and £150 millions.' Considering the vocal complaints concerning costs in the Dáil it was unlikely to be accepted. If they had been attempting to encourage support for their plan to allocate land to farmers the report that the land problem was 'in any event insoluble' was rather discouraging. They went on to inform that 80,000 enlargements and new holdings have been allotted too small an acreage to be viable. Another two million acres would be required to deal with 162,000 farms of one to thirty acres.⁹⁹ Curiously most of their figures were from the Agricultural Statistics 1927-1933 which was a full twenty four years before the date of this report and with the extent of land division one would assume rather out of date. Nevertheless they calculated that as of 1955, there were 535 holdings of 200 acres and over available in Meath compared to 611 available in 1931. This seemed on the surface to indicate that there might still have been enough land to accommodate quite a number of migrations to Meath of whatever type. Only Kildare, with 424 possible holdings, was as numerous as Meath in potential redistribution.¹⁰⁰ By 1948 with the end to Fianna Fáil period in office, and the colony experiment a closed book, migration policy and its application continued to evolve and would still be operating into the early 1970s.

XVI

But what were the consequences of the migration policy regarding the revival of the Irish language? By 1939 the Land Commission seems to have no longer selected migrants based on their fluency in Irish. Previously, significant consideration was given to migrants with Irish, with a view to reintroducing the language into an area where Irish had not been spoken for many generations. Although there appears to have been no planning as to how this minority language was to be spread to the English speakers in the neighborhood of the Gaeltacht colonies, some thought had been given to the selection of migrants. Those in charge of the processing of applicants for the first scheme, Ráth Cairn, recognized that the Irish language had regional dialects which could not be readily understood by speakers from other areas. For this reason migrants who were chosen by the Land Commission official in Galway, Sean McGlyn,¹⁰¹ were from one homogenous dialect area, Connemara. Ráth Cairn migrants had a

⁹⁹ National Farmer's Association report on 'Farm apprenticeship and land holding' (NAI, DT, S16265), p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Interview with Pádraic Mac Donncha of Ráth Cairn, Co Meath (18 Jan., 2006).

greater, though not absolute, uniformity but by choosing the colonists with a common dialect it has proved to have been, in its own way, successful.¹⁰² Surprising then that when a decision to create an even larger Gaeltacht colony in the same county was initiated, it would falter on the Irish language. Migrants for the second colony were chosen from four very dissimilar linguistic regions Mayo, Kerry, Donegal and Cork; consequently their common language was not Irish but English. It was regrettable that such a large colony of fifty migrants, considered the ideal number for safeguarding the language, would have such an elementary flaw at its inception.¹⁰³ The outcry in the Dáil with the proposal to create Gaeltacht colonies as foolish and, with hindsight, we can see that it was a utopian dream of its time and that, with the exception of the first colony of Ráth Cairn, they were correct.

The Irish language in the late 1920s and early 1930s had played an important part in the nationalizing rhetoric of the country but in reality how widespread was the use of the language in the Gaeltacht, this perceived touchstone of Irish identity? In 1932 Richard Mulcahy asked the Minister for Industry and Commerce, Sean Lemass, for a breakdown of farms in the Gaeltacht where Irish was the language naturally in use by both adults and children, compared to where adults speak Irish and the children mainly speak English.¹⁰⁴ He also wanted to know where English was the language naturally in use by both adults and children. Of the 82,501 farms in the Gaeltacht area, 11,798 of these were fully Irish speaking a further 25,044 showed only the adults speaking Irish, and in 45,659 English was the common language. These statistics were based on the total number of farms in both the Irish speaking and the partly Irish speaking districts of the Gaeltacht which, on the whole were formally the Congested Districts. (Table 1.2) This shows, as Reg Hindley would conclude later, that Irish even in the Gaeltacht was a minority language.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Nancy Stenson, 'Current Themes Language Report: Rath Cairn, the youngest Gaeltacht', in *Eire Ireland*, XXI:I (1986), p. 115.

¹⁰³ Hindley, *Language*, p. 131.

¹⁰⁴ Seán F. Lemass (1899-1971), Fianna Fáil, Dublin South, Minister for Industry and Commerce 1932-33, 1937-1941, 1943-1948, Tánaiste 1945-48.

¹⁰⁵ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, vlíi (31 May, 1932).

NUMBER OF FARMS ON WHICH

	Total Number of Farms	Irish is the natural language of the home	Irish is the natural language of the adults but English is spoken by the children	English is the natural language of the home
Portions of Gaeltacht Situated in				
CLARE Co.:				
Irish-speaking districts	612	39	539	34
Partly Irish- speaking districts	7,252	41	1,294	5,917
CORK CO.:				
Irish-speaking districts	1,254	199	837	218
Partly Irish- speaking districts	7,485	106	1,392	5,987
DONEGAL CO.:				
Irish-speaking districts	9,639	4,826	3,614	1,199
Partly Irish- speaking districts	4,379	322	865	3,192
GALWAY CO.:				
Irish-speaking districts	10,203	3,750	3,707	2,746
Partly Irish- speaking districts	9,024	283	2,814	5,927
KERRY CO.:				
Irish-speaking districts	3,892	887	2,391	614
Partly Irish- speaking districts	6,477	128	1,218	5,131
MAYO CO.:				
Irish-speaking districts	4,510	889	2,535	1,086

Partly Irish-speaking districts	12,426	113	2,787	9,526
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WATERFORD CO.:

Irish-speaking districts	1,435	185	682	568
Partly Irish-speaking districts	3,913	30	369	3,514

TOTAL OF ABOVE:

Irish-speaking districts	31,545	10,775	14,305	6,465
Partly Irish-speaking districts	50,956	1,023	10,739	39,194

Table 1.2 Gaeltacht Statistics Source: Dáil Éireann deb., xlii (31 May 1932)

The change of approach in the second colony, choosing Irish speaking migrants from different Gaeltacht areas, which had proved to be a grave misjudgment, was a decision made by the Minister of Lands. Connolly, in his memoirs, claimed responsibility for this error thinking that it would introduce possible marriage partners of a wider genetic mix than had hitherto been available. 'We have suffered to some extent from inbreeding in the remote and isolated areas of the country.'¹⁰⁶ With a mix of counties this would be less likely to happen. Whatever about marriage prospects it did nothing to contribute to the increase in the Irish language, in fact quite the opposite. The third colony at Kilbride, in effect an addition to Ráth Cairn, rectified the language error by, once again, choosing all the migrants from Galway.

Although the Irish language, linked to colony migration, would become of secondary importance after 1939 activities related to the policy of migration were sustained up until very recently. Group and individual migrations, which only coincidentally included Irish speakers, continued up until the 1960s and 1970s as research has revealed.¹⁰⁷ The final Land Commission reports, produced in the early 1980s show an uninterrupted trickle of individual migrations. Only

¹⁰⁶ J. Anthony Gaughan, *Memoirs of Senator Joseph Connolly (1885-1961) A founder of modern Ireland* (Dublin, 1996), p. 371.

¹⁰⁷ Suzanne M. Pegley, 'Land redistribution in Ireland 1923-1960 A study of the Land Commission, case study of Kilmecredock, County Kildare' (B.A. dissertation, NUI Maynooth, 2004).

when the files of the Land Commission records are open to research, will the definitive number of all types of migrations arranged be revealed in detail. Until then, one can only approach the topic obliquely and on a townland by townland basis.

Chapter Two

Fianna Fáil's role in the establishment of the Gaeltacht Colonies

In 1934, as part of the push for redistribution of land, and the revival of the Irish language, Eamon de Valera, was encouraged to set up Gaeltacht Colonies in County Meath. In November 1934 Senator Joseph Connolly Minister for Lands announced that a Gaeltacht colony was proposed for Co. Meath. Connolly's November announcement refers to a 'fair balance' that must be maintained between local applicants and migrants, adding an extra dimension to de Valera's earlier statement.¹ It was envisioned that twenty-seven allottees 'of the best class' from one area of the Gaeltacht would be chosen. Initially the feeling was that around twenty-two acres, with a rateable value of £20, was sufficient to make holdings economic.²

This announcement came just seven months after a small group of Connemara farmers had called on the President and four months later the first Gaeltacht colony would be put in place. It would be an understandable assumption to make that the delegation was extremely influential and that a group of politicised small farmers were able, within such a short time, to cause a government to bend to their wishes and has achieved mythical proportions. Was this the case or was the delegation simply giving voice to a popular cause that Fianna Fáil was already prepared to take on board? De Valera had been out on the campaign trail recently enough to realise that a colony migration scheme was a positive step. It would be a poor politician who was not able to read the hearts and minds of its constituents.

Research showed that the vesting process of untenanted lands began as early as four weeks after the delegations' visit.³ In actual fact the scheme announced in November was so far along that the Land Commission had already begun building on the vested land in the Athboy area possibly as early as June or July.⁴ In addition, the Department of Agriculture files show a considerable amount of tillage and general preparation to be well underway at the time of the

¹ *Fianna Fáil Monthly Bulletin* November 13 & 14, Vol. I Nos. 10+11 (UCD Archives, P104 1847), p. 7.

² Land policy standards for holdings (NAI, DT, S6490 (A)).

³ *Iris Oifigiúil*, (*Dublin Gazette*) 15 May 1934, p. 475.

⁴ *Meath Chronicle*, 5 May 1934.

Ard Fheis. ⁵ Indeed the party was so enthusiastic that Joseph Connolly, while 'not making promises', promised to increase land division from the previous average of 38,000 to within sight of 100,000. He knew that it had been suggested that an amount of 413,000 acres were ready for distribution but he was of the belief that there was more available. He added with confidence that if the program that Fianna Fáil had instigated with the Land Act of 1933 went through the LC could be out of a job in four years. Preparing his memoirs in 1958 he asked rhetorically 'what are they all doing?' when the job was still not complete. ⁶ Jones, in his examination of land reform in Ireland, was more positive when he suggested that the outcome of land acts, under post independence legislation, contributed to 60 percent of the total land purchased and distributed, and 'was the virtual elimination of untenanted lands'.⁷

II

Fianna Fáil had been officially inaugurated in 1926 and the following year with 26% of the vote they won forty four seats in the Dáil out of a possible 153. At the first Ard-Fheis Fianna Fáil lay out their manifesto and stated that their aspiration was to 'establish as many people as practicable on the land'. This was guaranteed to strike at the fundamental needs and desires of the small farmers and agricultural labourers concerned with the realities of subsistence as apposed to the loftier abstract ideals, as Dooley points out, of a 32 county Ireland.⁸ In a re-election after the oath of allegiance was dropped they increased their seats to 57 with 37% of the vote.⁹ It was not however the ethos of Sinn Féin they followed, but the organizational pattern of the IRA that allowed them to become so successful. Cells of organisation across the country know as cumann would feed them public opinion which they would then act upon. The Fianna Fáil party-political machine was most effective, operating through the large scale

⁵ NAI, DA, G60/1935.

⁶ Fianna Fáil Bulletin, p. 7; Gaughan, *Connolly Memoirs*, p. 365.

⁷ David Seth Jones, *Graziers, land reform, and political conflict in Ireland* (Washington D.C., 1995), p. 219.

⁸ Dooley, *Land for the people*, p. 99.

⁹ Peter Mair, 'de Valera and democracy' in Tom Garvin, Maurice Manning and Richard Sinnott, (eds), *Dissecting Irish politics*, (Dublin, 2004), p. 34; Lee, *Ireland*, p. 183-4.

cumainn throughout the country ¹⁰ and a considerable number of these clubs rallied to elect Fianna Fáil into government six years after their foundation.¹¹

In 1932 when Fianna Fáil came to power in coalition with Labour and the Farmers Party, they were determined in their desire to create a society with a predominantly rural focus. For the party, land division was a key priority, which was directly linked to their political survival. In line with their stated policy they were resolute in the effort to speed up the land redistribution and division begun in the nineteenth century and continued with independence under Cumann na nGaedheal. They had already laid the ground work in their manifesto 'to establish as many families as practicable on the land'. This particular vision of their leader, Eamon de Valera, President of the Executive Council (after 1937 the epaulet was Taoiseach) was further enshrined in the 1937 constitution: that there should be 'a maximum number of families as can be established on the land in economic security'.¹²

However, before the Fianna Fáil government's full attention could be given to the business of land division the outstanding question of Anglo-Irish relations had first to be discussed. This delay proved to be disastrous to those already facing difficulties in the agricultural sector. As a bargaining tool de Valera withheld the land annuities expected by the British Government. This move was, according to Joseph Lee, an 'appeal in an optimum electoral manner'. While achieving a moral victory, Ireland would suffer in a trade war as Britain sought to retrieve the lost value of the annuities. Although the annuities had been reduced by de Valera to half the initial burden, the resulting economic trade war would impact negatively on the farming communities.¹³ Within the political arena Fianna Fáil was also facing agrarian unrest. The as yet proscribed IRA was actually encouraging social agitation through anti-communist and anti-

¹⁰ John M. Regan, 'The politics of utopia' in Mike Cronin and John M. Regan (eds), *Ireland: The politics of independence 1922-49* (London, 2000), p. 34.; Dooley, *Land for the people*, Appendix I.: The growth of Fianna Fáil cumainn 1932-33, p. 242; County Meath Cumann were forty-nine in 1932 increasing to sixty-nine in 1933.

¹¹ Richard Dunphy, 'Fianna Fáil in power 1932-1938' in idem *The making of Fianna Fáil power in Ireland 1923-48* (Oxford, 1995), p. 72.

¹² Kevin O'Shiel, assistant legal advisor to Executive Council, Saorstát Éireann 1922 and Land Commissioner 1923-1955, pointed out in 1954 that the first constitution did not contain any reference to agrarian principles but, in the new constitution of 1937, the phrase quoted above from the Fianna Fáil manifesto, appeared as article 45.2 in Kevin R. O'Shiel & Timothy O'Brien, *The land problem in Ireland and its settlement: Proceedings of 1st International Congress on Agrarian Law*, (Milano, 1954), (NLI IR333 P52), p. 25.

¹³ Lee, *Ireland*, p.178.

Blueshirt violence, which did nothing to calm the unease in the countryside.¹⁴ O'Duffy's Blueshirts, in the form of various guises, the Young Ireland Association and the League of Youth, each proscribed in their turn, contributed to parts of the country being in high agitation.¹⁵ This was proving complex for Fianna Fáil who were trying particularly hard not to cause political turmoil and give cause for any more open militarism, since any kind of overt militarism would have put in jeopardy the cross-class alliances which they had carefully constructed.¹⁶ Fianna Fáil could easily have succumbed to the authoritarian approach as they stepped into power as so many Eastern and Central Europe countries had done after 1918. Instead they reacted by following all of the rules governing parliamentary handover, assisted, in no small part, by Cumann na nGaedheal, the outgoing party.¹⁷

Historically the approach to land reform fits the method adopted by Fianna Fáil on coming into office. Russell King a geographer, divided land reform into a number of useful categories which help to understand the historical context of migration in the wider land reform politic.¹⁸ The categories are quite straight forward: expropriation, compensation, exemption and redistribution.¹⁹ Land redistribution is the critical issue for newly established governments and is designed to reduce the political, social and economic power of established landowners. Redistribution in its application breaks up or combines existing holdings leading to change in ownership and involved trading holdings to consolidate fragmented holdings.

In the main, the land reform policies were limited and palliative, but prevented land problems becoming serious issues. The process of redistribution was enacted, according to King in four main groups, by degrees of severity: mild, strong, stronger again and collectivism. In the various land acts, put into place by Fianna Fáil, they exhibit characteristics of the first three groups in the enactment of reform policies. The furthest the party progressed along the sliding scale of severity was the compulsory purchase in the 1933 land act. This strong

¹⁴ Richard Dunphy, 'Fianna Fáil in Power 1932-1938' in idem *The Making of Fianna Fáil Power in Ireland 1923-48* (Oxford, 1995), p. 184-189.

¹⁵ This Debate described incidents throughout the country where difficulties with marches and clashes with Garda were occurring, Dáil Éireann deb., lii, (18 May 1934).

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Mair, *Democracy*, p. 38.

¹⁸ Russell King, *Land reform: a world survey*, (London, 1977), p. 6.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

tactic, as King pointed out, often followed a revolution or was designed to prevent one.²⁰ The circumstances of the political unease and agitation of the period surrounding the Fianna Fáil victory, and the threat to the democratic mandate, may very well have pushed Fianna Fáil in the direction of aggressive land reform. Peter Main pointed out that democracy hung in the balance in the 1930s in Ireland and the system of government could easily have slipped into authoritarianism. He observed that, with hindsight, democracy was apparently taken for granted.²¹ The retrospective application of King's theories to the land reform policies of Fianna Fáil appears to apply. Whatever the reality, the result was that the Fianna Fáil party grew from strength to strength and, for the last eighty years, has been the dominant party in Irish politics.

Idealistic rhetoric was one thing but representatives in the Dáil repeatedly complained about the slowness of land division. As a consequence, in order to speed up the process, the existing land act of 1931 was repackaged and a new land bill, presented in 1933, that was to change the way the Land Commission dealt with their own department and the way it negotiated with the owners of land. This did not stop the critics however, and a case in point, Martin Roddy challenged the Minister for Lands,²² even as the new land bill was being debated.²³ Roddy was concerned as to the cost of the migration and, by taking such a step, that the risk of failure was enormous. He went on to remind the Dáil that the Congested Districts board had attempted to put such a concept in place but were forced to conclude that it could not succeed. He wondered too 'how can a landless man half fisherman, half farmer and who has been accustomed all his life to work and live on the bad land of Connemara ever be expected to be a success under entirely new conditions on a completely different class of land in County Meath?'²⁴

III

Land division would be accomplished in part through migration, as has been outlined in the previous chapter. Migration in the form of Irish speaking colonies however, was not on the Fianna Fáil agenda when they first came to office and it was surprising that it did go ahead at all. As has been alluded to in

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 7.

²¹ Peter Mair, 'de Valera and democracy' in Tom Garvin, Maurice Manning, Richard Sinnott (eds), *Dissecting Irish Politics* (Dublin, 2004), p. 39-40.

²² The Department of Lands was the administrative body of the Land Commission.

²³ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lv, 228 (28 Feb 1935).

²⁴ *ibid.*, 229.

the previous chapter, they were receiving some opposition from outside as well as within the party. As Jones has shown there proved to be a struggle going on in the background between the Land Commission, the Department of Lands and the Department of Finance. Two issues were raised even before colony migration was proposed: firstly how beneficial was the basic idea of land division and secondly, how were the financial costs to be afforded?²⁵ Once the Gaeltacht migration policy was implemented, more difficulties arose. The three main areas of contention, which were largely financial, were firstly, the expenditure on stocking and preparing the lands for the new tenant. This cost was estimated to have been in the region of £304 per holding. This cost would have included the purchase of the holding, the improvement of the land itself and the building of a house and out buildings, and it was proposed that the state would provide a limited amount of basic stock for the farm. In addition, equipment was supplied, although this was paid for by the allottee in installments over the next number of years, spread over, on average, sixty-six years; a portion of the cost would be borne by the allottee in the form of a yearly annuity. Eventually the Land Commission Annual reports would put the total figure, for the 122 migrant families brought to five colonies in Meath, at £48,926. The discrepancy between start-up costs and the recouping of monies caused a secondary concern that money was being lost on the resale to the new tenant/allottee. This was, in essence, the difference between the amount paid to the landowner and the annuity expected from the new tenant. The holding cost the state £104,612, then the allottee according to the Land Commission report, would pay £6,247 by way of annuities, a considerable difference.²⁶ Finally, further anger arose in 1933 when the annuities were reduced, again by half, and the losses increased.²⁷

The critics were negative about the whole idea of migration as can be seen in the comments of Deputy James Dillon²⁸ where he dismissed both the theory and practice of the policy. 'If your primary purpose is to undo the work of Cromwell and bring the people back into the rich lands, then the thing is not to bring the old people up to the rich lands but to bring up the young people before

²⁵ David Seth Jones, 'Divisions within the Irish government over land-distribution policy 1940-70' in *Eire-Ireland*, 2001 XXXVI: III & IV, p. 87.

²⁶ Summary of 1935-1940 Colony Migration, LC Report 1951-52.

²⁷ Jones, 'Divisions', pp 96-7.

²⁸ James M. Dillon (1902 -1986) *Fine Gael*, Monaghan.

they become rooted in that other part of the world.' ²⁹ Deputy McMenamin agreed and stated,

'I have seen pictures of other migrants who have been brought from Connemara. These men were fifty to sixty years of age. Now, there is an old saying that after a certain age the oak should not be transplanted and cannot be transplanted. These are men [from congested areas] who never stood behind a plough or a pair of horses in their lives never handled a plough or harrow or grubber or cultivator and never harnessed a horse in their lives. These men cannot do that work. It is not feasible. These men are expected, the morning after they are migrated to Meath, to start off behind a pair of horses and plough or harrow' ³⁰

He theorized that the elder sons may be capable of ploughing in a short time, but it was too much to ask the older migrants. ³¹ He concluded that in his opinion

'It is quite wrong to transplant men of fifty years of age from a congested district and expect them to work agricultural implements, plough, grubbers and cultivators, and so on. The thing is going to be a failure. These men cannot farm their land by horse power.'³²

Tractors were not used by the migrants until the 1950s and at first only second hand machines were affordable. Later Robert Mullen ran a business of secondhand farm equipment bought from Mackey and Burns, a Dublin Company.³³

IV

Fianna Fáil hoped that by generating political support for a popular land policy, together with the revival of the Irish language, the rural voter would be won over. What Fianna Fáil was attempting, in tandem with migration, was the formation of a rural based society. The attachment to the rural ethos was an important part of de Valera's philosophy and ties in with the search for an Irish identity for a country only ten years into independence. This offers some explanation as to why the party was so anxious to appeal to the agricultural

²⁹ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lxvi, 1657 (27 April, 1937).

³⁰ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lxvi, 1684-5 (27 April 1937).

³¹ Daniel McMenamin (1889-1963) *Fine Gael*, Donegal.

³² *ibid.*, 1684.

³³ Interview with Pádraic McGrath Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (18 Sept. 2006).

sector. Gearoid O'Crualaoich suggested that part of the approach to Fianna Fáil's governance was the idealization of 'the peasant'. The concept became the 'peasant model for thinking about and managing social and economic development in the years of de Valera's ascendancy'.³⁴ Take them out of the process of modern transformation and regard them as changeless. They would then become stereotyped but a perfect model for the stable category of social organization to which de Valera wanted to appeal. Despite the sweeping away of the old order, the Big House, and the coming of 'peasant proprietorship', the rural social order essentially remained the same. Here was indeed a source of that 'truly Irish' order of things that was so important a part of the national dream.³⁵ Dunphy backs up this theory, describing it as Fianna Fáil's political hegemony arguing that in the 1920s and 1930s Fianna Fáil represented the emergent national bourgeoisie. This was composed of a cross-class bloc that included urban workers, small farmers and those dependants on social welfare; certainly the latter two would be interested in the land redistribution process.³⁶

V

Despite difficulties concerning the trade war and the resulting economic situation, de Valera read the climate of support for Fianna Fáil as positive and he made a decision to abandon the coalition with Labour. According to Lee, the surprise election of January 1933 allowed Fianna Fáil to surge ahead of Labour in electoral terms and as a consequence they were able to take the majority of seats in the Dáil, thus no longer needing a coalition with anyone. It also consolidated Fianna Fáil's position in power, cementing and reinforcing the hegemonic control of the party. The results of this election, with an all time high turn-out of eighty-one per-cent, increased to seventy-seven the Fianna Fáil seats, as apposed to Cumann na nGaedhael forty-eight and Labour's two.³⁷

In Fianna Fáil's majority position, de Valera was able to deal with the agrarian unrest led by O'Duffy and the National Guard, which was causing difficulties for the smooth implementation of government policy, as alluded to

³⁴ Gearoid O'Crualaoich, 'The primacy of form: a folk ideology' in John P. Carroll & John A. Murphy (eds), *de Valera and his time* (Cork, 1993), pp 47-61.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 69.

³⁷ Tom Garvin, 'Continuity and change in Irish electoral politics' in *Economic and social review* III, 3 April 1972, p. 368.

above.³⁸ Accusations of communism addressed to Fianna Fáil and the anti-democratic anti-parliament stance taken by O'Duffy, repeatedly caused difficulty.³⁹ Large rallies in Mayo and Westmeath, coupled with agrarian agitation extending into criminal acts, resulted in a number of Fine Gael (the reformed Cumann na nGaedhael Party) national executives being jailed.⁴⁰ Further agitation in late 1934 encouraged, in particular, the strong farmers to withhold the annuities entirely but, of course now that the money was being withheld from their own government it caused some discomfort. De Valera responded by introducing a new police division equipped with armored cars, and subsequently the Blueshirts were banned.⁴¹ This final semi-fascist conflict represents the last of the fever that had convulsed Ireland since 1922.⁴² In 1934 local elections would once again consolidate the position of Fianna Fáil. The Meath Chronicle estimated that there was a turnout of eighty per-cent, reflecting the huge numbers who voted in the general election. They announced that Labour representation had been wiped out and indeed Labour had no seats on any of the County councils in Meath. However, Fine Gael was well represented in the Dáil with fifteen seats.⁴³ Despite internal conflict, Fianna Fáil set in motion the large scale migration and division schemes after the massive endorsement by their grass-roots supporters. With Fianna Fáil's strong showing in these two elections they settled in to a reordering of the land on a systematic and orderly fashion. Here the party walked a fine line between political clientelism and economic dependency on the United Kingdom but to scale back the land-distribution would risk electoral support, to which it was directly linked.

VI

In 1933, the year after Fianna Fáil came to office, a summary of the land distributed, taken from the LC reports, showed an increase in the amount of land acquired and redistributed and similarly an increase in allottees. The Land Act of 1933, which gave the LC greater powers, was reflected in the numbers of acres acquired for relief of congestion and disemployed agricultural workers. In 1935, after colony migration was established, the statistics showed that year as the highest figure for

³⁸ Bew et al, *Irish politics*, pp 48-57.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, pp 195-6.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 196.

⁴² Lee, *Ireland*, p. 183-4.; Bew et al, *Irish Politics*, p. 63.

⁴³ *Meath Chronicle*, 30 June 1934.

land redistribution, but in the following years this began to decline. (Table 2.1) The lands acquired previously by the Estates Commission and the CDB were also included in the total amount of acres redistributed during the period. By 1939 the holdings had been reduced to just over $\frac{3}{4}$ of the high of 1935. At the end of Fianna Fáil's first period in office, 1948, redistribution had dropped to the lowest point of the scheme's operation with only 12,615 acres in total redistributed to 1,112 allottees. By examining the period, by looking at the number of allottees, it was evident that although 1935 had the largest amount of land redistributed/divided it was the following year, 1936, that saw the largest number of allottees. ⁴⁴ It was quite likely however that the figures for 1936 are the final results of the 1935 figures.

⁴⁴ Sammon, *A memoir*, pp 256-7.

Untenanted land distributed by Fianna Fail 1933-1948

Year end 31/3	Estates Commission & CDB Estates		Land Commission Estates		Total Acres	Total Allottees
	Acres	Allottees	Acres	Allottees		
1933	1,680	330	35,264	2,270	36,944	2,600
1934	470	100	39,354	3,595	39,824	3,695
1935	21,477	1,107	101,800	6,244	123,277	7,351
1936	6,747	1,034	103,872	7,712	110,619	8,746
1937	4,725	505	72,525	5,981	77,250	6,486
1938	2,395	217	60,907	4,959	63,302	5,176
1939	3,811	636	41,745	3,374	45,556	4,010
1940	2,836	490	38,636	2,729	41,472	3,219
1941	1,833	407	25,678	1,804	27,511	2,211
1942	2,765	135	20,527	1,666	23,292	1,801
1943	2,666	244	20,520	1,288	23,186	1,532
1944	604	67	13,359	1,184	13,963	1,251
1945	8,452	347	14,229	861	22,681	1208
1946	618	96	14,132	808	14,750	904
1947	380	78	14,240	1,018	14,620	1,096
1948	1,722	148	10,893	964	12,615	1112
Total	63,181	5941	627,681	46,457	690,862	680079

Table 2.1 Untenanted Land. Source: Sammon, P.J., *In the Land Commission: a memoir 1933-1978* (Dublin, 1997), pp 256-7.

Throughout the 1930s Fianna Fáil was building up the economic base that would eventually divert the emphasis from the rural to the urban, in terms of their party support. A great deal of effort was being put into catering for the urban workers and with urban poverty. Sean Lemass, the Minister for Industry and Commerce, was busy establishing the semi-state sector between 1932 and 1936. Comhlucht Siuicre Éireann and the Industrial Credit Company were founded in 1933. What would be later known as Bord na Móna was established in 1934 along with the chemical manufacturer Ceimici Teoranta. Aer Lingus was founded in 1936 and by 1939 the Irish Assurance Company and the Irish Tourist Board. Lemass announced in 1937 to the Dáil that 800 new factories and workshops had been started since Fianna Fáil came to dominance with fifty factories going up in the previous year alone.⁴⁵

VII

While the Irish government took great pride in the establishment of the colonies, brought about by land and migration policies, In reality they did little to support the individuals who were moved once the material structures of homes and equipment were put in place. Agricultural advisors were in position but many did not speak Irish. Neither the Land Commission of the British administration nor the Irish Land Commission had any 'previous engagement with policies of Irish language renewal', and had little or no interest in the social, cultural or indeed consideration, for the language revival. ⁴⁶ Essentially it was up to the migrants to muddle along on their own.

Further dissension concerning the redistribution of lands, particularly the colony migration schemes, would fester and eventually from the early 1940s a split again occurred within Fianna Fáil as to how beneficial land-distribution actually was. The first more traditional group saw redistribution as vital and that it had accomplished three objectives. Primarily it kept as many people on the land as possible in economic security, which was part of the Fianna Fáil manifesto and had been enshrined in the 1937 Constitution. Secondly, it maintained the traditional rural culture based on the small family farm and finally it sustained economic self-sufficiency. These were the guiding principals

⁴⁵ Mair, *de Valera*, pp 89-90.

⁴⁶ Duffy, 'State sponsored migration', p.180.

that shaped Fianna Fáil land-distribution policy and again reflected de Valera's vision.

The second group within Fianna Fáil was skeptical about the effectiveness of the reordering of land holdings and saw land-distribution as harmful to agricultural economy. Even the Minister for Lands was critical of the benefits or at least the method of application. Their preferred priority was to the improvement of production and viability of Irish agriculture based on modern farm practice and technology. They saw the break up of the commercial grazing farms as an anathema to those aims. They also felt that the standard of living for the allottees (or congests as they were often referred to) was not significantly improved and only perpetrated small-scale traditional farming which was ineffective and outdated.⁴⁷ This party dissention would continue up until the early 1940s where even loyal supporters of de Valera would question his attachment to the pastoral ideal.⁴⁸ Seán McEntee, Minister for Finance, was outspoken in his criticism.⁴⁹ His complaint, in a memo of the 1940s, stated that the electoral dependence on small farmers and the type of agricultural economic practiced by this strata were stultifying Irish agriculture. Moreover, de Valera was virtually using the pre independence policies under the Land Acts to push ahead his course of action. As Garvin says the 'British wanted to keep the Paddies happy' and so, too, did de Valera. 'The Irish Land system owed its structure to political and social considerations rather than concern about businesslike efficiency.'⁵⁰ The Minister for Lands, Seán Moylan, in 1943 asked for a review of the size of farms and the wider implication of agricultural production in the interest of the entire country. His main worry was that with the size of farms being unsustainable the small farmer would become largely dependant on government assistance.⁵¹

The allocation of land was a contentious issue and Moylan was in trouble in 1943 following a rather provocative statement at the Fianna Fáil Ard Fheis quoted in the *Irish Independent*, 'The fruits of Government policy should go,

⁴⁷ Jones, 'Divisions', p. 109.

⁴⁸ Tom Garvin, 'Politics and development' in idem *Preventing the future* (Dublin, 2004), p. 36.

⁴⁹ Sean McEntee (1889-1984) Fianna Fáil, Dublin County/Dublin Townships, Minister for Finance 1932-39, Industry and Commerce 1939-41, Minister for Local Government and Public Health 1941-47.

⁵⁰ Garvin, 'Politics and development', p. 39.

⁵¹ Moylan to de Valera, 1 Sept. 1943 (NAI, DT, S12890 (A)).

other things being equal, to Government supporters.⁵² On another occasion a letter signed by Moylan and read out in the Dáil contained the following statement: 'From the list certified as competent I was bound to appoint the person best suited to the position from a political point of view.' This type of favouritism did not go down well and other members were concerned that this selective attitude of should not extend to the allocation of holdings. It was hoped 'that in future allottees will be selected not because of their being Government supporters, not because of their holding a particular political point of view, but rather on the grounds of their capacity to work land'.⁵³

The issues of land division, allocation of allottees and migration were driven by the political considerations of interested groups. With a legitimate claim on the hearts and minds of the small farmers and historical political ethos the various political parties responded, not always objectively. The manipulation of the constituents for political gain existed in many shades of grey and Fianna Fáil were masters at this by taking public opinion and quickly translating it into influential policy. Despite huge steps the problems of uneconomic holdings remained. Poverty beyond today's comprehension was a feature of the Irish countryside. In the 1930s the Gaeltacht, mainly the old Congested Districts, were still the areas of the greatest hardship. Despite the romanticised rural idyll, envisioned by the Celtic revivalists and the idealistic leaders of the 1916 Rising, life in rural Ireland was far from idyllic. A period of high emigration left behind those who were barely able to sustain themselves on the lands they had. De Valera and the Fianna Fáil party began their period in political control by making glowing promises regarding the redistribution of land. Expectations had been raised and 'land for the people' became the catchphrase. Land throughout the twenty-six counties was compulsorily purchased, not without controversy and passed on not always to those who saw themselves as the 'rightful' owner. This would prove to be the most emotional and problematic area of the migration schemes and of land division.

At the end of 1939 Fianna Fáil was coming under pressure in the Dáil; they were not moving fast enough on the land redistribution schemes and with the redistribution they were accomplishing they were accused of creating more

⁵² *Dáil Éireann* deb., ciii, 1829 (4 Dec. 1946).

⁵³ *ibid.*

problems, outside the western counties. Martin Ryan⁵⁴ complained 'that by the method in which land is divided at present you are creating a kind of agricultural slum.' He explained that 'a living cannot be made at all on 15 or 20 acres of land in this country. I hold that anything less than 30 acres is of no use at the present time, and will not be in the future.' Along with accusations of 'wire-pulling or political influence' he stated what was becoming apparent to many 'We have not sufficient land to cater for everybody.'⁵⁵

The overcrowding created by modern land division was blamed for the numbers leaving the land. Some who were unwilling to acknowledge that there was not enough land for everyone, called for more land to be made available, more land for agricultural labourers who were leaving, not because there was no employment, but because they wanted their own land. Deputy Dillon, despite being in opposition defended the past policies to keep people on the land. 'Migration schemes have been tried; amalgamation schemes have been tried—every resource that could be worked out has been exhausted in order to try to abolish agricultural slums.'⁵⁶ As late as 1962 Mícheál O'Morain, Minister for Lands, in a speech to the Agriculture Science Association would still be championing land resettlement. 'With the extent of rural congestion ...it goes without saying...every acre of land which becomes available for acquisition must be acquired to cope with it.'⁵⁷

VIII

During the 1932 to 1948 period the Fianna Fáil Party was endeavouring to establish, not alone their place in the political spectrum, but the establishment of a new Ireland. They needed to find a new way to solve problems, in a way that was not the '*colonial*' way, and those years were ones of trial and error. Elizabeth Hooker, an American economist, was sent in 1938 by the American government, to study migration and the land redistribution policies, set out to discover whether the land policies, in place for some considerable time, were an advantage to the small farm occupiers. Her study showed that on some level they had benefited. They had gained a consciousness of ownership and the fear that the landowners might take it all from them had

⁵⁴ Martin Ryan (1900-1943) Fianna Fáil, Tipperary.

⁵⁵ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lxxv, 1379-1382 (28 April 1939).

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 1397.

⁵⁷ Mícheál O'Morain, T.D., Minister for Lands, a speech to the Agricultural Science Association at its annual Technical Conference at UCD on 21st September 1962, Annual Report of the Irish Land Commission 1962-1963, p. 35.

been eliminated. However, with the land act of 1933, that security could be undermined by the State at any time if it suited them politically, particularly with the use of compulsory purchase of the land acts. It was unfortunate that her study was so premature, 10 years later a clearer picture may have emerged.⁵⁸ Fianna Fáil, in an attempt to satisfy different groups failed to assist the weakest farmers in the Congested Districts. 'Unwilling to antagonise the rural bourgeoisie..... and faced with substantial conflicting demands, Fianna Fáil inevitably disappointed its small farmers and labourer supporters.'⁵⁹ After two decades, despite great endeavour by all concerned, Martin Roddy was perhaps right after all. Looking at the census of Ireland returns in the 1940s, regardless of attempts by Fianna Fáil to expedite redistribution on the one hand and fulfil de Valera's rural dream of 'cosy homesteads' on the other, the policy was not succeeding. Agricultural occupations at the end of the 1940s, had declined dramatically and the silent agricultural revolution was now underway. Agriculture was being re-ordered, smaller farms, run by the immediate family, was becoming the norm and assisting relatives would soon begin to fade out of the picture.

⁵⁸ Hooker, *Readjustments*, p. 169.

⁵⁹ Bew et al, *Irish Politics*, p.77.

Chapter Three

The first Gaeltacht Colony

Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath

The first large scale migration undertaken in Co. Meath by Fianna Fáil was designated a Gaeltacht colony.¹ Having outlined an overview of migration in the opening chapters this chapter will deal in depth with the establishment of Ráth Cairn. Initial indications that a colony was being arranged appeared in mid 1934 in the files of the Department of Agriculture.² The following year the Land Commission's annual report contained the first mention of the colony migration from the Congested Districts to Co. Meath.³ However, as early as 1931 Ráth Cairn had been mentioned in the Dáil. Martin Roddy, again speaking on behalf of the Minister for Lands, in reply to a question about acquisition of Meath lands, stated that the Ráth Cairn lands were 'still under consideration by the Land Commission.'⁴ The colony was described at the Fianna Fáil Ard Fhéis in November 1934 as, the experimental migration of Irish speaking migrants from the Gaeltacht to preserve and extend the use of the Irish language.⁵

I

Although the idea had been circulating for some time, the establishment of the Gaeltacht colony at Ráth Cairn was not a decision made without some consideration on the part of Fianna Fáil. The plan had been encouraged by a number of bodies in previous years not the least of which was the Gaeltacht Commission in their report of 1927. Eamon de Valera, as head of the recently formed Fianna Fáil party, took part in a Dáil debate in 1928 and stated that he was more inclined to favor the fringes of the Gaeltacht for the establishment of colonies and that the *leath-Gaeltacht*⁶ would be the better option.⁷ Even as late as 1932 indications were that he was still of the same mind and not ready to wholeheartedly endorse the idea of creating Irish speaking colonies outside the Gaeltacht, as an article in the *Irish Independent* showed.

¹ Ráth Cairn was not an *official* Gaeltacht area until 1967.

² 15 June 1935 (National Archive Ireland (hereafter NAI) Department of Agriculture (hereafter DA) G60/35).

³ Land Commission Report 1934/35 (NAI, DT, S7327).

⁴ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xl, 2751 (10 December 1931).

⁵ *Meath Chronicle*, 17 Nov. 1934.

⁶ *Leath-Gaeltacht* half Irish speaking area also *Fíor-Gaeltacht*- true Irish speaking district and *Breac-Gaeltacht*- partly Irish-speaking District.

⁷ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xxiii, 1033 (4 May 1928).

'Mr. de Valera was not willing to adopt a recommendation that the £900,000 should be spent on a scheme to bring 2,000 families from the Gaeltacht and give them twenty acres each of land in Co. Meath and a loan of £150, but said that the government should provide land for people from the Gaeltacht in areas adjoining the Gaeltacht.'⁸

He had felt, however, that something needed to be done and in the autumn of 1933 initiated a further investigation into possible public works schemes that might be of benefit to the Gaeltacht. Concerning his 'request that we examine...public works in Conamara' he was advised by his ministers who wrote 'as you are aware the problem of the west is not one of unemployment but of poverty age long and deep seated no temporary worker or sporadic relief will sensibly alter the position'. The memo concluded with the remark that Mr. Connolly would examine the problem more fully.⁹

II

Increasing unemployment in Ireland due to the worldwide depression, which coincided with Fianna Fáil coming into office, cut off emigration to North America. In the past, emigration had presented a solution to unemployment resulting in an indirect solution to poverty, but with a virtual embargo on entry to the USA and Britain, the Irish government was faced with greater social problems that had to be dealt with on home ground.¹⁰ Although emigration would pick up again toward the end of the 1930s the flow then would be mainly to the United Kingdom. For those with no option but to remain at home, 1935 was a crisis year with 120,000 on the live register representing thirty-six percent of the population. In 1937 the live register would be at its lowest with 82,000. Dunphy reported that 110,000 applied for assistance but only 16.4 percent were eligible.¹¹

The 1933 land act went some way to deal with the problem of poverty and unemployment by speeding up the acquisition and distribution of land. The new land bill would accomplish this by giving the LC greater powers. This was to be accomplished by restructuring the administrative responsibilities of the LC.

⁸ *Irish Independent*, 18 Nov. 1932.

⁹ *Irish Independent*, 15 Dec. 1933 [This referred to Senator Joseph Connolly, Minister for Lands].

¹⁰ J. Peter Neary and Cormac O'Grada, *Protection, economic war and structural change: the 1930s in Ireland* (Dublin, 1986), p. 10.

¹¹ Mel Cousins, *The birth of social welfare in Ireland 1922-1952* (Dublin, 2003), p 180; Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 179.

Previous land bills were seen to have been restrictive to the Land Commission's decision-making, so that it now became autonomous, acting through the Minister for Lands and allowing for the vesting of lands. Vesting was the publishing in *Iris Oifigiúil*, of the intention of the government to purchase land. Because this weekly official government bulletin was previously known as the *Dublin Gazette* the process became known as *gazetting*.¹² This announcement was rapidly followed by the work of preparing the land and the construction of houses and out offices for new allottees. This increased the size of the existing uneconomic holdings and made available jobs for local people wherever the new holdings were established. By the 1930s the availability of untenanted lands in Meath was seen as an opportunity to migrate groups of western farmers up to the fertile midlands. In the western counties in 1932 Cumann na Gaeltachta (the Gaeltacht Society) was established and in November of that year had a meeting with Eamon de Valera who told them he was happy to give them land but quite where, was not divulged. Bearing in mind his previous comments, this was quite likely to have been a carefully worded response.¹³ Later another group, *Muintir na Gaeltachta* (People of the Gaeltacht), began to express their desire to obtain the untenanted lands in the eastern counties and became proactive and quite vocal in their wish to migrate.



Figure 3.1 *Muintir na Gaeltachta* Committee. Source *An t-Éireannach* 26 Jan. 1934

¹² O'Shiel & O'Brien, *The land problem*, p. 28.

¹³ Mícheál O'Conghaile, 'Ráth Cairn: The birth of a Gaeltacht' in C. J. Byrne, M. Harry, P. O'Siadhail (eds), *Celtic languages and Celtic peoples, Proceedings of the second North American Congress of Celtic Studies*, xii (Halifax, 1989), p. 613.

III

In 1934 *Muintir na Gaeltachta*, the politicised left wing movement surfaced as a pressure group. (fig. 3.1)¹⁴ Their intention was to convince the government to migrate young men to the untenanted lands of the eastern counties, particularly Kildare, Meath and Westmeath. The committee was directed by Máirtín O'Cadhain, a man who was then a school master but who would later become an outspoken radical nationalist and, as a consequence, would be interned in the Curragh during the 1940s. His overwhelming interest was in the Irish language and he would become a writer of some note; he was eventually appointed a Professor of Irish at Trinity College, Dublin. The stiúrthóir¹⁵ was Sean Costigan of whom we will hear more later. A statement of their manifesto was placed in the *Connaught Tribune* to announce the stance of *Muintir na Gaeltachta* and, one assumes, to look for supporters. Part of their clearly nationalistic policy was the conflict between the continued use of the two languages English and Irish. They summed up their opinion in the following quote taken from the newspaper announcement, which referred to the English language, not the government, since the country had already been independent since 1922: 'Irish and English cannot live together anymore than a cat and a mouse can live in a box.' Speeches by O'Cadhain, quoted in part by Steve Coleman, observed that O'Cadhain 'situated political analysis firmly within the cognitive framework of Irish Language folkloric discourse' and that 'O'Cadhain, using the high folk rhetoric of the Connemara audience, refutes the attempt to put a 'Black Pig's Dyke around us'. In Coleman's opinion O'Cadhain argued against the government policy of turning the Gaeltacht into geographically defined welfare ghettos.¹⁶ *Muintir na Gaeltachta* would generate followers from many of the congested western counties; however, it was the Galway supporters who were the most active and were the ones to reap the greatest benefits.¹⁷ Early in 1934, this group organised a delegation that would cycle up to Dublin to meet government officials.¹⁸

¹⁴ *An t-Éireannach* 26 Jan. 1934, caption: 'Oifigiúil Muintir na Gaeltachta gConnamara, Máirtín O'Cadhain, Stiúrthoir, Seán Seoighe, Camas, Máirtín O'Cofaigh, Leitir Moir, Míceál O'Flatharta, An Cheathru Rua, Colm O'Flatharta, An Tulach, Seosamh O'Finneada, An Cnoc, Míceál O'Loideain, An Spedéal agus Seán O'Coisdealbha, Runai agus Timire.'

¹⁵ secretary

¹⁶ Steve Coleman, 'Return from the west: A poetics of voice in Irish', (Phd., University of Chicago 1999), vol. 1, p. 224.

¹⁷ Interview with Pádraic Mac Donncha of Ráth Cairn, Co Meath (25 Jan. 2006).

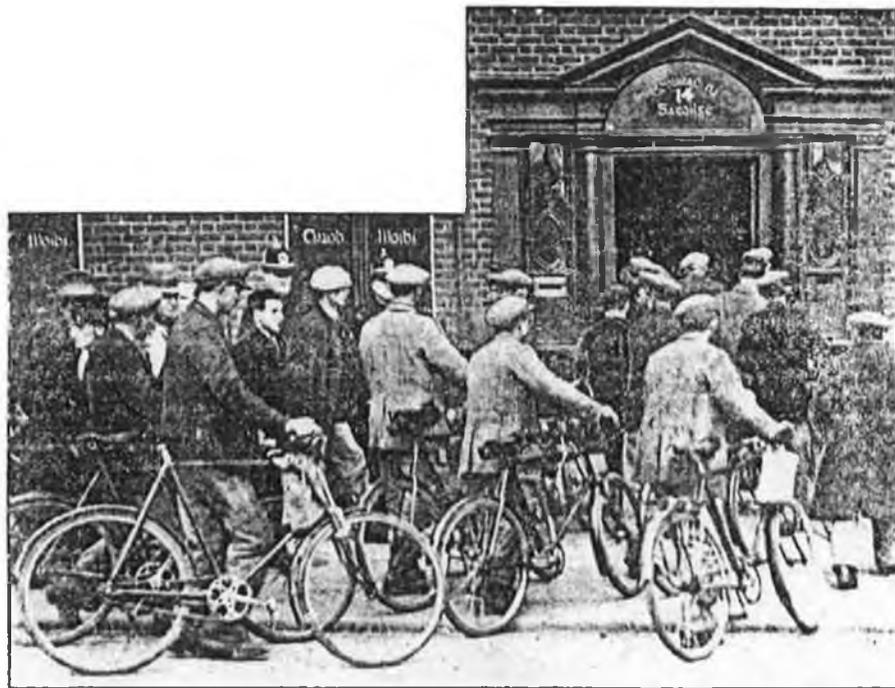
¹⁸ Proinsias MacAonghusa, 'Rath Cairn: An Feachtas' in O'Conghaile, *Gaeltacht Ráth Cairn*, p. 41.

On 29 March 1934 the *Irish Press* give an account of the trip, however they were not the only group to report the event. A notice of their impending journey was sent by the Galway Office of the Garda Síochána of the Superintendent's Office at Oughterard also dated 29 March 1934. The memo, signed by Thomas Heaphy, indicated that information had reached him the previous afternoon that at midnight of 29 March 'a number of young men (one hundred or so) from Carraroe, Rosmusk and Inveran, lead by Sean Costigan NT [National Teacher] Ballynahown, Inveran propose to journey to Dublin to secure an interview with the Ministers for Lands and Agriculture.' He went on to explain that 'the party intend to cover the entire journey by bicycles and will wear Connemara Homespunns and Bawneens.' He explained that the object of the journey was to petition the ministers of the two departments to settle the men on economic holdings in the midlands or elsewhere. In order to accomplish this they would also ask for aid in the form of building grants and instruction in practical farming. He could not say if Mr [Sean] Costigan had been able to secure an interview with the ministers. However, Heaphy had established with the Sergeant at Inveran that this information was correct and finished with the observation that the deputation expected to reach Dublin on Friday evening.¹⁹ Whether their original intention had been to only 'interview' the two ministers of Lands and Agriculture or not it was ultimately an appeal directly to de Valera himself. Their slogan was, 'Give us back the land that Cromwell took from us.'²⁰

The headline in the *Irish Press* read, 'Voice of Gaeltacht shall be heard' and detailed the trip. They described how thirty-six Gaedhailgeori cycled from Connemara to Dublin on the morning of 29 March, a far cry from the one hundred Heaphy had anticipated. Having stayed overnight in the city, they marched in the morning of the 30th from the Gaelic League offices in Parnell Square to Merrion Street where de Valera received six of their number, including O'Cadhain and Costigan at government buildings. The Irish language newspaper *An t-Éireannach* later reported the event and included a photograph. (fig. 3.2) The interview lasted several hours during which the deputation presented a petition that advocated provision of lands, outside the Gaeltacht, for

¹⁹ Proposed Deputation of Connemara small-holders and labourers to interview the Minister for Lands and Agriculture at Government Buildings, 1934 (NAI, Department of Agriculture (hereafter DA) G1837-1934).

²⁰*An t-Éireannach* 2 June 1934.



" Sé bhun mbeato, a Saiscibis éireann." " Irish Independent."

Figure 3.2 Connemara Delegation, *An tEireannach* 2 March 1934.

young men forced to remain at home because of the depression in the United States of America. In addition they requested tools for home crafts, and asked that English matriculation would no longer be a compulsory qualification for public posts in the Gaeltacht. Asked by de Valera how to explain the proposed scheme to the people of Meath Máirtín O’Cofaigh²¹ answered, ‘Tell them that Cromwell sent us west and that now we are returning.’²²

The *Irish Press* reported that the delegation ‘had all been deeply impressed on the journey to Dublin by the huge tracts of undeveloped and fertile lands and it was felt that the only way to break the power of foreign influence in Ireland would be to restore the people of the west to the lands from which they had been expelled.’²³ The foreign influence he refers to may possibly have been the belief that it was the Anglo-Irish who still held large tracts of grazing land in

²¹ A member of the delegation.

²² Coleman, ‘Return from the West’, p. 188.

²³ *Irish Press* 2 April 1934.

Meath. While this may have been true in the past, by the 1930s the remaining landowners, whatever their genealogical history, by now saw themselves as belonging in Ireland. The other possible reference may have been to the influence of England; all the effort of fattening cattle on the fertile plains of Meath largely served only the English market.

Sean Costigan, as stiúrthóir of *Muintir na Gaeltachta*, gave a statement to the newspapers on their return to Galway reporting that the group deemed themselves satisfied with de Valera's response.²⁴ However, de Valera had not heard the last of Sean Costigan. In 1947, then principal of Ráth Cairn National School, he was once again petitioning the government. This time his concern was for housing for young couples in the Ráth Cairn Gaeltacht where he too was living. Anxious that young couples had to leave the area to find housing and regarding this to 'be a blow to the Irish language' he asked that houses be built '...there would be no question of land but houses only.'²⁵

The official record of de Valera's reply to the *Muintir na Gaeltachta* delegation was noncommittal. He told them that the Gaeltacht problem was continuously kept in view by the government but that there were many difficulties connected with it.²⁶ In response to the request by the delegation to remove English from the curriculum he commented that he doubted if the people of the Gaeltacht would be satisfied to have [the] teaching of English, to their children, brought to an end. As far as the allocation of land in the eastern and midland counties was concerned he reasoned that the people of other districts would be dissatisfied if land in their localities were given to people from the Gaeltacht.²⁷ This was a rather surprising comment in view of the fact that considerable numbers of migrants from the western counties had already been placed in Meath. In 1934 alone forty-eight individuals, many with families, had been provided with a new holding in Meath comprising a total of 1,357 acres, and in 1935 there was a substantial increase to 384 holdings comprising 7,791 acres.²⁸ That aside, he reminded them that an attempt had already been made to improve another area in Galway, namely Seana-Phéistín, and much money had already been spent. The Seana-Phéistín scheme, fifteen miles inland, was put in

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Sean Costigan to Eamon de Valera April 1946 (NAI, DT, 97/9/679 I).

²⁶ NAI, DT, 97/9/40.

²⁷ This is a reference to migration.

²⁸ Provision of new holding, *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lcv (11 March 1937).

place in the 1920's under Cumann nGaedheal, but the land was poor and those who had been moved there were dissatisfied. Pádraic Mac Donncha's grandparents were living there when they applied for a place in the Ráth Cairn scheme.²⁹ This Gaeltacht area, along with one other, Gleann an Mháma, were both the focus of improvement schemes in the 1920s but were ultimately deemed failures.

De Valera's reply concluded with the promise that he would speak to the ministers concerned about the matters raised by the deputation.³⁰ His official response would seem to indicate he was not yet prepared to be persuaded, by the delegates, into announcing a new migration policy. Although cabinet minutes do not reveal any discussions on this particular subject he may well have needed to discuss major policy decisions of this type at cabinet level before initiating such a major resolution. By waiting for a period of time before putting their suggestions in place he avoided being seen to give concessions to any one pressure group. Shortly after the meeting with the delegation, a memo was prepared justifying the comments and offering an analysis of the situation. The memo demonstrated that some consideration was given to the delegation's concern, regarding compulsory English in schools, and considered whether English should be placed as an optional subject for employment for the civil service. Ultimately, it concluded, by reiterating de Valera's remark that there would be no withdrawal of English as a compulsory subject, and as a consequence would be required for civil service jobs in the Gaeltacht.³¹

Whatever the political maneuvering in the background this cycling pressure group directed by *Muintir na Gaeltachta* has traditionally been seen by the Ráth Cairn residents as the genesis of the migration to Meath. While de Valera's initial response did not appear positive it may well have been the final influence that prompted the decision. Máirtín O'Cadhain, the principal organizer of *Muintir na Gaeltachta* in petitioning de Valera to set up the colonies, would however, later heavily criticize the nation state, as it related to the Gaeltacht colonies.³²

²⁹ Interview with Pádraic Mac Donncha of Ráth Cairn, Co Meath (25 Jan. 2006).

³⁰ NAI, DT, 97/9/40

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Coleman, 'Return from the West', p.184.

IV

The first indication that a decision to set up the Gaeltacht colonies had been reached was a memo, dated 15 June 1934.³³ In this memo the Land Commission wrote to the Department of Agriculture to inform them of their part in the new scheme. It began with the names of the three Department of Agricultural Inspectors who would be responsible for the process and because of its significance as the beginning of the Gaeltacht Colonies it is worth quoting in full.

'Mr Kernan, Mr Gamble, Mr Geoghegan

Following upon the discussion with the Minister at Tuesday morning's Conference of certain Inspectors from eastern and western areas, I shall be glad if you will now arrange to come together as a small committee with a view to the preparation of a scheme for the settlement upon the lands near Athboy- which seemingly are going to be the first suitable area of sufficient size to come into the hands of the Land Commission - of a colony of migrants from the Gaeltacht.

You are aware of the government's desire in regard to this matter having heard the statements made by the President and by the Minister during the recent Inspector's conference and in the preparation of your scheme you should bear those views closely in mind so that the LC may leave nothing undone to secure that the beginning of this settlement proposal in County Meath may be attended by everything that experience and foresight may show to be necessary for success.

I am writing personally to Mr Twomey Secretary Department of Agriculture asking him to nominate an Inspector of his dept to assist you in the preparation of your proposals. In your scheme you should set out everything which you consider necessary for the successful plantation on the 1500 acres or so which it is thought are likely to be available at Athboy for a number of families from the Gaeltacht and you may consider yourselves free to deal with every consideration method, cost, propaganda etc etc which should be before the Land Commission and the government when the proposals come forward for approval. You are aware of the urgency of this whole [scheme] and I shall be glad therefore if you will arrange [for us all to] come together at the earliest possible moment.' [Initialed M.D.]

³³ Michael Deegan, Land Commissioner to Mr. Twomey, secretary of the Department of Agriculture 15 June 1934 (NAI, DA, G60/1935).

Mr Michael Deegan, Chief Inspector of the Land Commission, also wrote to Mr Twomey, secretary of the Department of Agricultural, on the same day repeating the above information and stating that at the conclusion of the large conference mentioned, a smaller conference was arranged where the minister met inspectors from the Gaeltacht and eastern areas.³⁴ The three divisional inspectors named above, two of whom had an intimate knowledge of the west and the other knowledge of County Meath, were to 'come together to prepare a plan for the settlement of Gaeltacht migrants on a large area near Athboy'. At this meeting they all agreed, 'and the Minister is with us in this', that for the preparation of a scheme under conditions as we know them in Co Meath the assistance of your department is a necessity' For the scheme to be successful, the Department of Agriculture was asked to nominate an inspector to sit in on a small committee with the three Land Commission inspectors already assigned to the project in order to confer on proposals. These proposals would then be put to the government as opinions of expert advisors that would 'embody the conditions which were looked upon as essential for the success of the first...settlement venture of the kind in the east'. A short time later the Department of Agricultural nominated Mr Patrick McGovern.³⁵

Soon after his appointment, following a meeting with Kernan and Gamble, McGovern wrote on 21 June 1934 to O'Connell about the progress of the initial arrangements. Although as yet there were only 350 acres available to the Land Commission it was hoped that this limited amount would be prepared and ready for occupation by February 1935. Along with the concern for spring planting to be completed on time there was an issue on the size of the holdings. Both departments recognized that with so many applicants, of various categories, looking for land the holdings should not exceed twenty-five acres or be less than twenty statute acres. In the future and indeed even at this early date acreage was becoming a contentious issue. As yet they had not considered the sustainability of the large families on these smallholdings. That criticism would come quite soon from deputies in the Dáil. The meeting produced proposals of costs for the colony and calculated the annuity and rates as £17.5 [per annum] for twenty-five acres and £13.17.6 for twenty acres.³⁶ Figures for a twenty acre farm were proposed as follows.

³⁴ Michael Deegan, secretary of the Land Commission 1930-48, Land Commissioner 1930-51.

³⁵ NAI, DA, G60/1935

³⁶ Memo McGovern, Migrations from Gaeltacht to eastern areas, 21 June 1934, *ibid.*

Proposed Costs of Settlement Scheme

Cost of Livestock	£94.00
Farm mach & equip	£84.00
First spring seeding and manuring	£22.00
Turf for 6 months from Feb.	£6.10
Subsidy of £2 per week for 1 year	£104.00
Cost of transporting of each family	£25.00
Total (sub)	£336.00
Dwelling house out offices	£350.10
Fencing & drainage	£80.00
Proportional cost of roads	£40.00
Total	£806.00

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This figure did not include the drilling of communal water wells which, as a Land Commission report indicated, was a specialized and costly undertaking.³⁸ So costly it would appear, that in 1937 a complaint was made in the *Labour News* that only two wells had been provided, whereas the migrants had been lead to believe that there would be one for every three farms.³⁹ McGovern already doubted that houses and out offices could be erected for this sum but did not offer any alternative figures. In this memo there is an interesting social comment. The Land Commission proposed to erect 'a good house' for the Department's overseer at a cost of £500, but as to the man living on the same lands as the migrants McGovern declared it inappropriate. 'It would be simply cruel to ask an overseer after working hard all day among a colony of farmers to remain in their midst all night too.'⁴⁰

On 10 September 1934 McGovern reported again on progress: that the roads were being made, dwelling houses built and fences erected on twenty-seven holdings and that all the lands of Ráth Cairn had been gazetted. In addition to the migrants, four local men, herds employed by the former landowners, and their families were also to be accommodated on similar holdings of around twenty acres. A field of six acres was also reserved for a sports field and for the site of a co-operative store. While houses had already

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Sammon, *A Memoir*, Appendix 6 [c.1948], p. 174-5.

³⁹ *Labour News*, 3 April 1937.

⁴⁰ McGovern, 21 June 1934 (NAI, DA, G60/1935).

been erected, work on byres, piggeries and stables would start at once, although it was not anticipated that the final clear possession of land would be finalized before the first of December 1934. ⁴¹

V

Even before the lands were fully vested in the Land Commission indications were that McGovern was becoming concerned for the imminent planting of spring wheat in early September of 1934. His unease was that the land was not available for planting. It appeared, however, that he was not fully aware of the legal rights of the Land Commission. The extended compulsory purchase powers in the Land Act of 1932 allowed the Land Commission to move into a holding they had vested, build houses, carry out improvements and pass on the lands to an allottee before the final legal settlement had been agreed with the original owner. Yet this memo from McGovern would seem to be implying that the provisions of the 1932 land act were not being implemented when he wrote 'As no ploughing can start until clear possession is obtained and the cattle cleared off...' would indicate that they continued to wait for as he says 'clear possession' despite the apparent legalities to proceed. This was resolved by January 1935 when all of the Ráth Cairn lands, having been vested, were in the possession of the state and under the control of the Land Commission. ⁴²

VI

Linked to the agricultural improvement of the colony in preparation for the migrants was the provision of an agricultural inspector. The Land Commission official, Mr O'Connor, to whom McGovern directed his reports, also wanted an agricultural inspector to be appointed who would be available to advise the new migrants and they both hoped that this man could be in place before the migrants arrived. The agricultural inspector would make recommendations to the Land Commission as to which sections of holdings were to be ploughed for oats, potatoes and spring wheat. In his report McGovern suggested that the Meath County Committee of Agriculture (MCCA) would possibly make available the services of a Mr Butler, one of their staff inspectors. Despite the concerns expressed previously regarding the planting of wheat however, McGovern felt there was no urgency with the appointment 'as ploughing is not likely to start until January'.

⁴¹ McGovern, 10 Sept. 1934, *ibid.*

⁴² 10 Sept. 1934, *ibid.*

McGovern's two reports were used in a memo from O'Connell to the Department of Agriculture on 19 September 1934.⁴³ Although he was unconcerned with costs at this time he agreed with McGovern, in this instance, about advisors and wrote that he felt 'the appointment of advisors is important if the Connemara migrants are going to succeed as farmers in Co. Meath.' Counter to McGovern's other suggestion he thought it would be 'a good thing to have a good man living amongst them and controlled directly by the department [of Agriculture]'.⁴⁴ It was also his opinion that the provision for the inspector should be entirely a matter for the MCCA, 'they have plenty of funds';⁴⁵ however he had some doubts as to whether they would agree to appoint an instructor. In any case he preferred an appointee from the Department of Agriculture and wanted them to consider the appointment 'so the man would be in place by the spring' despite the fact this would be too late to provide any practical advice to the Land Commission.

VII

The appointment of an Assistant Agricultural Overseer (AAO) generated for a time a considerable amount of correspondence between the Land Commission and the Department of Agriculture. There was an apparent bias against the possible MCCA appointee and on 22 Sept 1934 a comment, in an unsigned memo, agreed with McGovern and O'Connell about the appointment of 'our type' of Assistant Agricultural Overseer, as apposed to the MCCA type. The memo went on to warn that despite the two departments' preferences

'the Department of Finance will insist the man be appointed by Meath County Committee of Agriculture. It is possible and indeed probable that the settlement of Gaeltacht migrants in Co Meath may not be very warmly welcomed and the Meath County Committee of Agriculture may not wish to devote funds for the special purpose of teaching and instructing migrants.'⁴⁶

These memos revealed that there was an awareness of trouble that might surface over the arrival of 'outsiders' in the dynamic of farming life in Meath but no solution was offered.

⁴³ Settlements of migrants in Co. Meath, 19 Sept. 1934, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

Over the next month O'Connell and Deegan corresponded on the subject and at first it appeared that the MCCA would agree to appoint a second overseer to live in the colony for a few years. The two men, thinking they had a positive result, decided to propose this to the Department of Finance but resolved that the MCCA had 'better not mention migrants specifically as the new officer could also be utilized for advising local settlers [as well].' Inexplicably, they had not yet informed the MCCA the reason for the appointment of a second agricultural overseer. However, in October 1934 they decided to rectify the matter and O'Connell wrote to Section F⁴⁷ 'Better inform MCCA of the proposed colony...these farmers will require a considerable amount of instruction...' He indicated that he wanted the MCCA to be asked to appoint an overseer in a permanent capacity, with a base near the new settlement. In this memo the issue of an Irish speaking officer arose for the first time and O'Connell expressed the opinion that as the settlers would be from the Gaeltacht the officer appointed would be required to have a competent knowledge of Irish. Curiously, again he reminded them against 'stressing the migrant question'. To this end a short time later a letter to the MCCA informed them about the intention to establish a Gaeltacht colony in the Athboy area. They were requested to appoint an AAO with competent Irish to accommodate the new settlers on holdings that would provide for twenty-seven families and four former employees.⁴⁸

VIII

On the 3 November 1934, barely a week before the announcement at the Fianna Fáil Ard-Fhéis, a meeting was held between Department of Agriculture and the Land Commission to discuss the Athboy Migration Scheme. Present were Mr T. O'Connell, Senior Inspector Mr McGovern Inspector representing the Department of Agriculture and for the Land Commission, the Secretary, Chief Inspector [Michael Deegan], Mr Kernan, Mr Gamble and Mr Geoghegan. They agreed to the following resolutions: that the services of an AAO for migrants, expected March or April, would be made available so that they 'may have sufficient crops at their disposal to enable them to live through the remainder of the year'; that one acre of winter wheat would be provided, for which £1 per holding had been set aside. In these early planning stages it had been proposed by the Land Commission to have, in the first year, the following prepared: one acre of wheat, one and a half acres of oats, the same of potatoes,

⁴⁷ Section F was a division in the Department of Agriculture

⁴⁸ NAI, DA, G60-35

half an acre of barley and one acre of mangolds.⁴⁹ Some grass and meadow land was left unploughed. This was revised to seven to nine and a half acres ploughed before the migrant's arrival; at minimum it was hoped that each farm would have five to five and a half acres ploughed and cultivated immediately with the ploughing of the remaining acres completed in the coming months.

They also recognized that further funds would have to be secured for tillage for the remaining acres. O'Connell and McGovern submitted a price of £150 for sixty acres. Internal fencing of the various holdings, which would cost £100, was not budgeted for in the initial proposals. That the government was anxious to proceed quickly with the work was indicated when four days later, on 7 November 1934, Deegan wrote to O'Connell explaining that the 'Costs of £150 & £100 had been approved' and that an AAO was to be appointed. He qualified the proposal with a recommendation that the AAO should not come under the responsibility of the Land Commission, 'better under Department of Agriculture'.⁵⁰ At a further meeting on the same day, attended by the main officials, Messers Deegan, Waddell, Gamble, Kernan, Geoghegan, McGovern and O'Connell, all agreed that the planting would be 'One acre of winter wheat on each of the twelve to fifteen holdings which will be occupied by spring [and] four acres devoted to [other] tillage crops'.⁵¹

At this stage it was evident that there had been some communication with the MCCA in the interim, concerning the appointment of an instructor as the comments in a brief memo indicated; [It has been a] 'waste of time to ask MCCA to appoint an AAO and pay him out of their own funds. They indicated that prominent people in Co Meath are opposed to any scheme where migrants would get holdings and would not grant a county officer to give instruction to such migrants.'⁵²

On foot of the refusal on 22 November the Department of Agriculture wrote to the Department of Finance and proposed the appointment of an AAO for the Gaeltacht migrants near Athboy. A particular candidate was put forward whom the Department of Agriculture had selected for the post.

⁴⁹ A Mangold is a mangle-wurzel, a type of beet for fodder.

⁵⁰ NAI, DA, G60-1935

⁵¹ Deegan to O'Connell (NAI, DA, G60-1935)

⁵² *ibid.*

'Mr Burke who is a native Irish speaker is considered to be particularly well qualified for the post. In view of the special and arduous duties which he would be required to discharge and having regard to the fact that the migrants being from backward areas will know very little of modern farming operations and farm implements and will therefore need intensive tuition and close supervision it is proposed to offer Mr Burke £25 per annum in addition to his present scale of remuneration. It is useless to attempt to induce Meath CCA to appoint an officer. Certain prominent people are apposed to the scheme.'⁵³

The proposal was approved by the Department of Finance on 2 January 1935 but, without any explanation, it was Mr Pdraig Gleeson from County Cork who subsequently took up the position.

The memo, referred to above, offered an insight into the Meath County Committee of Agriculture and those who were controlling the agricultural bureaucracy in Meath. The approval of expenditure for an overseer had been withheld due to unstated grievances. This anti migrant tactic was revealing considering that the County Committees of Agriculture were statutory bodies funded by government and county council monies. An assumption that MCCA would pay for a second man on their team, who would look after Ráth Cairn exclusively, was not agreed. Instead his wages were paid by the Department of Agriculture with the approval of the Minister for Finance after long and complicated negotiations.⁵⁴

Only weeks before the migrants were to arrive in Ráth Cairn, Dr James Ryan, speaking on behalf of the Minister for Lands, explained about the placing of an AAO in the special settlement scheme in Meath. The overseer, he enlightened, had been put there to instruct in the growing of certain crops as well as all ordinary crops. In response Deputy Patrick Belton⁵⁵ asked why the migrants needed this instruction, 'is it not the same way you grow crops everywhere?' Ryan was quite blunt in his reply, accusing Belton of ignorance and wondering whether he too needed an instructor to advise him.⁵⁶

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Patrick Belton, *Fine Gael*, Dublin North

⁵⁶ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lv, 388 (6 March 1935).

The situation would become even more difficult for the Meath Committee when once again the Land Commission, through the Department of Agriculture, requested in May 1935 that additional instructors and demonstrators be appointed for the 'numerous allottees who will be given holdings in the county.' The pragmatism of the Department of Agriculture was evident when they commented that 'the possibility of the Meath County Committee of Agriculture if they so desired to provide instructors and demonstrators for the purpose intimated is remote.'⁵⁷ This memo did however confirm that an overseer, available exclusively to the farmers in the Athboy district, had been put in place and was being paid by the Department of Agriculture.

IX

On 27 March 1935 on the eve of the arrival of the first group of migrants the appointed overseer, Patrick Gleeson, their liaison with the Department of Agriculture and responsible for nurturing their agricultural knowledge, wrote to the Department of Agriculture. Translated from the Irish through the official translation arrangements he gave details of his duties at Ráth Cairn and an account of work carried out. However, it was evident that the work was not progressing smoothly. His workload had increased from what he was originally told to expect and he wrote that he had been unable to complete the additional preparation required.

'When I came here a few weeks ago the Land Commission informed me that twelve families were coming from Connemara to this place by the end of the month and that I would have to sow an acre of oats for them and plough an Irish acre for potatoes. A week later I was told that nineteen families were coming.

In the first twelve holdings an acre was sown with wheat and an acre ploughed for oats but the Land Commission decided to sow two acres of oats in the other seven holdings when there was no wheat sown in them. Only one acre was sown in these seven holdings.'⁵⁸

He had only managed to sow fifteen acres of oats when twenty-six were required and only eleven of the thirteen acres ploughed in preparation for oats. More seriously he had not begun any of the nineteen acres of potato ridges. He

⁵⁷Memo from the secretary, Department of Agriculture to Walsh Land Commission (NAI, DA, E1715-35).

⁵⁸ Pádraic Gleeson, (NAI, DA, G60/35).

wrote that he had employed a man to make ridges for potatoes 'He is the best man but the others are doing it badly', but hoped to employ more in a few days. Two men and two pairs of horses were sowing oats and he hoped that 'if the weather continues fine all the oats will be sown and most of the ridges by the end of the week'. Gleeson was most concerned for the sowing of the potatoes and was of the opinion that the Land Commission instruction to allow the migrants to plant their own crop when they arrived was far too late. '.....the Land Commission should make arrangements to have them sown as early as possible.' To this the Land Commission agreed.⁵⁹

The Department of Agriculture became more involved at this juncture when McGovern's response to Gleeson's letter proposed that a few specially selected tenants should be brought to begin ploughing for themselves. He also recommended a special ploughman to be employed by Mr Gamble. There was no further correspondence on planting or sowing potatoes to indicate what was accomplished at the time of the migrants' arrival. However, a memoir on the life of Mhicil Chonrai revealed that ridges were prepared, but the migrants had to plant their own potatoes.⁶⁰ The involvement of the Department of Agriculture was pivotal and today the migrants, for the most part, positively recall the contribution of Padriac Gleeson.⁶¹

X

At every opportunity Fianna Fáil was preaching the gospel of tillage, giving every encouragement to turn the green fields of Meath and Westmeath into wheat producing areas. The *Meath Chronicle*, in an article entitled 'Ultimate Aim of Fianna Fáil', explained that the rationale behind the acre of wheat planted for the migrants, which was reported to be already sprouting, was because the party was anxious to encourage them to till their lands in line with the national strategy.⁶² In the same paper Michael J. Kennedy T. D.,⁶³ at a rally and fundraiser, was quoted on the agricultural policy of Fianna Fáil and warned farmers of Westmeath that 'the day of the bullock, rancher and cattleman was finished....quotas would be changed overnight. The world was overstocked with

⁵⁹ O'Connor, *ibid.*

⁶⁰ O'Giollagáin, *Stairsheanchas Mhicil Chonrai*, p. 149.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 157.

⁶² *Meath Chronicle*, 19 Jan. 1935.

⁶³ Michael Joseph Kennedy (died 1965) Fianna Fáil, Longford Westmeath.

livestock and there was only one salvation for the farmers...speed the plough.'⁶⁴ The reason for this economic strategy, according to Richard Dunphy, was that by phasing out cattle grazing, production would be reorientated toward the home market.⁶⁵ Joseph Lee considers Fianna Fáil's policy ideology as self-sufficiency and he believed de Valera thought a tillage policy 'would bind a bold peasantry to the soil.'⁶⁶

XI

In the previous summer the Land Commission had already begun preparing the roads and houses in the Athboy area for migrants. Migrants, as shown previously, were not unusual in the county; however, on Wednesday 17 November 1934 Fianna Fáil at their annual Ard-Fhéis, introduced a new element into the expected announcement concerning the Athboy lands. Although the townland of Ráth Cairn was not mentioned officially it was there that the work was nearly complete toward the end of 1934 and the official statement by the Minister for Lands, Joseph Connolly, had not held any real surprise as to the location. What was new was that the lands in question had not been prepared for ordinary migrants, but for a Gaeltacht Colony. The *Meath Chronicle*, reporting on the Ard-Fhéis, gave details of Connolly's statement that 'lands had been allotted for twenty seven migrants chosen from one particular end of the Gaeltacht...' and that '...houses erected on an estate in the neighbourhood of Athboy are intended to accommodate the Gaeltacht colony. A portion of the land is being prepared for tillage on their behalf.' The government explained that it only remained for allottees from the Gaeltacht to be selected from among those who had applied.⁶⁷ The government however was not without its critics and Martin Roddy, as has been shown previously, was concerned as to the cost of the proposed migration and that by taking such a step, the risk of failure is enormous.

XII

On 19 January 1935 the *Meath Chronicle* in a headline 'New Meath Colony' informed its readers that farms and homes were ready and that the first arrivals were due in March. They reported both the acreage and the number of families wrong but indicated fairly accurately that twelve families would arrive

⁶⁴ *Meath Chronicle*, 19 Jan. 1935.

⁶⁵ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 151.

⁶⁶ Lee, *Ireland*, p. 184.

⁶⁷ *Meath Chronicle*, 17 Nov. 1934.

in the first group. The Irish government press release quoted by the reporter indicated that this scheme would be the first of many and that since the Land Commission took the preliminary work in hand the previous July an area of one and a half square miles had been transformed.⁶⁸ Earlier the *Irish Press* had sent a reporter to the Athboy area to report on developments 'Wide new roads encircle the area with outlets to Athboy two miles away.'⁶⁹ The un-named reporter who visited the area observed 200 men (fig. 3.3) working to get the houses (fig. 3.4) ready and clear the land for tillage which had up to now been used as grazing.⁷⁰



Figure 3.3 *Irish Press*, 16 January 1935.

⁶⁸ *Meath Chronicle*, 19 Jan. 1935.

⁶⁹ *Irish Press*, 16 Jan. 1935.

⁷⁰ *Meath Chronicle*, 19 Jan. 1935.



Figure 3.4 Land Commission cottage Ráth Cairn 2006.
Source: photograph by author.

Meath Chronicle during the late 1920s and 1930s believed that quite apart from the availability of land, Meath was in many ways an apt location for the colonies because of its affinity to the 'Gaelic Spirit'. The weekly paper documented the occurrence of *ceilidhe* and *Fhéis*, the large number of Gaelic Athletic Association societies and the prevalence of the Gaelic League and in evidence were the names of shops in Irish. While the predominant language of the paper is English, there were occasionally articles entirely in Irish. The paper repeatedly presented articles on ancient Irish heritage regarding the Boyne Valley sites and Tara which served to show that there was a strong Gaelic ethos in County Meath.⁷¹

In the months following the announcement of the migrants' arrival the local business people and other interested individuals, according to Mac Donncha, attended classes in Irish. It was hoped that if local people spoke some Irish this would ease the transition of the migrants.⁷² Mhicil Chonrai recalled the surprise his family experienced when they were greeted by a man working for the Land Commission in Irish but *céad míle fáilte* was all he knew.⁷³ Language issues would continue to be problematical for the older generation interacting with the local merchants. Bartley O'Curraoin was unable to appreciate that he was being offered credit in a shop in Trim and returned the item he had planned to purchase. At the insistence of the shopkeeper he took the item but returned

⁷¹ *Meath Chronicle*, 7 July 1934.

⁷² Interview with Pádraic Mac Donncha of Ráth Cairn, Co Meath (25 Jan. 2006).

⁷³ O'Giollagáin, *Stairsheanchas Mhicil Chonrai*, p. 145.

quickly with the money.⁷⁴ The 19 January 1935 article in the *Meath Chronicle* closed with a reminder that the migrants would be 'bringing back the living Irish tongue.....to an area where it is virtually unknown except among the very old and the school children.'⁷⁵

XIII

Considering the overcrowding in the west the townland of Ráth Cairn or *Rathcarron*, as it was then known, was virtually empty. Richard Griffith's Valuation compiled in the mid-nineteenth century showed that originally there were very few individuals associated with the selected lands south east of Athboy. The map included here shows the townland prior to division. (fig. 3.5) In the valuation there were only seven named individuals, with no indication of the number of family members, on slightly more than 779 acres. In the census of 1901 and 1911 four families of the same name remain from Griffith's; Hope, Kelly, Murray and Heffernan with three additions Farrelly, Merrin and Kane. A National School teacher, Miss Madden, was also seen in the 1911 census. In 1901 there are twenty-seven individuals living in the townland and 1911, despite a shuffle of family members, the number remained the same.⁷⁶

The *Meath Chronicle* also referred to a number of estates previously acquired.⁷⁷ The estates were, according to the article, taken over in July of 1934; however, gazetting by the Land Commission had only occurred between May and June of 1934 and the land would not be finally in possession of the Land Commission until January 1935. The so called cancellation books, a continuation of Griffith's valuation, showed that it was not until 1936 that the redistributed land was officially registered in the names of the allottees in the Valuations Office records. These so called 'estates' referred to were for the most part simply acres of untenanted land without any of the attendant structures or social patterns associated with what might otherwise be understood as a residential estate or demesne. Nolan, Whelan and Duffy refer to eight estates involved with the Ráth Cairn colony but the source found in the Ráth Cairn archive, held in the office of the Community Centre, lists only three.⁷⁸ Detailed searches of *Iris Oifigiúil* have not shown more than the three individuals named

⁷⁴ Interview with Bartle O'Curraoin (his grandson) of Ráth Cairn, Co. Kildare (18 Jan. 2006).

⁷⁵ *Meath Chronicle*, 19 Jan., 1935.

⁷⁶ Rathmore DED, Rathcarne, microfilm (NA, Census of Ireland 1901/1911).

⁷⁷ *Meath Chronicle*, 19 Jan., 1935.

⁷⁸ Duffy, 'State sponsored migration', pp 175-196.

below with regard to Ráth Cairn.⁷⁹ Further research found the name of one more, Richard O'Reilly, who owned land in the Kilbride townland. Colonized in 1937, Kilbride forms an integral part of the Ráth Cairn Gaeltacht today.⁸⁰ This small townland was more typical of an estate with a big house but by the 1990s Kilbride House had fallen into ruin. Associated with the big house was the steward's house (fig. 3.6), acquired by the Land Commission it became part of the holding given to a former employee of the Kilbride estate.

⁷⁹ There were a considerable number of acquisitions throughout the period and in first quarter of 1934 forty separate gazettings were seen, from twelve to one thousand acres. However, to tabulate the announcements in *Iris Oifigiúil* is outside the scope of this thesis.

⁸⁰ *Iris Oifigiúil*, 31 Jan. 1936, Kilbride, Co. Meath, Notice of final vesting by the Irish Land Commission, p. 144; Duffy gave the name of the Hope family, who declared themselves owners in the 1911 census, however the actual landowner was Mrs Heffernan.

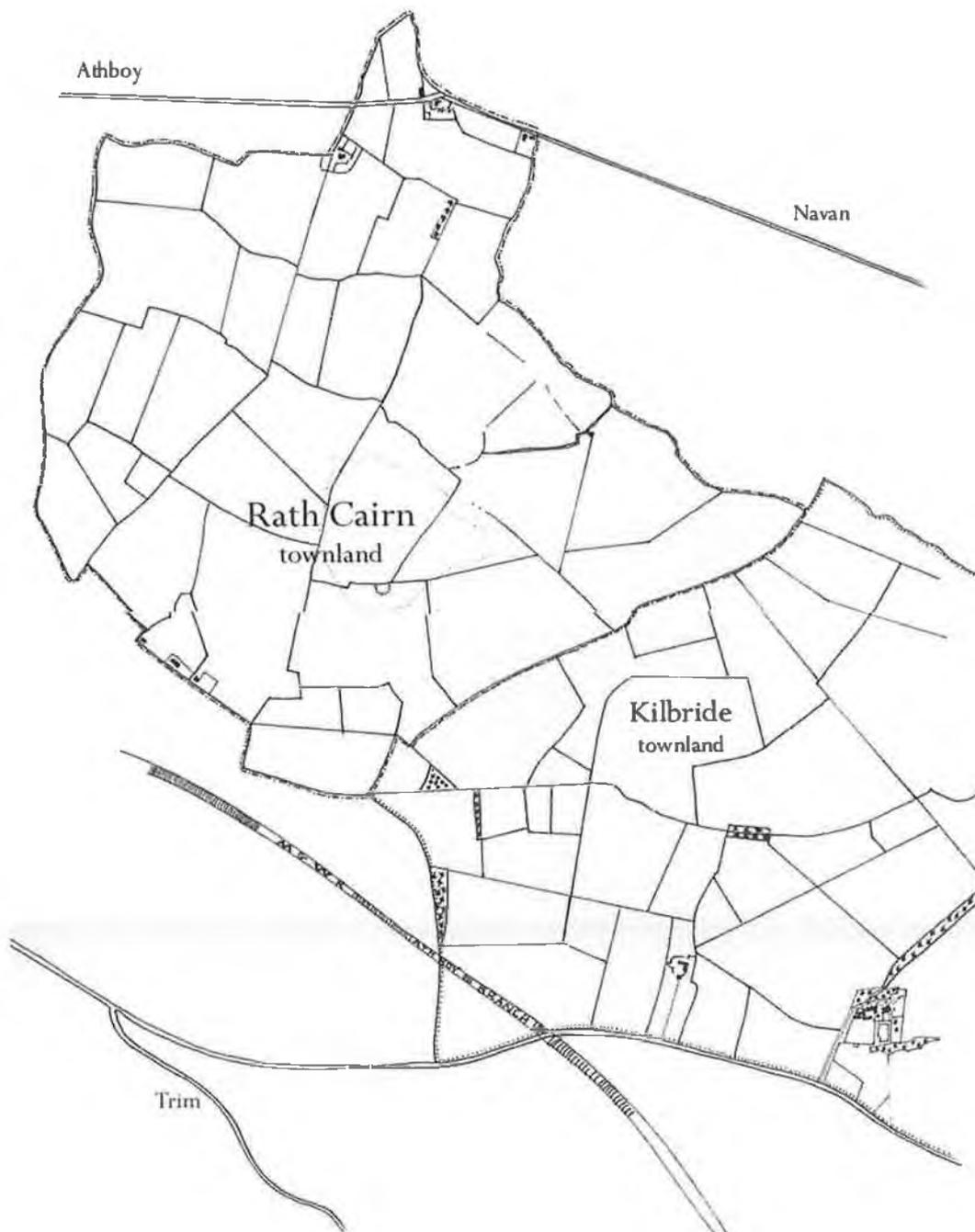


Figure 3.5 Ráth Cairn & Kilbride c 1912, OS County Meath Sheet 30:
 Key: Ráth Cairn- - - - - Kilbride



Figure 3.6 Steward's house, Kilbride. Source: photograph by author.

XIV

The estates acquired by the Land Commission, referred to in the *Meath Chronicle*, were those of James J. Maher, Mrs Malvina Heffernan and Mrs Valerie M. Fessler.⁸¹ From a historical point of view it is unfortunate that the particular map associated with the Cancellation Books detailing the townland of Ráth Cairn did not reveal the specific location of the ownership prior to acquisition by the state. These lands were deemed untenanted and indeed the map shows as few as three houses, all on the periphery. The fields were large and quite untypical of the type of divisions that were common in the west. The lands owned by James J. Maher⁸² in Rathcarran and a portion of land in the adjoining townland of Drissoge were gazetted on 15 May 1934. His total acreage was 357 for which he was offered £7,000, payable in four percent Land Bonds. The final vesting on 9 November 1934 had come into effect eight days previously on the first of the month. Lands of the other two landowners in the Rathcarran townland were gazetted on 26 June: Mrs Fessler, with 188 acres and 229 acres owned by Mrs Heffernan, or in this case her representatives, because Mrs Heffernan was by then deceased. The final completion of these two transactions would not be vested until 11 January 1935, having come into effect on 21 December 1934. Like Maher, Mrs Fessler, who received £3,500, and the

⁸¹ *Iris Oifigiúil*, 15 May 1934, Rathcarran, p.475; 26 June, Rathcarran, p. 598; 9 Nov. 1934, Rathcarran & Drissogu, p. 1074; 11 Jan. 1935, Rathcarran, p. 35. Notices of initial and final vesting to Maher, Fessler & Heffernan.

⁸² J.J. Maher was a prominent horse breeder and it was at his Confey Stud Farm that the English Derby winner *Manna* was bred.

representatives of Mrs Heffernan, who received £4,300, payment was in the form of four per-cent Land Bonds. Land bonds were non-negotiable and virtually worthless if one needed cash and in the 1950s an attempt was made to raise the land bonds dividend higher than their original four per-cent.⁸³ Ultimately the majority of recipients of the bonds would never benefit from the cash value of their lands.

Following the paper trail, the 1944 Cancellation book⁸⁴ showed the changes in ownership of the land.⁸⁵ The year 1944 was chosen as a cut off because here the notations extend into the 1960s where it could be seen that the migrants were beginning to buy their land, some through the Agricultural Credit Corporation. Notations in later books, showed that beyond the 1960s the original migrant names reoccurred in connection with Ráth Cairn and many of their family members remain in the area today.

XV

Of the 779 acres in the Ráth Cairn townland, approximately 188 acres were set aside for local men who had lost their jobs because the Land Commission had taken over their employer's land. The treatment of these men was quite different from the migrants and will be discussed below. Some 580 acres were then divided among the migrants. (fig 3.7) A portion of the lands within Ráth Cairn were also set aside for community development. Joseph Connolly in his memoirs quoted Kevin O'Shiel's⁸⁶ analysis of the migrant colonies and mentioned that after the migrants each received twenty-two acres there remained 240 acres. These acres were then let to the migrants as conacre, a practice of eleven month letting.⁸⁷ Knowing the difficulties that would arise in the future with the uneconomic sustainability of twenty-two acres it was questionable why the land would be deliberately placed into this category. An extra nine acres each would have been preferable to leaving the area open to old uneconomic problems. The letting of land for conacre was the cause of another contentious issue in the later colony of Gibbstown. Captain Giles complained in

⁸³ Quarterly report of the Department of Lands, Jan. to March 1953 (DT, DL, S15066).

⁸⁴ The subsequent information gathered for the valuation of lands begun by Richard Griffith's in the 1840s.

⁸⁵ Valuation's Office, Cancellation Books, County Meath, 1859-1944.

⁸⁶ Kevin O'Sheil (1891-1970) Republican/Sinn Fein Court judge 1919-1922, Land Commissioner 1923-63.

⁸⁷ Gaughan, *Connolly Memoirs*, p. 370.

the Dáil that conacre was auctioned only to the migrants and a bid from a local

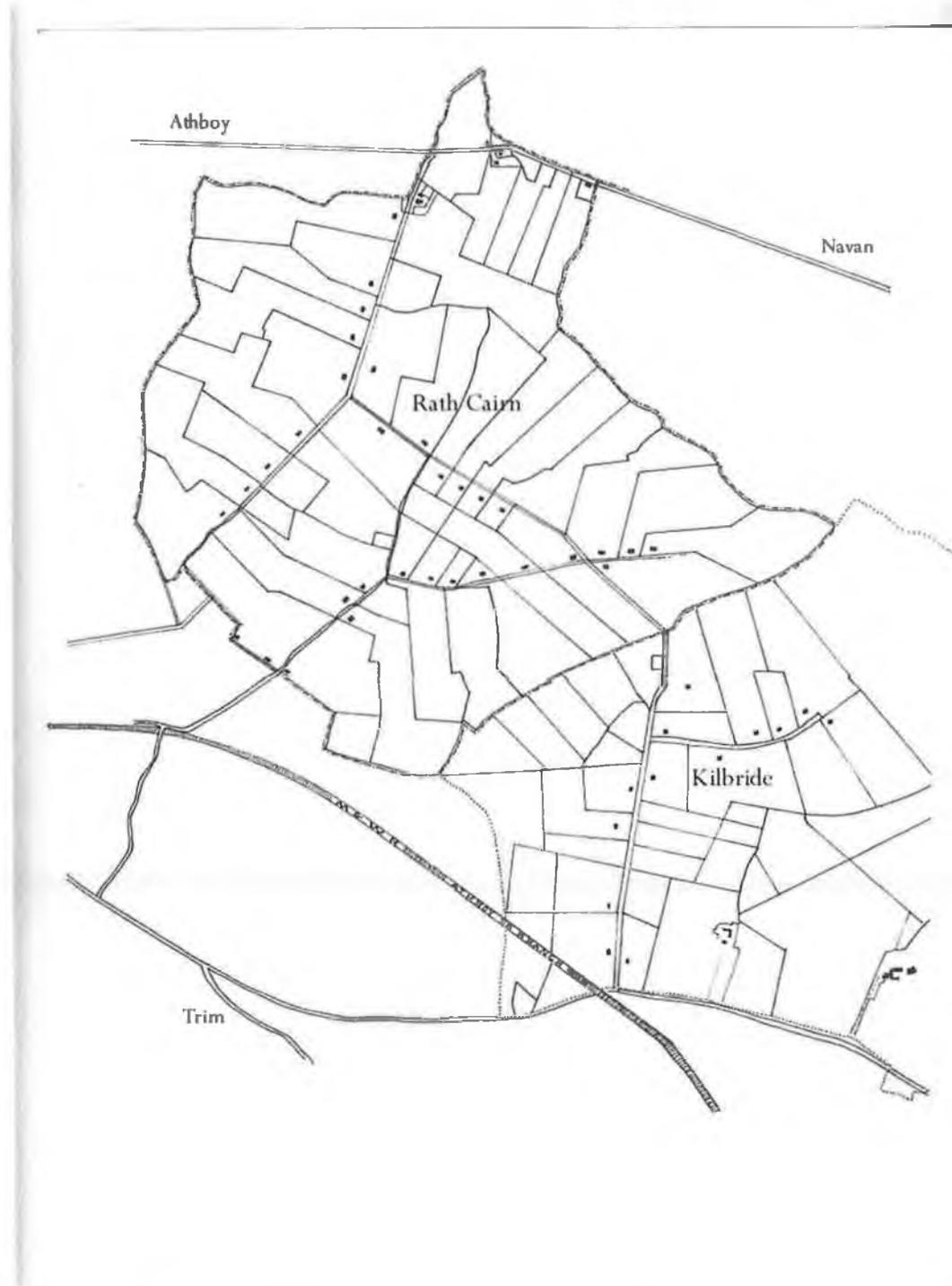


Figure 3.7 Ráth Cairn & Kilbride c 1945, OS County Meath Sheet 30. Valuation Office Cancellation Books 1859-1944. Key: Ráth Cairn-.-.- Kilbride

farmer was refused. The then Minister for Lands Thomas Derrig⁸⁸ made no apology for the decision, stating in reply, that the notices were posted only in the colony.⁸⁹

The *Meath Chronicle* reported that seventeen stone houses along with out-offices and piggeries were built on the former Maher lands, and as many were built on the neighboring estate. It appears however, that there were only four stone houses built and of those only one was left unrendered and obviously stone. Included too were new roads created to access the area. Two hundred men had worked to build the houses and plough and improve the fields 'that for decades had not seen a plough'.⁹⁰

XVI

In the months prior to the selection of allottees there was an excursion by a number of men who were interested in migrating, lead once again by Sean Costigan NT [National Teacher], who had, before moving to Galway, been principal of Dunshaughlin School and who had, 'taken a prominent part in the national struggle.'⁹¹ Numbering some forty men the intention was to travel to Meath to survey the lands of Ráth Cairn. Included among their number were some of the cyclists from the previous journey to government buildings. Boarding buses at 4:30 am they arrived in Athboy at 10:00 am where they were met by, among others, Seamus Finn, President of the Old IRA Organisation in Co. Meath, and Donal Quinn, secretary of the Gaelic League.⁹² A photo, (fig. 3.8) recorded their visit as they stood on a slight rise of ground in their Sunday best looking across the fertile lands of Meath. Among them some would eventually be allotted land in exchange for the holdings they left behind in Connemara.

⁸⁸ Thomas Derrig (1897-1956) Fianna Fáil, Kilkenny, Minister for Lands 1939-43, 1951-54, Minister for Education 1932-48, Minister for Post and Telegraphs 1939.

⁸⁹ Dail Eireann deb., lxxxii (3 April 1941)

⁹⁰ *Irish Press*, 16 Jan. 1935.

⁹¹ *Meath Chronicle*, 26 Jan. 1935.

⁹² *ibid*; *An t-Éireannach* 26 Jan. 1935.



Figure 3.8 Potential migrants visit Tara after seeing the townland of Ráth Cairn.
Source: An tEireannach 1934, Ráth Cairn archive.

During the visit, at the same time the Connemara men were being made welcome; a few realistic truths were explained concerning the available land. They were told, 'that the old IRA have first claim along with landless and uneconomic holders. Once these prior claims were fairly satisfied, the congests from the Western sea board will be cordially welcomed.' Both the Meath men and the westerners agreed that land division, relief of congestion and migration was 'so broadly national that it should have the attention of a full cabinet instead of being left in the hands of one Minister'⁹³ Despite this amicable meeting at Tara, letters were already appearing in the *Meath Chronicle* protesting against the proposed colony. The land of Meath 'is being filched from them to help in the spoon feeding of that section of our people who only seem capable of sponging on the remainder of the community. Wake up; remember there is a cuckoo in the nest, and that we have uneconomic holders of our own at Meath Hill etc.'⁹⁴

The *Anglo-Celt* also reported on the visit and confirmed the attitude to IRA claims on the land. The article quoted the visitors' leader who stated that the IRA 'had given the best years of their lives in the country's service [and] should have prior claim for holdings.' He was not named in this quote although later in the article they indicated that Martin O'Cadhain, who addressed the entire group later on the hill of Tara, was the leader of their organisation. O'Cadhain's republican attitudes would have been well known and were

⁹³ *An t-Éireannach* 26 Jan. 1935.

⁹⁴ *Meath Chronicle* 26 Jan. 1935.

reciprocated by the local IRA deputation who was in attendance. The Meath IRA opinion was evident when they were quoted as believing that 'it was distinctly understood that only such a class of migrants would be sponsored by the leaders of the Gaeltacht'.⁹⁵ What they understood of the dynamics of the Land Commission selection process is not known. It was possible that given the migrant's loyalty to O'Cadhain they too had republican leanings but this would not necessarily mean that the Land Commission was choosing old IRA men over other suitable candidates. The *Anglo-Celt* also indicated that the visit to Tara ended in prayer at the foot of the statue of St Patrick.⁹⁶ This certainly would have linked the fervent nationalism and republicanism within a religious context, the ethos of the time.

XVII

The migrants were eventually chosen, based on the Land Commission selection process, described in a 1939 document, which stated that the 'preference is to be given to married applicants with families to support.' It added that 'the fitness of the wife and family to co-operate in working the allotment was to be taken into account. Unmarried Allottees are to be given allotments...only if they intend to marry within 12 months (amended to two years during the Emergency)'.⁹⁷ The application form was quite simple (fig. 3.9) and would have depended on the local agricultural inspector's knowledge of the individual and possibly an interview to establish qualification. An application in Irish was sent by an overseer, P. O'Farrell, by mistake to the Department of Agriculture and could very well be typical of the type of request made by hundreds of applicants.⁹⁸ O'Farrell explained that Stephen Walsh, Letterfract, Connemara, was forty years old in 1934 with a wife of thirty years of age and five children that ranged in age from seven years to nine months. He told the Department of Agriculture that Walsh had a thirty acre farm valued at £7.15. He described this man's farm land as rough and boggy, capable of growing only root crops. Walsh himself wrote that he ran eighty sheep and sixteen cattle, four of which were milk cows on the land. At the end of the application Walsh made a plea that he was willing to learn and to put in the work and requested a thirty acre farm in Meath that included a house with seven rooms. The application was forwarded

⁹⁵ *Anglo-Celt*, 26 Jan. 1935.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ Memo from S. J. Waddell to grades I and II Land Commission inspectors-in-charge, land division policy, 22 December 1939 (NAI, DT, S12890 B).

⁹⁸ All of the Land Commission records are considered sensitive and are closed, regardless of category, but this does seem to be an area of genuine sensitivity.

IARRATAS AR AISTRIU

Ainm an Tionónta..... Seoladh.....

Dúitheche..... O.I. Uimh..... Folio.....

Blianaicht }
no } Luacháil faoi Dhl na mBocht
Clos }

Méid an Ghabháltais..... Baile Fearainn.....

Iarraim leis seo ar Choimisiún Talmhan na hEireann mé aistriú go dtí gabháltas nua i Ráth Carráin, i gContao na Midhe, agus má thaithníonn an gabháltas sin liom tá mé toilteanach an gabháltas a bhfuil a thuirisc tugtha agam thuas a thabhairt suas mar mhalairt air do Choimisiún na Talmhan agus mé féin agus mo mhuirghín agus a bhfuil agam d'aistriú go dtí an gabháltas nua.

Sighníthe.....

Fhinné :

Sighníthe.....

EOLAS I STAQBH CÚRSAÍ AN IARRATASÓRA

Aois..... An bhfuil tú pósta ?.....

Muirghín (Ainmneacha agus aoiseanna).....

Muoin.....

Stae.....

An í an Ghaedhílg gnáth-theanga na muirghíne ?

Cleachtadh ar Fheilmearacht (sa mbaile no i gearantracha eile).....

Figure 3.9 Application for Land Commission holding. Source: Ráth Cairn archive.

to the Land Commission regarding the transfer to Athboy.⁹⁹ This applicant, if he was successful, was not included in the Ráth Cairn colony.

In 1946, in order to justify the involvement of the Land Commission in the decision process, the selection procedure was described in greater detail and showed the pivotal part played by the LC inspector in the area. 'Inspectors are experienced men with knowledge of human nature as well as knowledge of land, and they are quite competent to reach a conclusion about a man's character and capacity'. The Minister for Lands then explained that the local inspector reported to his divisional inspector and between them a scheme of recommendations was prepared. The list of applicants, which included the viewpoint of the inspectors as to each applicant's suitability, was then submitted to the commissioners. The final decision was independent of the local inspectors, the Minister and the government.¹⁰⁰ In the case of Ráth Cairn the chosen migrants came from thirteen townlands in one area of Connemara. (fig. 3.10) A register of migrants was found in the Ráth Cairn archive and showed the location of each original holding. The townlands indicated were Annaghvaan, Carrowroe, Clynagh, Illaungorm, Inishbarra, Inishtravin, Keeraunbeg, Knock, Lettercallow, Lettermore, Maumeen and Teeranea. (table 3.1) Calculations from this list of holdings indicated that a total of 256 acres was given up in Connemara to be redistributed to 100 individual allottees.¹⁰¹ This land was valued in a review in the 1940s as being worth between £15 and £54 per migrant and between £35 and £105 in maximum resale value.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ P. O'Farrell to Department of Agriculture 22 November 1934 (NAI, DA, G60-1935).

¹⁰⁰ Dáil Éireann deb., ciii, 1858 (4 Dec. 1946).

¹⁰¹ Michael O'Conghaile, 'Ráth Cairn: Imirce agus Teaghlaigh in O'Conghaile, *Ráth Cairn*, p. 55. O'Conghaile gives 289 acres.

¹⁰² Department of Lands c1942 (NAI, DT, S10764).

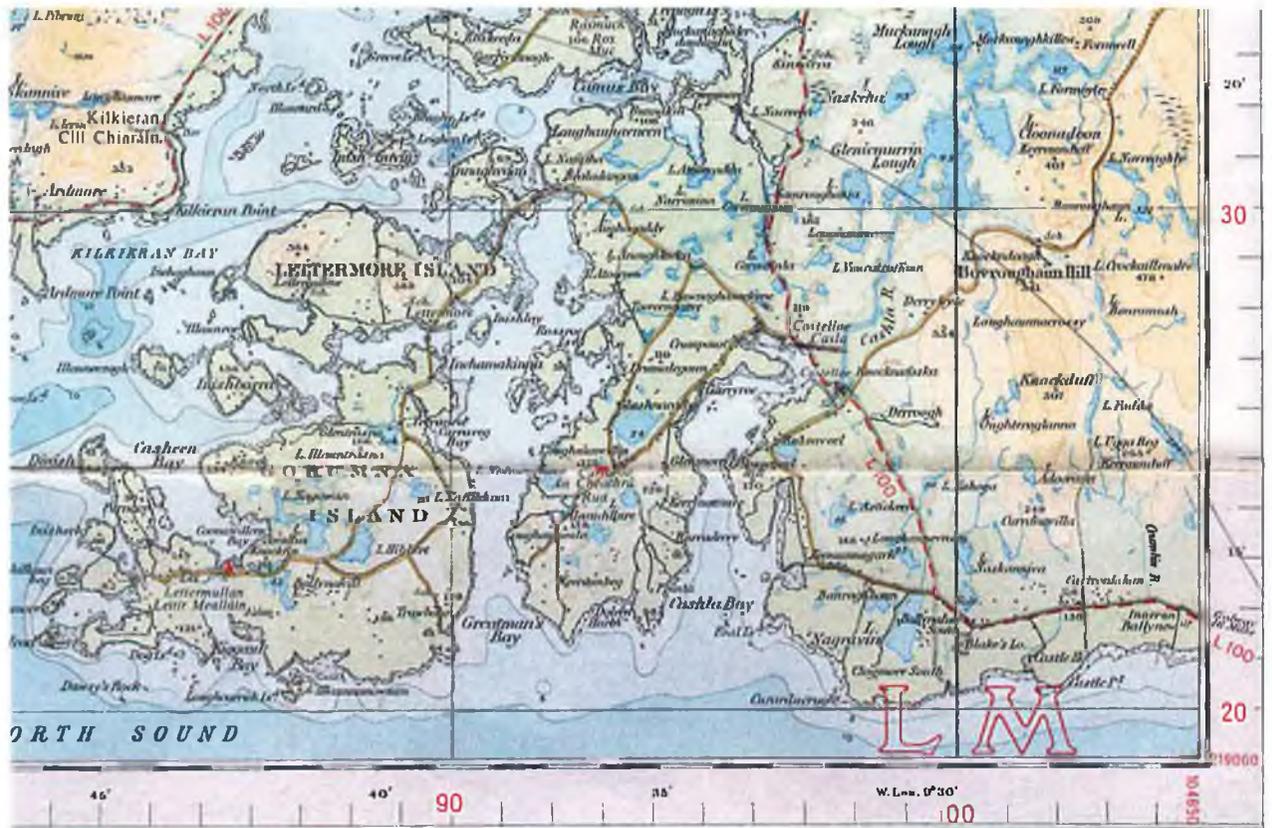


Figure 3.10 County Galway, *Discovery Series*, Sheet 44, (2nd ed., Dublin, 2003)

Migrants from Co. Galway to estates of

J.J. Maher: S.7348

Mrs M. Heffernan: S. 8182

Mrs V. Fessler: S. 5183

Particulars of Old holding surrendered on 15 April 1935							New holding						
Name	Estate & Rec. No.	Townland	Area Surrendered				Rental No.	Plot No.	Townland	Area			Occupn Int @ 47%
			A	R	P					A	R	P	
Michael Conroy	Joyce & Turner CDB 138	Maumeen	10	0	0	153 & 146	16,16A	Rathcairn	21	0	5	54	
Bridget Joyce w/w	do	do	10	0	0	95 pt	18,18A	do	22	1	5	51	
Kate Curren	do	Teeranea	12	0	0	274	19,19A	do	23	1	5	50	
Coleman Keane	do	Maumeen	9	2	0	139	21, 21A	Drissoge	0	2	0	50	
								Rathcairn	23	2	20	50	
John Coffey	do	Lettermore	11	0	10	78	26	do	21	2	10	49	
		Illaungorm	UNDIV 1/147 of 241/0/6										
Bartley Sullivan	Berridge CDB 95	Keeraunbeg	11	0	2	291			21	1	15	53	
James McDonagh	Joyce & Turner CDB 138	Inishbarra	10	0	0	187 pt	27	do	22	1	15	46	
Bgt. McDonagh	Berridge CDB 95	Keeraunbeg	6	0	0	291 8	28	do	21	1	30	41	
Michael McGrath	do	Lettercallow	12	0	0	373	30	do	20	3	20	48	
Patrick Conneely	do	Inishtravin	14	0	0	527, 502, 509	31	do	20	2	25	47	
Bartley Delap	Joyce & Turner CDB 138	Annaghvaan	10	0	0	14	32	do	21	1	10	22	

Table 3.1A Migrants from Co. Galway. Source: Handwritten original from the Ráth Cairn archive.

Particulars of Old Holding surrendered on 1st June 1935							New Holding					
Name	Estate & Rec. No.	Area Surrendered				Rental No.	Plot No.	Townland	Area			Occupn Int @ 47%
		Townland	A	R	P				A	R	P	
Michael Griffin	Joyce & Turner CDB 138	Teeranea	20	0	0	246	17,17A	do	21	3	35	46
Patrick Wallace	Millar CDB 10086	Carrowroe N.	9	0	20	114,116	?3	do	22	0	0	46
		Carrowroe										
		1/82 of 1182.2.4				???	2	Drissoge	1	0	24	
			0	1	4							
Margaret Joyce w/w	Hackett	Knock	13	0	39	???	34	Rathcairn	21	1	0	46
							3	Drissoge	1	2	18	
Coleman Bailey	Joyce & Turner CDB 138	Lettermore	3	0	23	25,87, 199,?	35	do	20	2	35	22
		2/47 of 24.0.6										
			13	1	24							
Patrick Curran	do	Teeranea	6	0	0		36	do	23	1	5	47
							4	Drissoge	2	2	26	

Table 3.1B Migrants from Co. Galway. Source: Handwritten original from the Ráth Cairn archive.

Particulars of Old Holding surrendered on 11 December 1935							New Holding					
Name	Estate & Rec. No.	Area Surrendered				Rental No.	Plot No.	Townland	Area			Occupn Int @ 47%
		Townland	A	R	P				A	R	P	
Patrick Folan	Joyce & Turner CDB 9965	Lettermore	5	0	5	74,75	1, 1A	Rathcairn	20	1	10	16
		2/47 of 241.0.6										
			7	1	27							
Peter McDonagh	Berridge CDB 99750	Clynagh	5	2	0	222A	2	do	20	1	20	15
Michael Joyce	Landless	n/a	nil			n/a	n/a	do	22	2	15	16
Thomas McDonagh	Berridge CDB 95	Clynagh	6	2	0	206	4	do	21	2	10	
Edward McDonagh	Joyce & Turner CDB 138	Teeranea	8	1	11	216 pt	5	do	21	2	20	16
John Griffin	do	do	16	0	0	247,249	6, 6A	do	21	2	0	16
Michael Coffey	Landless	n/a	nil			n/a	7	do	20	7	10	18
Michael Loughlin	Joyce & Turner 138	Maumeen	5	0	0	98,99?,105 pt	8	do	20	6	15	?
..... Ball*	Berridge	Inishterin	n/a			508	?	do	21	?	?	?
Michael McDonagh	Joyce & Turner 138	Maumeen	10	0	0	132	15	do	20	3	20	?
James Keane	Joyce & Turner 138	Teeranea				218 pt	20, 20A	do	21	2	25	16
Michael McDonagh	Millar	Carrowroe	15	3	19	Rce Ord 148, 161	14	do	21	2	0	16
		1/82 of 1182.2.9										

Table 3.1C Migrants from Co. Galway. Source: Handwritten original from the Ráth Cairn archive.

[Total 228 58 448]

* Entry struck out

Complementing the list of names in table 3.1 O'Conghaile presented a list in *Gaeltacht, Ráth Cairn* which listed the number of children and their ages.¹⁰³ By adding 178 children to the twenty-seven migrants, this comes to 205, already twenty-three over the published Land Commission figure of 182. Significant omissions in the two enumerations were the elderly and wives. Three women were listed as allottees with their older sons but the remainder were men and, assuming they were all married, this would represent an additional twenty-four individuals bringing the total to 228. As the newspaper reports below indicate there were also elderly relatives who travelled with their migrant sons or daughters, which would have brought the total even higher. O'Conghaile has highlighted an error on the part of the Land Commission officials concerning the number of children, perhaps understandable, but to not include wives in the total was questionable, even for the time. By factoring in these additional family members O'Conghaile concluded that 232 people were migrated to Ráth Cairn in 1935 rather than the official figure of 182. However he has also included family members who remained in the west due to work or for reasons of marriage or who were abroad. For this reason his figure 232 can also be regarded as misleading never-the-less a valid point was made regarding the former groups.¹⁰⁴

The age demographic was not given by the Land Commission in their reports but newspapers and O'Conghaile research showed that there was a wide range of ages. The 50th Anniversary publication gave a fuller picture and indicated that fifty-five were over fifty, forty-two were under ten with eleven not yet in school. The eldest to come to Ráth Cairn in 1935 was Beairtle Ó Curraion who was eighty-two.¹⁰⁵ The elderly who would perhaps be the least inclined to venture into a new way of life 'were obliged to abandon the land they had at home so that it could be distributed among their neighbours.' O'Conghaile also observed that sadly, many went to Ráth Cairn to die a view confirmed by Duffy.¹⁰⁶ The decision to migrate the entire extended family and bring the seventy-two families from the same area was unique to the Ráth Cairn colony.

¹⁰³ O'Conghaile, *Ráth Cairn*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*; Giles also claimed 'quite a number of old people some of them 90 and 92 years of age are being brought to the County Meath at the present time.' *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lxxiv, 2257 (1 May 1940).

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 54; Duffy, 'State sponsored migration', p. 184.

XVIII

On the day of the move from Connemara a reporter representing the *Connaught Tribune* and the *Irish Times* was on hand to record the event. The previous night there had been plenty of farewell parties but in the morning the reality was, for some, difficult to accept. The elderly especially found it hard, with a report of keening at one house and melancholy reflections from another couple aged 74 and 82, who never expected to see Connemara again. On a fine morning at the village of Lettermore it was all business. Even though it was only six a.m. the migrants were busy loading their possessions on to the lorries and boarding the buses supervised by the Galway manager of the IOC, H. Culleton. Representing the Land Commission was a Mr J. D. Kelly, on hand to receive the lands surrendered by the migrants. At the second stop, Gorumna Island, they were greeted by the keening of the elderly women and the uncertain clusters of people realizing the time had come to leave. Here in this small townland, the boreens, leading to what were described as hovels, presented an access challenge for the lorries and buses, appointed for the transport of the migrants. During a delay one of the older, unnamed migrants was interviewed as he watched the loading of his belongings.

‘In the old days ‘twas to America, away out to the west, that we sent our people. Now the bright steamship posters we used to see outside the village store aren’t there anymore. There’s pictures of the Volunteers in the post office and at the barracks, and now we are to go away to Meath- the pasture country- to Gaelicise it the government says.’ Then turning to his own holding he was to hand over to the Land Commission he observes ‘It was poor enough land, and glad we ought to be that we are getting grand new places. But it is hard to leave it. My people were here longer than one can remember, and I loved the place. In the city you said we were poverty stricken. I’m wondering will I be frettin’ more for the folks I’ll be leaving there than about what you folks called poverty.’

The reporter was struck by the sadness of the people both for those leaving and those left behind. He saw too the uncertainty of grown men with families and suspected that they ‘feared the new life and the strangers’.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷*Connaught Tribune*, (date unknown) 1935; *Irish Times* (date unknown) 1935. (Ráth Cairn Archive)



Figure 3.11 *Irish Press*, 13 April 1935. Source: National Library

On 13 April the *Irish Press* reported the arrival of the first eleven families in Ráth Cairn. (fig. 3.11) On the night of the move the largest numbers had arrived at nine o'clock, followed the next day by the elderly members of the group, who had spent the night in Galway. The paper also reported that they had not traveled without a guiding hand. Miss Mangan, a Domestic Instructress of twenty years service in the Lettermore district, accompanied the colonists to 'settle their domestic arrangements.' Someone had also thoughtfully arranged that every family should have a week's supply of groceries, giving them time to find the local shops.¹⁰⁸ Later the Coffey's would open a shop next to their house. This article recorded the words of an 'official' who indicated that it was 'hoped to colonise a large area gradually of Irish-speaking representatives' and who went on to say that these would be chosen from Connemara, Donegal and Kerry.¹⁰⁹ This was an indication that the larger concept of Gaeltacht colonies had already been accepted in principal if not yet planned in the finer detail.

On 20 April the *Meath Chronicle* took up the story and reported, with additional detail, the arrival of the migrants giving their home place as the *Cois Fharraige* area of Connemara. The eleven families, some of whom were blood relatives, numbered approximately eighty people. The celebrations that welcomed them included a hurling match between a local Athboy club and St Joseph's Carmelite College, Clondalkin,¹¹⁰ which was followed by a relay race

¹⁰⁸ O'Conghaile, *Celtic Language*, p. 614.

¹⁰⁹ *Irish Press*, 13 April 1935.

¹¹⁰ Hurling was not a tradition in Connemara. Duffy, 'State sponsored migration', p. 184.

and later a concert. During this concert welcoming speeches were made and the newcomers were reminded that the history of Ireland could be written from County Meath and the historic parish of Athboy.¹¹¹ In June the *Irish Press* detailed the arrival of five more families. This group from the same area as previously had begun the journey by loading their possessions into currachs to the point where they would meet the lorries and buses. In the article the reporter emotionally recalled the forty years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness culminating in the Promised Land.¹¹² While the government had seen migration and the Gaeltacht colony as a solution to much of the poverty and agricultural difficulties prevalent in the west at this time, they had not used such idealistic terms as the biblical references mentioned in the *Irish Press*. In December the last twelve families arrived, bringing the total to twenty-seven. However, by 1937 two families, Jack McDonagh, his wife and sixteen children and Michael Folen, his wife and eleven children chose to return to Connemara.¹¹³ The two holdings were then given to Michael Curran and Michael Coffey sons of two migrant families.¹¹⁴ Minister for Lands, Gerald Boland,¹¹⁵ gave their reason for leaving Ráth Cairn as ‘the call of the sea.’¹¹⁶

IXX

Of the twenty-seven houses that had been prepared, the house assigned to the Keane [Kane, O’Cathain] family was chosen for the reception of the new arrivals. Sandwiches and tea were provided for everyone, contributed by members of the Gaelic League who had come down from Dublin for the event. Being of a very high quality dressed stone, this was the only unrendered¹¹⁷ house of the four stone houses built and had been constructed by two stonemasons, Lacey [or de Lacey] from Trim and Pat May from Athboy. (fig. 3.12) It was said at the time that a family would want for nothing else if they were given this house. Although there were three further stone houses built these were not of the high quality of the Keane house and instead they were rendered.¹¹⁸ While the policy was to migrate large families, proper provision for an adequate size house

¹¹¹ *Meath Chronicle*, 20 April 1935.

¹¹² *The Irish Press*, 10 June 1935.

¹¹³ *Labour News*, 3 April 1937.

¹¹⁴ Report on ‘Gaeltacht Colonies in County Meath, Colony No. 1. *Rathcarran*’, (NAI, DT, S10764).

¹¹⁵ Gerald Boland (1885-1973), Fianna Fáil, Rosscommon, Minister for Lands 1933, 1937-39, Minister for Justice, 1939-48.

¹¹⁶ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lxxv, (21 April, 1937).

¹¹⁷ OED: Unrendered- exposed stone work pointed with lime and sand. Render- to plaster with lime and sand choosing smooth or pebbled finish.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Sarah Keane [the family also uses the Irish spelling of their name O’Cathain] of Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (10 Nov. 2006).



Figure 3.12 The Keane's stone house. Photograph by the author.

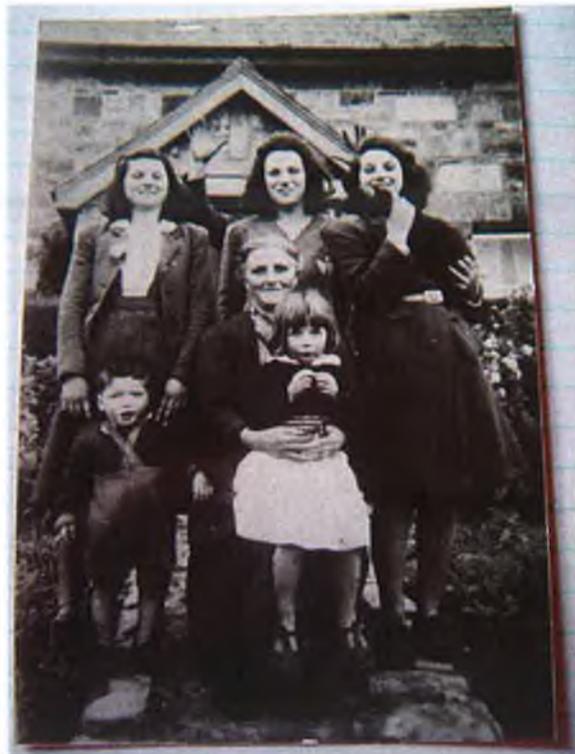


Figure 3.13. Front row from left: Sean Griffin, Monica Keane, Peg Griffin. Back row from the left: Brid Keane Barabra McDonnagh (néé Keane) Sarah Keane, Pat Keane's hands can be seen behind the group. Photograph in possession of Sarah Keane

was not fully thought out; most contained only three bedrooms for a family of, at minimum six. The Keane family was twelve in number, and the house like the others had only three bedrooms and, like the majority of houses at the time, the toilet facilities were outdoors. (fig. 3.13, fig. 3.14, fig. 3.15) The house has recently been refitted with UPVC windows and front door but the original divided back door remains. (fig. 3.16, 3.17) Coleman Keane and his neighbour, James MacDonnagh, grandfather of Pádraic Mac Donncha, were assigned a harrow (fig. 3.18, 3.19) and each man was given their own plough. Later Coleman Keane and Bartley Curran were given carts that became a contentious issue between them and the Land Commission.¹¹⁹

In a Dáil Debate in 1938 the houses were described as nicely built with a small neat shed alongside. A speaker observed that the shed, although pretty to look at, was practically no use whatever and with the thirty shillings per week they 'should put up other sheds where necessary. That is not being done because the thirty shillings was probably necessary for the support of the family and the result is the farms still look extremely naked' ¹²⁰

XX

A month after the move the *Weekly Irish Times* reviewed the migration and summed up the event in a somewhat less emotional style than the *Irish Press*. They laid out the government's policy on the relief of congestion in the Gaeltacht and considered it praiseworthy to give 'displanted families' the chance of a new and better livelihood on the best land in Ireland. The paper, however, had less sympathy with the migrants' role as missionaries of the Irish language. Somewhat dismissively they predicted that while it may help the immediate neighborhood it was only compulsory Irish in schools that would have any hope of success. They suspected that, in fact, with the natural way of evolution, the emigrants would merely acquire a superior knowledge of English.¹²¹ Once again, however, the *Meath Chronicle* was enthusiastic 'The greatest feature of the colonization scheme is of course the bringing back of the living Irish tongue....to and area where it is virtually unknown...'.¹²²

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lxx, 1793 (8 April 1938).

¹²¹ *Weekly Irish Times*, 25 May 1935.

¹²² *Meath Chronicle*, 19 Jan. 1935.



Figure 3.14 Group outside Keane's house. From the left, Michael Conroy, Peg Keane, Darach Keane and Tony McDonnagh. Source: Photograph in possession of Sarah Keane.



Figure 3.15 Monica Keane in Ráth Cairn wearing a báinín shawl. Source: Photograph in possession of Sarah Keane.



Figure 3.16 A kitchen dresser being loaded in Galway.
Connaught Tribune (undated). Source: Ráth Cairn archive.



Figure 3.17 Keane's dresser in 2007.
Source: Photograph taken by the author



Figure 3.18 Coleman Keane with the shared harrow. Note on the back of the photograph 'machine bought in 1935 between McDonnagh and Keane's. P. O. Gleosain ' [Assistant Agricultural Overseer] Source: Photograph in possession of Sarah Keane.



Figure 3.19 Harrow in above picture in 2006.

Indeed so taken by the Ráth Cairn colony were the supporters of the Irish language that in 1935 it became a busy destination for 'ardent Gaels'. They traveled to Ráth Cairn in such large numbers that a newspaper article appeared in the *Meath Chronicle* pointing out the inappropriate nature of their conduct.

'On Sunday afternoon the place was crowded with trippers and some were thoughtless enough to go looking in windows.'¹²³ It was hoped that articles such as this would discourage visitors but the proximity of a Gaeltacht so close to Dublin was irresistible. In a report by an *Irish Independent* 'special representative' it was revealed that the large numbers who made a trip to the colony had the 'attitude that they were viewing curiosities or exhibits.' It was also revealed by the reporter that the difference between the Irish spoken by the visitors and the migrants was significant. He recounted that two Irish speaking young girls 'of the secondary school type' ventured into Coffey's shop to greet the owner but they emerged explaining they 'could not understand a word'.¹²⁴ Such were the numbers of visitors that a request was issued by the government for the settlers to be left in peace and eventually the visitor numbers fell.¹²⁵ This had the unfortunate effect of effectively discouraging the very thing that the colony had been set up for, dissemination of the Irish language. One opinion presented in the *Irish Press* in the 1960s suggested that as a result of the excessive visitor numbers the migrants had reacted by becoming withdrawn and unco-operative with visitors and that this attitude may have persisted for some time. The reporter, in 1969, in a series of articles spread over six consecutive days used a UCD master's thesis on Irish speakers in Meath, which dealt with Ráth Cairn, as the basis for his report. In these articles he did not always agree with everything the postgraduate student, Brid Ni Chinneide, had written and in particular disagreed with her that the migrants had isolated themselves into their community as a result of the Gaelic tourism in the early months of the colony.¹²⁶

The Irish Independent 'special representative' produced a series of three articles, with pictures, thirteen weeks after the arrival in Ráth Cairn of the first sixteen families. An Irish speaker, he interviewed individuals around the colony for their reaction to the move from the West. He reported that while the men were satisfied the women would prefer to be back home among their own old friends and relatives. He reported too that while the men were willing to make good and there was an instructor to give his expert guidance, some of the men claimed they already knew all there was to be known about farming in Meath. A number of photographs accompanied the article showing the Keane and Coffey

¹²³ *Meath Chronicle*, 4 May 1935.

¹²⁴ *Irish Independent* 16 July 1935.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Irish Press*, 27 Jan. -1 Feb. 1969. Background source Brid Ni Chinneide, 'Colony Migration of Speakers of Irish to County Meath' (M.A. thesis, University College Dublin, c 1969), despite an extensive search this thesis could not be found.

family members. (fig. 3.20) Regardless of the bravado, he observed that they are doing 'exceptionally well'.¹²⁷ However, already he saw that in the future there would be problems with the twenty acre size of the farms not being able to provide for all the children in the family. They would have to leave to make their own way and revealed that already some of the young men have told him they intended to look for jobs driving buses, joining the Garda or the army. Later, with more education, he suggested teaching and the civil service might be potential jobs for the younger children.¹²⁸

In early November an incident occurred, seven months after the first colonists had arrived; just weeks before the last group of families were to come that caused fear and uncertainty among those who were already in residence. The *Meath Chronicle* under the headline 'Outrage at Rathcarne Gaeltacht'¹²⁹ reported that several houses among the eleven yet to be occupied had been shot at and slogans dabbed on the walls. A representative of the *Meath Chronicle* arrived on the scene to find that an intensive investigation by the Garda authorities was underway and that the slogans painted on the houses were of anti-migrant sentiment; they read 'WARNING NO MORE MIGRANTS ALLOWED HERE' and 'THIS LAND IS NOT FOR CONNEMARA PEOPLE-IT IS FOR MEATH MEN'. Three men were detained by the Garda but released. Between 1935 and 1940 the Garda Archives reported a total of six such incidents in county Meath as a whole.¹³⁰ Captain Giles asked the Minister for Justice, Gerard Boland, if he was aware of the bad behavior and ugly scene in Athboy, which threatened the lives of local people, and argued for extra guards to be stationed near the colonies to protect the local residents.¹³¹ At a meeting following the incident the outrage was condemned by the Old IRA and in a quote taken from the *Republican Congress* newsletter Peadar O'Donnell wrote of the threat to the Gaeltacht scheme by individuals that he suggested were the landless.¹³² The *Meath Chronicle* expressed the opinion that without co-operation between the migrants and the landless there would be a disaster. Above all, neighborliness, which was so vital in the Gaeltacht, must continue between the Meath landless and their new neighbours or the 'whole Gaelic

¹²⁷ *Irish Independent*, 15 July 1935.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, 16 July 1935.

¹²⁹ *Meath Chronicle*, 2 Nov. 1935.

¹³⁰ Garda Archives: in response to a request for information regarding the Athboy incident Inspector Patrick McGee, archivist at the Garda Archives in Dublin Castle, indicated that these files were closed. Letter dated 8 March 2005, in the possession of this author.

¹³¹ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lxxvii (8 Nov. 1939).

¹³² *Meath Chronicle*, 2 Nov. 1935.



THE GAELTACHT COLONY

We reproduce on this page a selection of interesting pictures specially taken by an *Irish Independent* staff photographer, illustrating the life and progress of the Irish-speaking colony recently migrated from Connemara to the rich pasture lands of Co. Meath.

Our photographer was accompanied by a special representative of the *Irish Independent*, the first part of whose interesting story appears to-day in our news columns.

The Gaeltacht Colony at Athboy (Co. Meath)—(Left) The first shop; (below) a refreshing interval during the harvest work; and (below on the right) one of the new colonists, a typical Connemara woman.

Irish Independent Photos. (11.)



Figure 3.20 Top photograph, Mrs Coffey outside her shop. Lower photograph, from the left young Keane boy, Martin Coffey, Coleman Keane and Pat Coffey.
Source: *Irish Independent*, 15 July 1935.

colonization scheme is threatened.' With little grasp of the workings of the Land Commission the reporter suggested that the two groups plan a scheme to present 'to the Fianna Fáil cumann, labour bodies and the IRA and a county conference to discuss it.'¹³³

XXI

In developing the colony scheme, described earlier in chapter one, it had been agreed that each family in the Ráth Cairn colony would receive three cows, ten sheep, two bonhams,¹³⁴ one young heifer, one horse, one donkey, twenty pullets and one cock. In lieu of a fourth cow, two sheep or two young heifers might be given, and in lieu of one young heifer a sow was proposed. The following should also have been supplied; one horse cart and harness, one donkey cart and harness, one combination plough with traces and slings, one spring tooth harrow, one grubber, one light wooden harrow, one roller and shafts, one wheelbarrow, six milk pans, one end over end churn, four milking buckets, one turf barrow and two crocks for cream. Community implements to be shared by the migrants were five mowers and reapers, together with five knapsack sprayers.¹³⁵ They were also supplied with seed, and a grant of up to £78 for specific improvements. In addition, thirty shillings each week for a twelve month period, the equivalent to unemployment allowance, was given to assist additional improvements. An agricultural advisor would call and schooling for the family was on hand locally.¹³⁶ They would also benefit from a grant in connection with Irish speaking districts where a bonus of £5 for each child was available to parents from 1934.¹³⁷ There was a promise of a church, on a site already provided, however it would not be built for nearly forty years.

Whatever was privately thought about the other provisions among the Athboy population, the thirty shillings was not allowed to pass without comment. After the migrants were established for some time at Ráth Cairn a local observed to a reporter from the *Irish Independent* 'the newcomers had

¹³³ *ibid.*

¹³⁴ Bonhams are piglets.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Land Commission Annual Report 1951-52.*

¹³⁷ This applied to school-children, in the Gaeltacht and the Breac-Gaeltacht, if the Department of Education was satisfied that Irish was the language of the child's home and that the child in consequence spoke Irish naturally and fluently.

been given quite enough without thirty shillings a week extra coming into them.¹³⁸

Mhicil Chonrai, in his memoir, mentioned the stock received by the migrants adding small detail to the bare facts. He listed the cattle his family received and mentioned that the other migrants took much the same: two young bull calves and a bullock along with four cows. He confirmed that they received a horse cart but had to wait a year for the donkey cart. In reference to the carts it must be assumed that they also received a horse and a donkey. He also confirmed three or four bonhams, a cock and a dozen hens, adding that they were 'wine dot hens'. Furthermore he confirmed receipt of the proposed machinery but did not indicate whether anyone else had a horse cart. Later on in his memoir, he thought perhaps it was a year or two before they had everything that was promised and this would tie in with not having carts to transport the turf as described below.¹³⁹ In 1999 he told O'Giollagáin, the editor of his memoir, that the bog allocations for each family consisting of two perches¹⁴⁰ in fourteen foot wide strips, were not yet exhausted, and turf could still be taken from them.¹⁴¹ In 1937 Micheál MacCraith gave an interview to a reporter from *Labour News*. He reported the circumstances of their treatment as he saw it when he arrived in Ráth Cairn. The bargain had been that the locals, under the supervision of the agricultural overseer, would till five and a half acres but only three and a half had been ploughed. He also told the reporter that the horse did not arrive for six months and that the plough had not been sent until November, which was 'too late'. It would seem that this was the situation for all but two of the migrants since four horses came early in the summer. He went on to criticize the Land Commission, complaining that the promised donkey and cart had not arrived although the harness had been delivered the previous week.¹⁴² If the migrants had received the equipment promised, the difficulties that would arise, particularly with the turf, would not have taken place.

XXII

In the absence of any correspondence regarding the stock allowed to Ráth Cairn the memos in relation to the second colony, Gibbstown, serve to

¹³⁸ *Irish Independent*, 16 July 1935.

¹³⁹ O'Giollagáin, *Stairsheanchas Mhicil Chonrai*, pp 145-6.

¹⁴⁰ a measure of land: 1 perch = 1/160 of an acre.

¹⁴¹ O'Giollagáin, *Stairsheanchas Mhicil Chonrai*, pp 126-7.

¹⁴² *Labour News*, 3 April 1937.

indicate the amounts. Gibbstown approximately eight miles from Ráth Cairn would consist of about sixty holdings. With a view to reducing the financial commitments, the Land Commission wished to review the system of stocking and equipping the Gaeltacht holdings. The advice of the Department of Agriculture was requested and it transpired that Deegan, the Land Commission inspector, proposed to weigh up the various items individually and ascertain whether it was desirable to make changes in view of the experience gained from the first colony. The Minister of Finance expressed his concern over the cost of the new scheme and felt that those responsible hadn't known what they were doing the first time.¹⁴³ The Department of Finance would have had considerable influence in decisions and eventually the generous stocking levels seen in Ráth Cairn would not feature in the migration policy as it developed after 1939.

The proposal for the second colony was first indicated in a letter of 16 October 1935.¹⁴⁴ The colony was stocked and equipped broadly with the plan previously agreed for Ráth Cairn and initially only minor changes were implemented, shown below:

Allocation of Stock		
	Ráth Cairn	Gibbstown
Cows	4	2
Sheep	10	12
Heifers	none	2
Sow	optional	1
Bonhams	2	2
Horse	1	1
Donkey	1	none
Pullets	20	20
Cockerel	1	1

¹⁴⁵

In order to encourage the keeping of a sow it was agreed that a second piggery should be provided and that taking a sow should be obligatory. Provision for the purchase of a sow had been increased from four to six pounds, a considerable expense at the time. Likewise the provision for pullets had been increased from four to five shillings per bird and an increase in the terms for the

¹⁴³ Deegan to O'Broin, 7 October 1935 re New migration scheme, (NAI, DA, G60/35).

¹⁴⁴ Settlements of Migrants in Co. Meath, 1936 Scheme, 16 October 1935, (NAI, DA, G60/1935).

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

purchase of a horse from £20 to £22. Regarding implements-only the numbers of milk pans and buckets were reduced. Some of the larger pieces of equipment were communally shared and it was suggested that the Land Commission should construct proper housing for these items. As a result in both Ráth Cairn and the new settlement, Gibbstown, a suitable structure for each five holdings was built. The Land Commission agreed to provide a grant for this purpose.¹⁴⁶

XXIII

When the reports from Pádraic Gleeson began to come in, Deegan, the Chief Land Commission Inspector, visited Ráth Cairn himself. He spoke to three migrants on 17 August whom he named as Bartle O'Sullivan, P. Conneally and Bartle Delap. All three supported Gleeson's reports as to the difficulties under which the migrants were working, owing to the failure of the Land Commission to provide them with necessary farm implements. They complained that due to a delay in sending on the horses and extra cattle as promised, the pasture, which had been kept up, had gone coarse and was being grazed in patches by an inadequate stock. As a consequence, Deegan wrote in his memo that three of the migrants had gone ahead and bought young stock. In his opinion they would have done earlier had they foreseen that the pasture would remain under stocked.¹⁴⁷ Gleeson was also having his own problems and had reported five months after the colony was established that 'only one of the three ploughs in the colony is working as there is only one set of plough swings.' Deegan found that Gleeson 'has continued to train the younger members on how to plough stubble using one of a pair of trained horses but it is hard to see how all the anticipated ploughing can be done.' Deegan was satisfied that if ploughs and fittings were available Gleeson would have had the stubble at least ploughed.¹⁴⁸

Deegan's report, subsequent to his visit, indicated that some enterprising work by the women, possibly knitting, was already underway when he wrote that 'wool was brought in from thirty-five shillings to £2.6.8 per holding.' Other income had already been earned, in one case hay in cocks were sold for three pounds and 'an odd dozen of eggs is being sold to Coffey's shop.' The main reason for his visit confirmed that the most pressing needs of these people at the

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Deegan's memo on Ráth Cairn 17 August 1935 (NAI, DA, G60/1935).

¹⁴⁸ Gaeltacht Colony, 17 August 1935 (NAI, DA, G60/35).

time were fittings, ploughs and harrows, 'there are no harrows' he wrote, and perhaps most significant as has been shown with the turf transport, no carts either. His conclusion was that until these are supplied Mr Gleeson can make little progress but 'the matter is far more serious for the migrants themselves.'¹⁴⁹ It is gratifying to see that these families are thought of with sympathy and not simply a logistical difficulty.

Despite the lists of stock and equipment and financial support there was a level of inequality within the Ráth Cairn scheme that was acknowledged in May of 1935. Four individuals named as James and Patrick Farrelly, Joseph Murray and Thomas Lynch were categorised as 'ordinary allottees' and treated differently from the Gaeltacht migrants. These men were former employees of the landowners mentioned earlier who had given up their land to the Land Commission and were allotted holdings in the area. The most striking difference was that, apart from receiving a housing assistance, none of the stock or the equipment detailed above, including the weekly payments, was provided for these families. In a Dáil question there was a suggestion that these families were in some ways being neglected. Deputy Charles Fagan wanted the Minister for Lands to know that this situation 'is a serious handicap and a source of discouragement to these men in making a success of their holdings' and asked the reason for the inequality.¹⁵⁰ In response, Seán O'Grady¹⁵¹ speaking for the Minister, was quite unequivocal in his reply 'The grants given to the migrants...are not applicable to ordinary allottees for parcels of untenanted land...and it is not intended to make them any other grants.'¹⁵² The answer did not explain the reason for the inequality which focused at the time on the poverty in the western counties leaving to one side the poverty experienced by small holders of other parts of Ireland. To set up each migrant family in the Ráth Cairn Gaeltacht cost the Land Commission an average of £980; the ordinary allottees, without the added extras, cost nearly £300 less at £685.¹⁵³ Living within the same community it would have been somewhat obvious that to be a poor western Irish-speaking farmer was more rewarding than a poor eastern English speaking farmer. If there was to be any bad feeling in the area this may very well have been its source when the western farmer received all of

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.* (handwritten original)

¹⁵⁰ Charles Fagan (1891-1974) Centre Party, Longford-Weatmeath.

¹⁵¹ Seán O'Grady (1889 - 1966) Fianna Fáil, Clare, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Land and Fisheries 1932-1937, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Lands 1941-1943.

¹⁵² *Dáil Éireann* deb., lví (28 May 1935).

¹⁵³ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lxvi, 1651 (27 April, 1937).

the benefits; ancillary buildings, stock, equipment and weekly allowance, as shown, and his neighbour, equally poor, received only a house.

XXV

Correspondence between the two departments supports the impression that the Land Commission had previously found great difficulty in the purchase of stock for Ráth Cairn. The largest obstacle was how to hand over the money to the migrants for the purchase of cattle. In theory the migrants were to be assisted at cattle fairs by the AAOs as to which stock to purchase. The Department of Agriculture however did not want the AAOs to be anything more than consultants and considered 'it is quite impossible for overseers to undertake work of this kind that would mean in reality having to visit fairs time after time in connection with such purchases.'¹⁵⁴ On the other hand the department felt that the migrants would not necessarily spend the money 'to the best advantage if it was handed over to them.'¹⁵⁵ Both departments apparently found it difficult to take risks and allow the migrants to learn new skills themselves.

It appeared, however, that the departments slowly came to terms with the migrants determining their own circumstances, as further correspondence on 17 October 1935 showed. The Department of Agriculture wrote to the Land Commission Assistant secretary stating that, in their opinion the department should not be responsible for the purchase of stock. The solution they offered was to use agents to purchase cattle on a commission basis if the Land Commission was not prepared to purchase the stock themselves. Pragmatically they stepped back from the predicament and asserted that purchase should be up to the migrants themselves. 'If they hand over the necessary funds to the migrants it seems to me that in many cases there will be no necessity for anybody to accept responsibility for advising as to the animals which should be purchased.'¹⁵⁶

Between the two departments there was no satisfactory resolution of the problem and the Department of Agriculture eventually left it up to the Land Commission to sort out the handing over of monies for stock, and by June 1936

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*

Department of Agriculture declared they were leaving the matter 'rest'. The Land Commission briefly commented that 'unless you wish to advise any further action we will leave the matter until December',¹⁵⁷ a case of letting common sense take over.

The Land Commission would run into other difficulties however, over stock with the Gibbstown migrants. In 1938 seven migrants took the Land Commission to court and sued for breach of contract over promises they thought they had been given for four bullocks rather than the two they had received. When the Land Commission was not forthcoming the migrants were not prepared to sit back and allow it to renege on promises regarding the cattle. The case was dismissed as being without foundation, the court claimed that the Land Commission not only did not make promises of stock, they could not.¹⁵⁸

XXVI

It would seem that while difficulties with the amount of land allocated to them would arise in the future some issues were more immediate. Gleeson reported that the amount of agricultural equipment was inadequate and was directly linked to the supply of turf which was the first problem to arise. Gleeson's report, at the request of Mr. Twomey in the Department of Agriculture, was translated from Irish and gave a human face to the circumstances.

'When the people from Connemara arrived here Inspectors from the Land Commission brought them out to the 'Gaeltacht' bog and pointed out the place from which they were to take turf. The distance by road from Ráth Cairn was about five miles and the distance from the road to the bog about one mile. The colonists were not satisfied and the Insp. promised to have a road laid down between the school house at Ráth Cairn and the bog a distance of two miles. On hearing this the colonists began to cut turf and [which] is now ready but the road is not yet built. The Land Commission has been supplying turf since the migrants arrived it is six months since the last load arrived and the supply is exhausted a fortnight ago. The people are burning brushwood.

Mr Mullaney Inspector, Land Commission was out on the bog last week and discovered a pathway over the ground. Two men were engaged in taking out turf on Sat last. They said it was necessary to bring out turf in sacks to the road a quarter of a mile away and then cart it home

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Meath Chronicle*, 25 Nov. 1938.

five miles. Four holders went to the bog yesterday to collect turf but they said that this was not going to help as there is only one cart available.¹⁵⁹

Gleeson conveyed not only the difficulties of the migrants but contributed his own opinion. In reporting the turf problem he observed that it was now five months since the colony had been established and it was time the Land Commission did what they had promised. 'This failure to fulfill promises has made them discontent. The people are complaining and they have good grounds to do so. It is only right that the Land Commission understands that they cannot do without fire and they should come to some decision as regards the solution of this turf problem.'¹⁶⁰

XXVII

Two months later another memo was received from Gleeson, also in Irish, again outlining the equipment problem. Mr Deegan précised it, illustrating that there had been no improvement, 'there is only one cart among the sixteen holders and even if there were more only five sets of harness have been allocated. They have been provided with five mowing machines but for want of harness only three could be used'.¹⁶¹ Because of this, Gleeson had to borrow a set, the implication being so that a fourth mower could be employed. He went on to describe how the lack of carts had a bearing on the saving of the hay as it had earlier on the collection of turf.

'The saved hay could only be collected where the location of the meadow and the surface of the gradient enabled the cocks to be slid along the ground by ropes. Hay will have to remain in the fields until carts are provided. This will prevent the hay from being stored and prevent cattle and sheep from grazing in the aftergrass until late in the season.'¹⁶²

The cart problem continued to plague the migrants and a question was put to the Minister for Lands in 1937 about the delivery of carts. In response Minister Boland informed the Dáil that carts were supplied to the migrants at Ráth Cairn at an unspecified date in the past. However, two of the migrants named as Coleman Keane and Bartley Curran rejected them 'on the grounds that they were of inferior workmanship'. The Land Commission was not of the same

¹⁵⁹ Turf for the Gaeltacht 2 June 1935 (NAI, DA, G60/1935).

¹⁶⁰ Pádraic Gleeson to DA, *ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*

¹⁶² *ibid.*

opinion and refused to supply any others with the result the two declined to accept the cart available at that time. Later when another consignment of carts was delivered to Athboy station, Curran's son, John and Coleman Kane seized two of the new vehicles and refused to give them up. The Land Commission was eventually forced to take the men to court to recover the carts. They were willing, however, to supply the two carts originally rejected which were still available. The outcome was a financial penalty of £3 on both men which represented a subsidy that all the other migrants received who 'attended to the work of their holdings in a satisfactory manner'.¹⁶³ The daughter of Coleman Kane, Sarah, remembered the story of the carts as being too small for the horse that had been provided. The family story was that, 'we told Mr Mullaney that the horse's behind wouldn't fit between the shafts.' The cart presently in her shed was the one, she believes, which was eventually accepted by her father. (fig. 3.21) She cannot say if this was the same one taken from the railway station but was, she said, identical to everyone else's cart with blue wooden sides and red painted iron rimmed wheels.¹⁶⁴ The grandson of Bartley Curran, Sean, has no recollection of the event as part of his family history but was of the opinion that his father John would have had no experience with either horses or carts and that it was very likely that he was advised by his brother Coleman Curran. John had been a fisherman in Connemara and had gone to labour on the electrification schemes in Germany none of which would have prepared him for agricultural activity or judgments of the suitability of carts. It was Sean's uncle, Coleman, who in 1935 was being paid by either the Land Commission or Department of Agriculture to assist new migrants how to handle horses that may have advised his brother.¹⁶⁵

XXVIII

Other difficulties which had arisen in preparing the ground for autumn sowing were outlined in a memo by O'Connell in September of 1935. The 'Migrants plan to plough a few acres for winter wheat but there will only be three ploughs available.'¹⁶⁶ Gleeson in his regular reports on progress, or lack thereof, over the next month raised an issue with the type of crop the migrants were growing. Prior to their arrival one acre of oats and one of wheat were planted on each of the holdings, with the exception of four holdings where two acres of oats

¹⁶³ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, *lxvii* 27 (11 May 1937).

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Sarah Keane of Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (18 Sept. 2006).

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Sean Curran of Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (18 Sept. 2006).

¹⁶⁶ O'Connell (NAI, DA, G60/1935).



Figure 3.21 The Keane family's cart. Source: Photograph taken by the author.

were been sown. The new migrants, only too aware of the market economy, had apparently been speaking to him about the crops planted for them before their arrival. In October, Gleeson informed the Department of Agriculture that the 'migrants realize that wheat is a more valuable cash crop than oats but will have to buy wheat seed if they wish to plant this crop. They feel they have a grievance.' However, he was confident that if wheat seed was supplied they would be satisfied. Deegan, somewhat acerbically, commented in reply: 'presumably they expect to get the seed free of cost.' When the full memo was translated on request it also included the following snippets of information. 'There are sixteen families from Conamara now here in Ráth Cairn. At first it

was arranged to settle twelve families. Eleven families came on 12 April 1935. Five families came on 31 June 1935'¹⁶⁷

XXIX

Samuel J. Waddell, Chief inspector of the Land Commission, addressed a memo in 1936 to the Minister for Lands setting out what he considered to be an economic holding with regard to sustainability by various types of allottees. This tied in with the earlier concern as to the advisability of the migration schemes. Basing the size and rent on his long years of experience he judged 'Twenty Irish acres of good land at a pound an acre to be what the small farmer ...accepts as sound and practical.' This would be at an annuity of £20. With the 'tremendous number of applicants', particularly the landless, this could, he felt, be lowered to twenty-five acres.¹⁶⁸ Although this appeared to read somewhat incorrectly, twenty Irish acres are in fact, thirty two and a half statute acres.¹⁶⁹ The size of holdings at this time stood at around twenty-two statute acres. The official policy would in time increase this to a maximum of thirty acres for holdings but even at the time twenty-two was considered inadequate. A short document concerned with Land Division and Enlargements of Holdings endorsed the Ráth Cairn experiment but quantified this as evidence that twenty-two acres was insufficient.

'Examine the last new Colony from the Gaeltacht founded at Ráth Cairn where each family got a standard holding of 20-22 acres all without waste thereon, of the best land in Co. Meath well suited for tillage. At the present time practically every family is sending members across the water to England to assist the occupiers in living on these holdings and help to pay the annuity and rates and to exist on them.

No one who has seen these migrants can say that they are idle or neglect their little farms or do not take every possible advantage of using them in a proper manner.'¹⁷⁰

The implication was, that regardless of hard work and diligence, the amount of land was not sustainable. The attitudes to farm size would be reviewed by Sean Moylan in 1945 and again in 1947 when it was thought that farms of varying size should be allowed.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ O'Connell to Prendergast 24 September 1935; Re Gleeson's memo, *ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Land division and enlargements of holdings (NAI, DT, S6490 (A)).

¹⁶⁹ Irish acres were traditionally based on the larger plantation acre, a size established in the 16th century.

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Land division policy, Department of Lands (NAI, DT, S6490 B/1).

Waddell went on to explain to the Minister for Lands that those with uneconomic holdings had survived because they had used other resources. They rented conacre for tillage and grazing, bought meadow and cut grass. In addition they supplemented their own harvest by buying in hay, roots, cereals, milk and butter. Working with their neighbours they also borrowed horses and equipment. Relatives at home and abroad also assisted by providing cash and to augment this many went on the 'dole' which was a term that referred inaccurately to social welfare payments.¹⁷² In the public mind using the term 'dole' allowed a distinction between deserved or undeserved unemployment payments. Realistically all recipients were deserving and the payments could not therefore be seen as 'dole'. Early in the period of Fianna Fáil's first term in office they allocated two million in the budget for unemployment relief.¹⁷³

XXX

The issue in regard to the Ráth Cairn migrants was the Unemployment Assistance (UA) of 1933 for small farmers. Based on Sean Lemass's approach, the small farmers were allowed to draw UA for periods designated the Employment Period Order (EPO). In 1935, prompted by criticism from both the Department of Finance and Fine Gael, and with the dramatic rise in unemployment assistance claims, the EPO was put in place to limit the period of eligibility to assistance. This restricted small farmers with a land valuation of over four pounds to only claim UA between October and March, and rural, single men from October to mid July. In 1936 this was revised from October to February for the former and October to May for the latter.¹⁷⁴ In contrast the Gaeltacht migrants were allowed to receive UA for the entire twelve months of the first year to allow them to concentrate on establishing themselves on the new holdings. Dunphy was of the opinion that the dependency on payments by both urban and rural workers reinforced Fianna Fáil's popularity, particularly with Fine Gael attacking the party on social spending.¹⁷⁵ Steve Coleman reported that Free Beef was also part of the social welfare payment benefit. Due to the high

¹⁷² Social Welfare unemployment payment was established in 1911 and available to those out of work after twenty-six weeks and came to be known, colloquially, as the dole, a term that has survived to the present day. This payment amounted to seven shillings for fifteen weeks in a year, which in 1920 was raised to fifteen shillings. By 1925, because of increased unemployment, the fund for this money was exhausted and because it had actually become nothing more than charity it was described as a 'dole'. from Cousins, *Social welfare*, p. 60

¹⁷³ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*, pp 67-68.

¹⁷⁵ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, pp 177-179.

import duties, imposed after de Valera stopped the Annuity payments, cattle were unmarketable in Britain. The Irish government bought these animals, which were then redistributed to those on the 'dole' making de Valera popular in the western counties where meat was a luxury.¹⁷⁶

XXXI

In 1939, Professor Smiddy, looked back at the previous five years and accessed the human and economic consequences. 'The Department of Agriculture has laid down guidelines as to what comprised a small holding and its viability. There was however nothing done to rectify the inadequate acreage and any lands that became available to the Land Commission were not made available to the migrants.'¹⁷⁷ The appreciation of how inadequate the acreage would prove to be had not, in 1937, impacted on the migrants, who were still in the euphoria of the move. This realization would effect later migrants and arose in 1938 during the court case mentioned above with the Gibbstown migrants. In the Gibbstown migrants versus the Land Commission, the migrant's opinion of their new twenty-two acre holdings were that 'The farms are too small altogether they're only the size of orchard gardens.'¹⁷⁸ Mac Aonghusa also gives an example of the disillusionment in reaction to the inadequate holdings of Ráth Cairn. He quoted a migrant who described the farm he was given: 'They gave us the small acres, not the big acres.'¹⁷⁹

XXXII

The Gaeltacht migrants, once they began to farm their holdings, had to face significant changes to their traditional horticultural practices. While they struggled to meet the challenge of modern agricultural techniques in 1936, barely a year after their arrival, a crop failure of winter wheat occurred. An insight into the difficulties encountered was given by Micheál MacCraith in a *Labour News*¹⁸⁰ interview in the following year. Not understanding the process of harrowing, the migrants had driven the seed too deep to allow for proper growth by harrowing after sowing instead of before, resulting in a poor yield. MacCraith claimed that with only the instructor to advise them they had not

¹⁷⁶ Coleman, 'Return from the West', p. 38.

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.*; Land Division and Enlargements of Holdings (NA DT S6490(A)).

¹⁷⁸ *Meath Chronicle*, 25 Nov. 1938.

¹⁷⁹ Duffy, 'State sponsored migration', p. 185.

¹⁸⁰ *Labour News*, 3 April 1937.

been able to learn about the soil of Meath which would not have been the case if local framers had been advising them.

As a consequence of this crop failure the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Finance began a debate on the value of demonstration plots for agricultural instruction and their cost effectiveness. The Demonstration Scheme had previously been established in the Congested Districts where the seeds and manures used were supplied at half price. The demonstration plots on selected farms were planted and managed by the local AAO then cared for by those who were to be instructed. Mr Prendergast of the Department of Agriculture assumed it would be reasonable to do the same for the Meath migrants. Since they had been farming in the Congested Districts, and needed instruction in new farming practices he therefore applied to the Department of Finance for approval to spend an estimated £7 on this service. In response, the Department of Finance questioned not just the cost of the scheme but the necessity. The minister 'requests that the scheme be not proceeded with if it can possibly be done without.' The main paragraph is worth quoting showing the pragmatism that the Dept of Finance was taking toward what was already an expensive undertaking.

'...the M/F [Minister of Finance] does not understand the necessity for the special assistance proposed nor the necessity to assist the colonists in this way as if they had never left Conamara that although the expenditure involved is small he is loath that such a scheme should be embarked upon as the tendency is to increase rather than diminish in course of time and thus the people concerned never learn to stand on their own legs.'¹⁸¹

Ultimately the sum of not more than £16 was approved and the demonstration plots arranged with half priced seeds.¹⁸²

XXXIII

The Land Commission and Department of Agriculture had created an artificial community overnight and this too would impact on the lives of the migrants as significantly as the move itself. The sense of personal identity rests to a large extent on one's geographical home place and this had changed

¹⁸¹ Department of Finance to Mr Prendergast Department of Agriculture, 12 January 1937 (NAI, DA, G948/37).

¹⁸² *ibid.*

radically for the migrants.¹⁸³ The formation of a new identity would have been of paramount, if unconscious, concern to the new arrivals.¹⁸⁴ They would have to establish new versions of the cultural norms that they were so familiar with in Connemara, within the unfamiliar cultural traditions of the Meath area.

In the move from Connemara to Meath the migrants had to deal with an apparently trivial circumstance that would represent major shift in the spatial environment. The traditional pattern of settlement for the newly arrived residents was altered when houses, built by the Land Commission, were spaced out in the landscape on separate holdings, as opposed to the clusters that were common for many migrant families in the west. The Keane family had lived with three other families, in a cluster of buildings around a small yard, in the townland of Maumeen.¹⁸⁵ While today in the countryside ribbon development of individual homes, placed at a distance from the next house is quite normal, this was quite alien to the migrants. Overlapping with the sense of place one must also consider community relationships. Duffy pointed out, in accessing the difficulties faced by the migrants in their new holdings on a cultural level, that the social life had been based around hearths and homes but in Meath it was the cinema, dance halls and public houses. For the young people this presented a new and exciting life but the remainder 'kept a link with the older ways and culture of the forbearers.'¹⁸⁶

Formal and multidimensional relationships are dependent on people having considerable knowledge of each other's lives. Coupled with this is also the assumption that even if not everything is known, attitudes of beliefs and experiences are going to be similar to one's own. Families had to establish interactions with their new neighbours, the majority of whom, despite their common origins and language, were strangers to one another. Retrospective research cannot judge the extent of relationships that may have developed, particularly after so many years have passed however, it appeared, that everyone helped each other and that '*cooring*' was an important feature of the relationships the families had with each other. Hannan, in a paper that considered kinship and neighbour group structure, described *cooring* as a translation from the Irish *comhair*. This means 'mutual co-operation, mutual

¹⁸³ Mike Crang, 'Place or space?' in idem *Cultural geography* (London, 1999), pp 103, 111.

¹⁸⁴ Hilary Tovey and P. Share, (eds), *A Sociology of Ireland* (Dublin, 2000), p.145.

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Sarah Keane of Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (8 March 2007).

¹⁸⁶ Duffy, 'State sponsored migration', p. 185.



An chéad ghluim. Pictiúr a tógadh i 1935. Ó chlè, Colm Ó Griofa, Seán Ó Catháin, Micheál Seoighe, Micheál Óg Ó Conaire, Micheál Ó Conaire agus Pádraic Ó Conaire.

Figure 3.22 Hay making. Source: O'Conghuile, *Ráth Cairn*, p. 64

borrowing or exchange of labour amongst neighbouring farm families.¹⁸⁷ Natural neighbour groups would be evident during the busiest times of the year: haymaking, harvesting and threshing, bringing home the turf as well as digging or planting potatoes. (fig. 3.22) This would have been especially important when little money was available to buy machinery. Indeed the provision of equipment through the migrant schemes was intended to be shared between five families, partially to save money but also because it was felt important that the migrants should help each other. Hannan pointed out that this very sharing may also have given rise to ill-feeling, especially over breakages and repairs. The type of farming anticipated for the migrants, and encouraged politically, was tillage and would naturally have led to greater mutual aid and the more tillage 'the more integrated the neighbour group would become.'¹⁸⁸ The question as to how the old tradition of cooring translated to the midlands with people who were not of close kin or neighbour groups was, according to secondhand reports, reasonably successful. Since they came as a group, admittedly spread over a nine month period, they would have had their own mutual experience as incomers to Meath that would have created a natural cohesiveness. Hannan also suggested that

¹⁸⁷ Damian Hannan, 'Kinship and social change in Irish rural communities', *Economic social review*, Vol. 3 Nos 1-4, 1971-2 pp. 167-8.

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p. 169.

those who were related had certain obligations of kinship and others continued the practices in place in Connemara outside their kin groups after the migration to Meath.¹⁸⁹

It has been acknowledged that it would have been easier for individuals to adapt to life in America, as so many families had already experienced emigration and therefore would have had more sympathetic guides. Bartle O'Curraoin, typical of so many Irish households, substantiates this with examples from his own family. Many of his father's aunts and uncles were already living in the United States and were anxious that more of their family joined them; both paternal grandparents and his maternal grandmother had been in America prior to coming to Kilbride.¹⁹⁰ So much more was expected of them in Meath than would have been the case had they gone to America or the UK. Here in Ireland they were expected to be the torch bearers of a new Gaelicised Ireland, to carry the cultural flame of the Irish language to the rest of Ireland. Added to this pressure was the animosity of a minority in the county, who resented their selection over those who had expected to receive land. The fruits of these grievances would not become manifest in Ráth Cairn for some years.

XXXIV

Another dimension must be considered in redistributing the land; the pattern of society and farming was altered. On a local level, established patterns of inheritance and tradition were disrupted. For the in-comers, they were relocating to a place that was unknown and without meaning, contrasting with their home places with deep layers of tradition and personal histories. 'The shaping of the landscape by generations is of central concern. The local landscape in which the present generation moves is a legacy of past contributions.'¹⁹¹ In a new landscape all the familiar social customs were lost. The language of the local people was different and so too were the agricultural methods. While the colonists were coming together they still had to negotiate the local practices. The degree of difficulty for everyone both new and old was significant. There was some local resistance within the old community where the migrants were to settle. Many local residents had also anticipated getting land or

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Interview with Bartle O'Curraoin of Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (10 Jan. 2006).

¹⁹¹ Patrick J Duffy, 'Locality and changing landscape: geography and local history' in Raymond Gillespie and Myrtle Hill (eds) *Doing local history pursuit and practice* (Belfast, 1998), p. 26.

had possibly lost their livelihood when the land was taken by the Land Commission. Although in many cases the land that they and their families had improved, often over generations, and that they considered theirs had only been rented as conacre from the true owners.¹⁹²

The local people had not however been entirely left out. In an interview with Pádraic Mac Donncha this author was told that before the lands of Ráth Cairn were allocated to the Galway migrants a meeting was held at Athboy to address the local uneconomic holders/small farmers. The local small farmers, who were themselves in need of land for economic sustainability, were given a choice which involved money or land. Local men were offered a job with the county council, building houses and roads for the improvement of the lands that were to be offered to the proposed migrants, or land equivalent to that offered to the migrants, probably twenty-two acres.¹⁹³ The jobs would last for at least five years whereas the land would be theirs provided they farmed the holding and did not sublet. Such was the economic need and the recognition that the land did not offer a substantial financial advantage at the time, the majority of locals decided to take the jobs. Problems with the local people did not arise, according to both Pádraic Mac Donncha and Bartle O'Curraoin, because of this arrangement until five or perhaps ten years after the migration and then only in isolated incidents, when drink was taken.¹⁹⁴ By this time the land itself, not the economic livelihood, had risen value and some reportedly felt hard done by because the jobs they had taken had not lasted, or had not fulfilled expectations. While it is apparent, as has been shown above, that there was some initial trouble in 1935, it would appear that in the main, the consequent problems were minor and isolated. In 1935 the *Meath Chronicle* reported some Ráth Cairn migrants as rowdy and drunk at the Athboy Fair: in Gibbstown an argument over a mowing machine resulted in an incident between two migrant families the Sheehys and the Garveys, who assaulted one another. In a further report in 1938 a £2 fine was imposed when three Gibbstown migrants assaulted a local man.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² A family in Maynooth pointed out a field to this author, which research had shown to be owned by someone else, and said it was theirs because they had rented it for nearly fifty years as conacre. They were deeply upset when the owners sold it to someone else.

¹⁹³ O'Giollagáin, *Stairsheanchas Mhicil Chonrai*, p. 166.

¹⁹⁴ Interviews with Pádraic Mac Donncha & Bartle O'Curraoin of Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (25 Jan. 2006); O'Giollagáin, *Stairsheanchas Mhicil Chonrai*, p. 166.

¹⁹⁵ *Meath Chronicle*, 25 Nov. 1939; *ibid.*, 17 September 1938.

Reported in the *Meath Chronicle*, Deputy Fitzgerald-Kennedy,¹⁹⁶ speaking in the Dáil in 1940, suggested there may have been plans to burn out the colonies, but 'nothing of the kind occurred'. The final word in the same 1940 article referred negatively to the Ráth Cairn migrants 'they are fighting morning noon and night.' according to Captain Giles, who stated in the Dáil that 'the people brought to Ráth Cairn did not behave as they should.' Speaking in order to generate support for himself and his own party, he complained that 'the sons of decent County Meath farmers cannot get a share of land in their own county.'¹⁹⁷ Still taking an anti-migrant stance six months later, Giles commented in the Dáil, during a question and answer period, that 'people being brought to Meath through migration schemes were no asset'.¹⁹⁸ The negative implications of these words cannot be substantiated in the newspapers of the period however Captain Giles an outspoken critic of the migration scheme had this to say in the Dáil:

'The people in the Irish colonies were brought up with a great fanfare of trumpets. You had men on horses going out to meet them and big processions, with a lot of fools marching at the head of them. The people who did that would kick them home to-day. Those people, instead of making Rathcarne an Irish-speaking colony, are going to make it a proper West-Briton, narrow, bitter, un-Irish type of colony. The story is told that when a parish priest in Connemara was asked why he had supported the removal of 30 or 40 families to an Irish-speaking colony in the County Meath, said he was glad that they had gone elsewhere.'¹⁹⁹

The *Drogheda Independent*, in 1940, reported difficulties regarding Allenstown, the last colony to be put in place; here the goal posts in the local sports field were damaged because the field was used to save hay. The GAA officials demanded that the migrants stop using the GAA sports field for this purpose. The Bohermeen Gaelic Football Club paid rent for the field and felt that they should have authority over what happened to it when not in use.²⁰⁰ The paper went on to remind its readers that while someone had written 'NO COLONISTS WANTED' on the road before the migrants arrived, the locals were friendly when they did.²⁰¹ The most significant article was seen in 1946. The *Drogheda Independent* reported in an article it dramatically headlined with

¹⁹⁶ James Fitzgerald-Kennedy (born 1877) Fine Gael, Mayo South.

¹⁹⁷ *Meath Chronicle* 25 Nov. 1940.

¹⁹⁸ *Meath Chronicle*, 25 May 1940.

¹⁹⁹ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lxxix, 2259-60 (1 May, 1940).

²⁰⁰ A Land Commission annual report did suggest grazing cattle on sports fields while not in use.

²⁰¹ *Drogheda Independent*, 2 Nov 1940.

'Reign of Terror in Part of Meath' of how some areas were experiencing problems and mentions Athboy and Ráth Cairn in particular. Fighting in the street, dance halls and licensed premises, for no reason at all, was condemned as part of the questionable customs of the western Irish. In the article the Ráth Cairn migrants were described as red Indians descending on the peaceful Meath towns as if they were pioneer outposts. Furthermore they were compared to 'Corsican bandits swooping down from the hills to disturb the pleasant every day life of some industrious village.' The sentimental aspect of reviving the native tongue aside the Ráth Cairn migrants, the paper stated, were a 'poor advertisement for the Gaelic culture' and a 'striking contrast' to other decent migrants in Meath, from other parts of Ireland. The highly defamatory article concludes with the call on the government 'who inflicted this type [of migrant] upon the law-abiding people of the Athboy district' to respond to the situation. 'The time is obviously overdue when some of those in Ráth Cairn colony should be sent back to where they come from.'²⁰² Only in the final sentence did the paper give any hint that not all the migrants of Ráth Cairn were to blame.

The difficulties, for the Ráth Cairn migrants, had a tendency to arise after the pubs closed and at dance halls where drink had been taken, and words exchanged, resulting in fights. This seems to have been the source of a number of incidents, the most serious being the death of a local man and as a consequence a migrant was accused of murder. However, the inquest concluded that the man had fallen into a ditch and the resulting injuries had caused his death, as a consequence, the migrant was released.²⁰³

The ambivalent attitude to the new migrants, coupled with the divergent social practices of the local Meath and migrant groups would result, for many, in an awkward settling in period. However, according to Duffy et al, the indigenous population was never as aggressive toward migrants as were experienced in Tipperary and Limerick.²⁰⁴ The Gaeltacht Colony experiment was certainly revolutionary but it has involved real families, subject to great pressures, not alone from the local people, but from the 'Land Commission bureaucracy and the requirements of its land reform programme'²⁰⁵ as well . Observed, reported

²⁰² *Drogheda Independent*, 31 August 1946.

²⁰³ 'Ráth Cairn after 70 years' RTE TnG (2006); with Pádraic MacDonncha of Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (25 Jan. 2006) gave an account of the event and the outcome of the inquest.

²⁰⁴ Duffy, 'State sponsored migration', p. 183.

²⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p. 180.

upon, complained about, both good and bad, it created a community apart rather than the hoped-for integration. It would appear, from anecdotal evidence, that the feelings of apartness still remain to some extent in the community. Senator Connolly in his memoirs revealed the concern at the time, 'We had grave anxiety as to how the new migrants would make out, how they would adapt themselves to the new conditions on the rich lands of Meath away from the hills and the seas of the western seaboard and, above all, how they would succeed in establishing good neighborly relationship with the local people.'²⁰⁶ Despite an exhaustive examination of the newspapers of the time, apart from those already mentioned, no other aggressive behaviour was reported between local and migrant groups.

XXXV

As was shown in chapter one, after Ráth Cairn the next and largest Gaeltacht colony was Gibbstown set up in 1937. Three further colonies would follow; Kilbride also in 1937, Coghill in 1939 and finally Allenstown in 1940 which would be the last of the colony migrations. The seeds of failure for Gibbstown however lay in the selection of the Irish language mix for this later colony. The policy of a monoglot dialect for Ráth Cairn was reversed for Gibbstown. Instead allottees from a number of counties, from Donegal to Cork, were selected who unfortunately could not understand each other's dialect. The one common language they understood was English which would eventually lead to the Fáilure as a Gaeltacht. However Reg Hindley sees these communities, unlike Ráth Cairn, as having achieved the integration the planners had hoped notwithstanding the failure of the language.²⁰⁷

Of the subsequent colonies created Kilbride was the most significant to this study because it was in effect an addition to Ráth Cairn in 1937. All of the new migrants, who numbered 105 were, like the original Ráth Cairn group, also from Galway. They too received the average twenty-two acres that the earlier colonists had received and already seen by the Department of Agriculture as insufficient. The townland of Kilbride is immediately to the south east of Ráth Cairn and shares a common boundary and would be subsumed into the umbrella description as part of the Ráth Cairn Gaeltacht. The colony took up

²⁰⁶ Gaughan, *Connolly Memoirs*, p. 369.

²⁰⁷ Reg Hindley, 'Gaeltachta of Leinster' in idem *The death of the Irish language: A qualified obituary*, (London, 1990) pp 131-36.

only 221 acres of the townland, which totalled 1099 acres, and has come to be known to the colonists as *Lambay* (sic)²⁰⁸ to distinguish it from the original settlement of Ráth Cairn. The Cancellation books gave the names of the thirteen migrants allotted holdings as follows.²⁰⁹

Martin Conneely	Pat Folan
Michael Conneely	Thomas Folan
Patrick Conneely	Martin King
Coleman Conroy	Thomas Martin
John Conroy	James Matthews
Bartley Curran	Coleman McDonagh
	Stephen Naughton

The remainder of the townland was a mixture of Land Commission acquisitions and original owners. The slightly more convenient access to Trim created a social and material culture to this town while the original migrants looked to Athboy. Eventually seven townlands surrounding Ráth Cairn would join to form today's Ráth Cairn Gaeltacht; Ráth Cairn, Kilbride, Drissoge, Woodtown, Wardstown, Mitchelstown and Tullaghanoge. The borders of the present day Gaeltacht have only recently been determined and a new map is being created that includes the full extent of the Ráth Cairn Gaeltacht in 2007.

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XXXVI

Despite being assisted in their new environment in many different ways, fifteen Ráth Cairn migrants would face a serious difficulty regarding the payment of rates. The amount that they believed they were required to pay was five pounds but in reality the figure was eight pounds. This misconception had resulted not only in complaints but difficulty in meeting the demands. Fourteen months after their arrival these fifteen individuals were taken to court by Meath County Council for failure to pay their rates. The court proceedings at the monthly court at Athboy were conducted in English but translated for the benefit of the migrants. The Land Commission had done what they could by extending assistance to a portion of the arrears even though, according to the defendant's solicitor, they 'were not liable'. His intention was to ask for an

²⁰⁸ *Lambay* was the name of a small holding in the immediate area that predated the colony migration scheme. See Ordnance Survey map 1912.

²⁰⁹ Valuations Office, Cancellation Books, Co Meath, 1959-1944.

²¹⁰ This map is not yet available to researchers.

extension on the time to pay the small sums in arrears, which averaged seven pounds, but were never the less significant for these people unable to supplement their income. Their solicitor claimed throughout his submission that while the land was rich the migrants were in effect 'in the same position as those who went to virgin land in America to colonise it. It was a struggle to keep going.' His clients had found that Co Meath was not the *El Dorado* they had hoped for. In passing he remarked that they are still short of a donkey cart and harness. ²¹¹ The difficulty in raising enough money throughout the year for the payment of rates was not an unusual circumstance. The 1930s in Ireland was a time of extreme poverty and hardship across the majority of the urban and rural population. In order to survive it was necessary to have a source or sources of alternative income. In Galway the migrants would have had fishing and sea weed harvesting to supplement their income. In the midlands there was no alternative except limited work for the Land Commission building roads that some had taken up. When questioned during the trial none of the migrants families had any income and John Coffey, whose wife ran the shop, claimed that any work 'the people of Ráth Cairn had got outside the land would not buy them tea and sugar'. Although the migrants were not required to pay their annuities immediately they would eventually be required to pay between £8 and £10 per year on top of the rates of £8. With aprox £66 income per year from the holdings this represents a considerable percent of the yearly income. ²¹²

XXXVII

The roll book of Ráth Cairn National School showed that the first students, seventy in total, enrolled together on 1 July 1936. Their ages ranged from five to fifteen; on average aged seven and a half. In the years covered in this study the classes only went to fifth class, the exception being 1937 when there was one boy, aged sixteen, in sixth class who was the oldest pupil seen between 1936 and 1949. The students in 1936 were all from Ráth Cairn but in 1937 when the Kilbride colony was established there was an influx of thirty children with one other child from An Clocán. This remained the picture until 1943 when other townlands in the immediate area begin to be represented, Baile an Mistealaig (Mitchelstown), Ar Buide, Drissoge and Heacta. All the enrolments throughout the thirteen years covered remained in the low single figures only rising to six

²¹¹ *Drogheda Independent*, 27 June 1936.

²¹² *ibid.*

for Ráth Cairn in 1949.²¹³ Education for the rural population as discussed in the Limerick Survey indicated that farmer's daughters were better educated than sons, because they needed a good education to help them make their way in the world and by paying for a daughter's education this was a way of providing her share of the family property. The attitude to education for boys seems contradictory. It was thought that too much education would turn him away from work on the farm and any schooling would not make him a better farmer. Like girls, boys who had high scholastic ability were educated to leave the farm. Farmers with money to engage in progressive farming practices sent their sons to agricultural colleges but traditional farmers felt that practices learned at home were better. Even agricultural instructors were viewed with suspicion when they attempted to introduce new methods into the old ways.²¹⁴ This may go some way to explain the demand in Ráth Cairn in 1937 for the removal of the agricultural overseer, discussed below, who would also have provided instruction. In terms of vocational training, that was reported as being available locally, those who did finish primary school at fourteen briefly found some sort of job before emigrating at sixteen, according to Bartle O'Curraoin. He felt that it was unlikely that in the 1930s and 40s few if any young people at this level engaged in further education.²¹⁵ An original migrant, Sean Curran was of the opinion that only two children went beyond primary schooling in the early years of the colony, John Coffey's son became a clerk of the court and later Sean Coffey attended university.²¹⁶

XXXVIII

In c.1938 a report on what had been achieved in land redistribution and what was hoped to accomplish in the future was presented to the Dáil. It showed that the Land Commission was having some difficulty in acquiring suitable lands for enlargement, provision of new holdings or accommodation and turbary plots for certain classes of allottees; ex-employees on the lands, evicted tenants, migrants and local landless men. It is reported that half of the lands acquired thus far, given as 737,991, have been divided with 30,000 enlargements and

²¹³ *ibid.*

²¹⁴ Jeremiah Newman (ed.), *The Limerick rural survey 1958-1964* (Tipperary, 1964), pp 210-213.

²¹⁵ Interview with Bartle O'Curraoin of Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (10 Jan. 2006).

²¹⁶ Interview with Sean Curran of Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (18 Sept. 2006). John Coffey's family operated the first shop in Ráth Cairn.

17,000 new holdings or plots provided. A portion of this latter number would have involved colony or group migrant holdings.²¹⁷

This report also informed the Dáil that forty-three percent of the divided lands were in the seven of the congested counties: Donegal, Galway, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, Sligo and Kerry. More land was shortly to become available in the same seven counties because sixty-percent of the lands had been acquired but not yet distributed, thirty-five percent of land with definite proceedings for acquisition and finally twenty-four percent of the land was currently under inspection. The total acreage was given as 225,000. The author of the report claimed however, that 110,000 acres under inspection for acquisition, or twenty-four percent of land, represented a decrease the amount of land available and even this amount is not necessarily suitable for acquisition. The quality of lands in the west for division was running out; however the indicators were that the overcrowding in the congested districts was now under control.

The report pointed out that in 1938 while the average size of estates was ninety acres the average area that could be divided subsequently was only forty-five acres. This illustrated the difficulty the Land Commission had to keep up with the record of previous years. The time and trouble involved in the acquiring and dividing up of small estates was often as great as or greater than large estates. As has been stated previously it could take up to two years to allocate an estate after acquisition.

The cost of acquiring lands had also begun to rise and the author or authors of the report were of the opinion that the high cost of estates in previous years has pushed up the price. In the previous three years the price per acre was £8 but had now risen to an average cost per acre of £9. The total cost to the Land Commission of approximately 621,000 acres in the land bank at that time was given as £5,200,000.²¹⁸ The cost of migration had also gone up and the Land Commission was asking the Dáil for an increase of the amount per family.

²¹⁹

Conclusion

²¹⁷ Report on 'Land division in Eire achieved and in prospect', undated c1938 (NAI, DT, S12490 (A)).

²¹⁸ *ibid.*

²¹⁹ *ibid.*

In the 1930s, following Fianna Fáil electoral success, a huge effort went into creating a rural utopian scheme to assist the poor western small holders lead, no doubt, by de Valera's vision as much as Fianna Fáil policy. The allotted holdings for the new migrant policy included houses, ploughed and planted lands, equipment, provided at realistic payment rates, and thirty shillings per week in unemployment assistance for a year. Also included were an amount of stock animals and a share of bog. Agricultural advisors were also on hand where necessary to give instruction. On the site of the Gaeltacht 'service centre', in principal both a church, school and a sports field were in theory made available. Although migration had been underway for at least thirty years by the time Fianna Fáil modified the method of approach, Ráth Cairn was unique in the combination of family groups and the pivotal position of the Irish language.

Chapter Four

Changing attitudes and policy adjustments of the 1940s

By the 1940s Ireland had undergone considerable agricultural change; the obligatory move from grazing to tillage in the midlands, the redistribution of land and the considerable migration of people. Changing attitudes and new policies of the 1940s impacted on the implementation of new Gaeltacht Colonies and opinion as to how land division and redistribution would be carried out in the future.

I

Even as the practice of migration was being restructured in the late 1930s de Valera, was still advocating the rural idyll and in 1942 he was urging the Land Commission 'to take up as a matter of urgency the maximum achievement possible in land division'.¹ On Radio Éireann the following year the 'comely maiden' speech for St Patrick's Day was intended to encourage the population to learn and speak Irish. But more memorably this famous broadcast shows the quintessential distillation of his vision of Ireland. Delivered in 1943 at a time when the Second World War was well established, it encapsulated much of what were the theories behind the Land Acts put in place since the founding of the state. For this reason in order to show how fundamental the rural utopia featured in his vision it is worth quoting in part.

'Before the present war began I was accustomed on St. Patrick's Day to speak to our kinsfolk on foreign lands,...and to tell them year by year of the progress being made towards building up the Ireland of their dreams and ours- the Ireland that we believe is destined to play, by its example in its inspiration, a great part as a nation among the nations.

That Ireland which we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit- a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age.'²

¹ Jones, 'Divisions', p. 91.

² M. Moynihan, *Speeches and statements by Eamon de Valera 1917-73* (Dublin, 1980), p. 466.

De Valera however did not entirely neglect the influence of the urban centres that were growing due in part to Lemass's work with the Department of Industry and Commerce. He went on to mention that Thomas Davis sought to build a utopia in parallel with the rural: 'Our cities must be stately with sculpture, pictures and buildings, and our fields glorious with peaceful abundance' and that this utopia in Davis' words are 'the solemn unavoidable duty of every Irishman.'³ This great ideal had already begun to quietly unravel at the end of the 1930s.

II

The whole spectrum of re-settling families on new holdings was undergoing a re-assessment by the latter end of the 1930s. In the Dáil, deputies were asking questions as to the failure of the Land Commission to provide ancillary buildings, for example to the new Kerry migrants to Batterstown, Co. Meath. Boland, in his response as Minister for Lands, conveyed the policy as it stood at the end of the 1930s. 'It is not the practice of the Land Commission to provide such buildings.'⁴ This brought the status for new migrants into line with a policy already in place for the landless in 1937, when Boland stated that the landless allottees would be provided with buildings but not stock or equipment.⁵ These Kerry migrants were not of course the Ráth Cairn and Gibbstown Gaeltacht colonists who would have earlier received additional buildings and barns as well as the dwelling and out offices. The Batterstown migrants had accepted that only the basic dwelling place would be provided when they agreed to migrate.⁶ This demonstrated that that within government circles, driven no doubt by economics, a new less idealistic attitude toward the new migrant groups was emerging. Even before the Second World War the concept of land ownership was being questioned. The *Cork Examiner* in 1938 already had reservations regarding the theory of peasant proprietorship. They felt that due to falling production the aspirations of forty years ago had failed to be fulfilled. They predicted that the small holdings would fail as quickly for the next generation. The splitting up of the ranches may have given individual families their own holding but it did not maintain them in any comfort even with the state 'spoon feeding' them. The report predicted the elimination of the ranches where the excess calves and yearlings from the dairy industry were

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lxxvi (24 May 1939).

⁵ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lxxvii (11 May 1937).

⁶ *ibid.*

fattened would prove to be a serious loss of a viable economy. They forecast that the artificially created small holders in Meath and elsewhere will have disappeared within 100 years.⁷ Certainly the forecast has some truth as farming was declining at a rapid rate, a fact which was borne out in the Census statistics.

As early as 1938 changing attitudes, toward the government policy of both the Gaeltacht colonies and migration in general, had been surfacing. A question was put in the Dáil as to whether there was any differentiation of treatment between the urban and rural populations. The Department of Agriculture hastily assured the Department of Finance there was none. But, in the future this would become a much larger issue and possibly it had begun with the special treatment afforded the Gaeltacht migrants.⁸ A quite different quality of holdings were mentioned in a Dáil debate by Captain Giles when he complained that gates were missing from the holdings of regular migrants while the Gaeltacht migrants had secure gates. 'When migrants come from the West they do not come to a wilderness. They find the ditches made up and nice piers and gates erected. There should not be any discrimination against Meath people.'⁹

Martin Roddy was also asking questions about the progress of the Gaeltacht colonies in 1938. 'I am seriously interested in the experiment, and I should like to know how it is succeeding. He had a list of questions and criticisms about the whole scheme 'Is it the Minister's intention to carry the experiment still farther?' He continues with the same type of critique that he voiced earlier. Only this time he has become negative about the Irish language concept.

'From the outset I could not see that it was humanly possible for an experiment of that kind to succeed. If the Irish language is to be propagated successfully, if it is to spread out from the Gaeltacht to the English-speaking areas, [is] to encourage it to spread out from its native home to the areas where English is generally spoken. There is the danger that those people who have been migrated into purely English-speaking surroundings may succumb to their environment eventually, and become just as English as the people amongst whom they are living.'¹⁰

⁷ *Cork Examiner*, 10 November 1938.

⁸ Motion of Dáil Questions (NAI, DA, G2311/38).

⁹ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lxxvi, 753 (07 June, 1939).

¹⁰ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lxx, 1710 (07 April, 1938).

That the concept of creating the sustainable small holder was already failing was shown in the comments by Captain Giles in the Dáil in 1938. He complained that land was being divided up that was of little use for tillage, which the government had been advocating, when it was only capable of supporting cattle or livestock grazing. He related that the Ráth Cairn migrants made some success because some had other means but several families, despite state support, could not make good. He explained that many young people had gone to England and others had to resort to the labour exchanges. Dividing unsuitable land in small holdings was not helping to sustain families.¹¹

III

The Ireland of the 1940s looked to both America and Europe for inspiration for a new cultural outlook. The romantic rural past so carefully nurtured by de Valera and the Gaelic League and supported perhaps less romantically by the church was being taken over by the changing attitudes in the metropolitan centres. It was assumed that a post war depression would sweep across Europe but instead it enjoyed a quickening of economic and technological pace in the next thirty years. This unfortunately did not include Ireland, it stagnated and was left behind, increasingly poor and irrelevant.¹² Ráth Cairn, as will be shown below would not be immune to the parallel challenge of having land but not having enough. It too would be sending its children abroad and suffered the need to become more productive.

Throughout the 1940s there were a number of backward looking reviews on the state of agriculture in the 1930s. Professor Smiddy's report mentioned earlier evaluated the state and current practice of agriculture the nature of migration and, as has been shown in chapter one, he also looked at land available for distribution.¹³ The professor's personal observations included Land Commission inspector Deegan's opinion that because of local opposition to Gaeltacht colonies in County Meath the landless were placated with 4,000 acres as apposed to only 600 acres given to the migrants. The opposition of local claimants had also blocked the resolution of congestion in the west. His report concluded that the Gaeltacht type of colony would be discontinued but ordinary migration, according to policies established in 1939, would continue.¹⁴

¹¹ *Dáil Éireann* deb., lxx, 1733 (7 April 1938).

¹² *Cork Examiner*, 10 November 1938.

¹³ Land division and enlargements of holdings, c. 1942 (NAL, DT, SP6490 (A)).

¹⁴ *ibid.*

In 1943 Inspector Deegan carried-out an examination on the work of the Department of Lands over the previous number of years. Eamon Mainseal¹⁵ examined the report he drew up on behalf of the Department of An Taoiseach and 'profoundly' disagreed with the content.¹⁶ Leaving aside his analysis of the work regarding the lands divided Mainseal was of the opinion that the selection process of the migration schemes needed to be revised and that for too long agricultural workers with families have been ignored in favor of those who have a small amount of land.¹⁷ He seemed to suggest that there was almost a class distinction in their disregard and he supported the attitude that brought about the end of the Gaeltacht colony type of paternalism. He was of the opinion that the migrants must be self-sufficient and should no longer depend on the Land Commission to carry out work on their holdings and cited fencing and cleaning of drains as examples. He was also very critical of the tendency to concentrate on three congested counties for the selection of migrants. He reported that 70% of migrants of both the Gaeltacht and group schemes are from Mayo and Galway. To only choose these two counties, with Roscommon mentioned later, he commented that 'The grounds advanced for this glaring differentiation will not bear ten minutes intelligent examination.' It would seem he went on to say, that it was as if the Congested Districts Board had solved the congestion of all the other counties under their remit leaving only those three for the Irish Free State to resolve.¹⁸ In another report in the same year on Land Division Policy he again made the case for the landless agricultural worker. 'The persistent administrative opposition to this large and deserving class.....is resulting in the general dissatisfaction with the Administration.'¹⁹ The statistics in Sammon do not show that he has achieved any results with this criticism of the policy. The figures showed that only an average of nineteen landless were allocated land amounting to 11,080 acres in the period up to the end of the 1940s. Many of those who were supplied with a cottage as described above did not receive a small holding on the same terms as the migrants. However by the end of 1964 eighty thousand cottages had been built by the state for this group.²⁰

IV

¹⁵ This may be Eamon Mansfield (1876-1954) land commissioner 1934-1950, although Mainseal is the Irish for Mancell.

¹⁶ Observations on memorandum of the Department of Lands (NAI, DA, G14399 1940/42).

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁰ Anne-Marie Walsh, 'Root them in the land: cottage schemes for agricultural workers' in Joost Augusteijn (ed.) *Ireland in the 1930s* (Dublin, 1999), p. 66.

Mainseal was not the only one to be unimpressed with uncoordinated allocation of holdings. In the Land Commission Mr Nally was of the opinion that more land re-settlement did not mean a greater achievement 'Some people hold the view that the greater number of acres of land divided the greater the success. I don't hold that view. The creation of records has resulted in ill-devised schemes the evils of which are now apparent.'²¹ By 1948 even the spatial arrangement of the housing plan was coming under criticism. Seosamh O'Conneide requested of the minister that houses should be grouped together in village formation, harking back to the villages of the Gaeltacht that avoided the making of too many roads, offering the people a communal life. 'That has been partly attempted in Ráth Cairn and Gibbstown, but I think that the system should be perfected.'²² In reality the houses were strung out along roads close to their holding, a precursor to the present day practice recognized as environmentally unacceptable, ribbon development. He was very perceptive when he observed that if a pipe water system was created the houses should be together or if a school was established in the new village the houses should be near the school. In addition, if the houses were too scattered the Electricity Supply Board would object to including them in the rural electrification scheme.²³

V

In 1945 a joint Industry and Commerce and Department of Lands document was submitted to the Taoiseach in regard to future land policy.²⁴ Submitted by Minister for Lands Sean Moylan it outlined the current state of agriculture and made recommendations. It spoke of large farms, those over 250 acres, being in some cases beyond the capability of their owners. These farms 'run mainly to grass and the amount of employment given was negligible' and it was recommended a policy to break up these farms.²⁵ Generally speaking the report was geared toward the correct and economic use of farms and allotments. It also addressed the size of farms and recognised that the thirty acre farm must be the minimum. It made the point that farming practice must not just be subsistence farming for a family it must 'contribute to national income which economic policy demands of agriculture'. On the one hand the misuse of land

²¹Major post war economics & development activities 1944 (NAI, DT, S13481).

²² *Dáil Éireann deb.*, cxi, 342 (3 June 1948).

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Economic and social aspects of land policy (NAI, DT, S12890 (B)).

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 3

must be combated and on the other provision for farmers must be made to 'create conditions as will enable farmers to make an adequate contribution.'²⁶ Here then was a subtle change in policy. Fianna Fáil was not just creating small holdings for the livelihood of the allottee and his family or to combat poverty and to relieve congestion, they are now expecting a product in return. This expectation was a contribution to the pool of wealth which the holding should yield,²⁷ agricultural production that contributes to the economy.

Mounting criticism of the migration policy could also be seen in private members business in the Dáil when Deputies Hughes and Coogan²⁸ demanded to know what was the process adopted by the Land Commission regarding; the selection of allottees, the standard of living attained by the allottees, the minimum size of holdings and finally the degree of failure the allottees had experienced. In reply Moylan described the process of land acquisition from the announcement of the lands to be divided and distributed, which then resulted in a flood of applicants, through to allotment. He then admitted that there were too many on the land and the consequence of redistributing land in small holdings was going to result in agricultural slums.²⁹

In recognition of the possibility of agricultural slums, Moylan, in a memo of April 1947, indicated that he too was reconsidering the twenty-five acre limit on new holdings for re-settlement. He submitted a recommendation that 'lands...outside the congested areas where the policy of laying out standard £20 valuation or twenty-five acre holdings of good land be discontinued and that the Land Commission should be at liberty to plan holdings of varying sizes.'³⁰ He now risked criticism of a political sacred cow when he also suggested that the 'landless should be asked to put down between one third and one half of the total cost of buildings on holdings' a suggestion that previously would have been out of the question to propose.³¹ By June he had formulated a new policy on Land Division with the points made above and included what amounted to large gardens for cottiers. The memo however expanded on the difficulties encountered with the landless. 'A very large number of holdings have been allocated to landless men. The results have been unsatisfactory and

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 6

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ James Hughes, Fine Gael Carlow-Kildare; Eamon Coogan, Fine Gael, Kilkenny.

²⁹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ciii, 1859-60 (4 December 1947).

³⁰ Land division policy, Department of Lands (NAI, DT, S6490 (B/1)).

³¹ *ibid.*

disappointing, often shamefully so. Hundreds of new houses have been left unoccupied for years.....or pretence of occupancy or sublet.....for grazing and conacre. A new land act has had to be enacted to deal with these unsatisfactory allottees.' As a result the landless may only take up land 'if a migrant cannot be secured for land not needed for local enlargements' moreover it was recommended that a 'substantial cash portion of one third to one half of the buildings as well as capital equipment and stock [would be needed] to work the holdings.'³² This last suggestion repeated the idea that the money must be in the possession of the individual before the land could be given. Previously land was handed out with no consideration as to how the person would finance the running of the farm. The following month another memo observed that 'small houses and out offices were now costing the Land Commission £750.' However it seemed that by then £100 was being paid in advance by the migrants or other allottees. He felt, never-the-less, that 'those who are advancing money for holdings substantially in excess of the standard twenty-five acres should be required to take [secure] an advance of more than £100...for his holding.'³³ This debate continued up until 1949 when the matter concluded without a decision being taken.

VI

Circumstances that would bring about cultural changes without any policy strategy prompting it were occurring; the agricultural population was leaving the land. In most other countries population and employment steadily increased prompting a change from rural to urban living mainly as migration *within* the country. In Ireland both population and employment were static and the accelerated movement of people was out of the country.³⁴ In the Census figures for the 1930s it can be seen that the yearly average leaving the land was 4,400 but after the war it increased between 1946 and 1951 to 14,200. The numbers of men leaving was 87% of the total, six times more than previously. Farm labourers were going to better paid jobs in urban centres and, one imagines, working as labourers in England for McAlpines and Wimpy. Gerard Quinn gave an interesting statistic; before 1946 men working in agriculture were only leaving farms of under thirty acres, the majority from less than 15 acres.

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

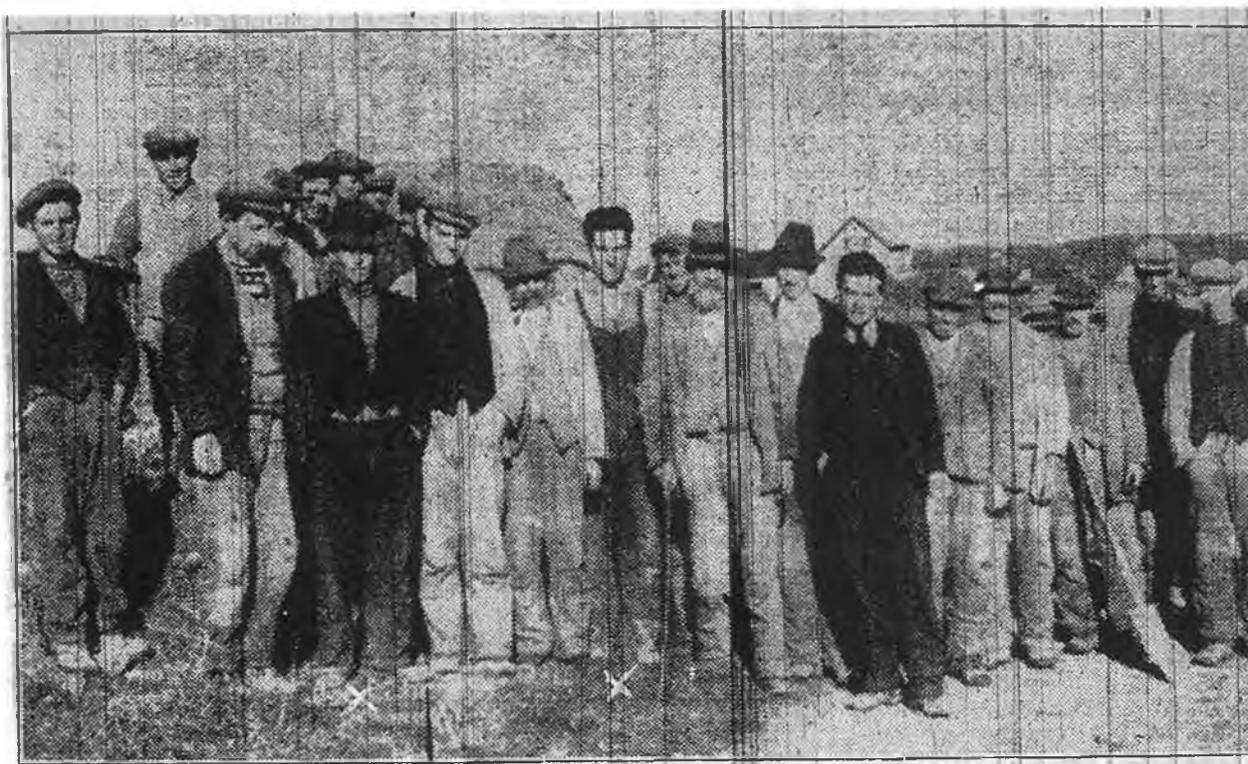
³⁴ Gerard Quinn, 'The Changing Pattern of Irish Society 1938-1951' in Kevin B. Nowlan and T. Desmond Williams (eds), *Ireland in the War years and After 1939-1951* (Dublin, 1969), pp 120-121.

After 1946 all farm sizes were losing men in equal proportions in a rapid increase of emigration.³⁵ De Valera and Sean Lemass, despite the best of intentions, between 1932 and 1948, wrapped Ireland in a protectionist and clientalist system. The overdue shake up of economic policies did not begin until Fianna Fáil lost the general election in 1948.³⁶ In a landmark study, the Limerick Survey, undertaken in the 1960s, observed some 12 years later that farm workers are the most migratory and it 'would seem the farm labourer has opted out of the rural community'.³⁷

³⁵ *ibid.*, pp 121-123.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁷ Newman, *Limerick Survey*, p. 207.



Connemara Men

***At the Gaelic Colony,
Rathcarn, County
Meath, who turned to
Labour to find a way
out of their Difficulties.***

The men indicated with an X
are bent on following the 23
per cent. who have already
emigrated or returned to Connemara. The full story appeared
in last week's LABOUR NEWS.

Figure 4.1 *Labour News*, 3 April 1937.

Ráth Cairn was no exception, it was as fundamentally uneconomic as other small farms anywhere in Ireland, despite Fianna Fáil's munificence toward the Gaeltacht colony. The Ráth Cairn children went to England and North America at the same rate as any other farming community. Once young people finished school at fourteen they prepared themselves with some type of job experience at home then at sixteen were away.³⁸ Before the Depression it was mostly to America but afterwards it was to the United Kingdom. As early as two years after the colony was established *Labour News* in a banner headline declared Ráth Cairn a 'Halfway House to England'. It reported that twenty-three percent of the population had emigrated to England.³⁹ The Ráth Cairn emigrants were named in *Labour News* and by comparing the family names with the original migrant list it was evident that with very few exceptions every family in Ráth Cairn was affected.⁴⁰ The accompanying photo indicated those about to emigrate. (fig. 4.1) The most significant side effect was that this left the area with very few young people and the paper complained that marriages in the area declined. The Roman Catholic parish records of St James, Athboy, that includes Ráth Cairn, indicated that the marriage rate declined from sixteen in 1935 to five in 1940. This figure represents the number for the entire parish as the church in Ráth Cairn was only built in 1978. It was felt too that many potential marriages were hampered by the lack of available housing in the area forcing many eligible young people to emigrate.⁴¹ The decline in marriage was not mirrored in the birth rate with thirty-eight baptisms in 1935 and forty-three in 1940 for the parish as a whole.⁴² The national school records showed that during the same years approximately thirty children were born in Ráth Cairn.⁴³

This in itself was not anything new; the rural population had been declining over a considerable period before the establishment of Ráth Cairn. It was the fact that Ráth Cairn, and the other colonies that would follow, were set up with the hope that it would be a model to stem the tide. In the Limerick survey evidence revealed that the depopulation of the western counties in the previous thirty years had been of major concern to the government. Depopulation had impacted on the age demographic and on the decline of

³⁸ Interview with Bartle O'Curraoin of Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (25 Jan. 2006).

³⁹ *Labour News*, 3 April 1937.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² Roman Catholic Parish of St James, Athboy, Statistical breakdown provided by the Parish Priest, April 2006.

⁴³ Roll books of Ráth Cairn National School (Scoil Náisiunta Ráth Cairn), Boys 1936-2005 Girls 1936-2005, held in the school.

commerce in those areas badly affected by emigration.⁴⁴ Such was the impact of the *Labour News* article that described Ráth Cairn as the ‘first laboratory of the Gaelic revival’ that it was read out and discussed in the Dáil. The article was quoted at length and included the paper’s statement that the ‘people are perplexed and unhappy’ and that there has begun a ‘Back-to-Connemara movement’, emigration and meetings of protest. The deputy who read aloud the article, Daniel O’Leary,⁴⁵ concluded with the condemnation that, considering the cost of the scheme, the ‘policy of the Government is disastrous to the people of the Free State’⁴⁶ The Minister later responded to O’Leary’s criticism that in his opinion emigration would have happened anyhow in the normal course of events regardless of where in Ireland they lived. ‘The fact is that some of the adult people in that colony have gone out of it—that is, the elder boys and girls—but it must be remembered that they are big families, and in no case has the head of the family gone.’ He was apparently critical of the article; it was after all a Labour party vehicle, when he said that it was intended to convey to the public that the scheme was a colossal failure. ‘It is quite the contrary, as a matter of fact. These people have adapted themselves very well to the new conditions and the new surroundings, and there were only two cases in which the people returned to their old homes. Personal reasons induced them to return, and it was not owing to failure either on their part or on that of the Land Commission.’ He was also of the opinion that the newer colonies that ‘have only just come in will be equally successful.’⁴⁷

The problem of emigration was still serious even in the late 1940s. Deputy Seamus Kennedy⁴⁸ requested that the government take into account the claims of married sons of the Meath migrants who had elected to stay at home and were living in the homes of their parents. He saw that even by staying home their domestic situation was causing problems.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Newman, *Limerick Survey*, p. 285.

⁴⁵ Daniel O’Leary (1877-1951) Cork North, Cumann na nGaedhael.

⁴⁶ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, lxxvi, 1431, 1435 (21 April, 1937).

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 1723.

⁴⁸ James (Seamus) Kennedy (1909-1968), Fianna Fáil, Wexford.

⁴⁹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, cxi (3 June 1948).

VII

The census figures illustrated that due to emigration, despite the hope that Ireland would be a rural based society, the numbers involved in farming had fallen considerably. The total number engaged in agricultural occupations in the twenty-six counties in 1926 was 672,129 but twenty years later, even after an active migration policy this had dropped to 593,653. (Table 4.1) Unexpectedly, considering the push to family run farms, it appeared that farms run using paid employees had hardly changed at all indeed, 1936 showed an increase, and by 1946 had only declined by 397 individuals. In looking at the gender pattern; the countrywide decline applied mainly to men, women in agriculture had increased by 328. The involvement of daughters in agriculture on home farms had dropped comparatively more than that of other groups between 1926 and 1946 from 53,485 to 28,941, a figure of only slightly more than half what it had been. This may, with more detailed study, reveal that some daughters had gone into paid employment. Prior to the Second World War it was recognised that more women emigrate than men and the *Labour News* observed in 1937 that when the women leave the area the young men follow. In the corresponding period, sons on the farm fell from 152,897 to 131,083 representing less than a quarter of the numbers leaving in 1946. The 1936 census showed that in the ten years after 1926 the agricultural population of women fell by 8527 and the men by 6426. In this case with these figures it appears that the young men are not following the women in equal numbers. Senator Patrick Baxter⁵⁰ made the comment in the Seanad that he was told of a parish where there had not been a marriage for three years mainly because 'no young girl is today prepared to go and live the life that has to be lived on a farm in Ireland.'⁵¹ With only the aggregate figures to deal with it was evident that between 1926 and 1946 while the female population declined the male population remained fairly steady.

⁵⁰ Patrick F. Baxter (1891-1959) Farmers Party, Agricultural Panel.

⁵¹ *Seanad Éireann* deb., xxi, 219 (6 July 1938).

Agricultural Population

Age 14 and over	1926	1936	1946
	Total	Total	Total
Farmers	268,930	259,112	249,898
Sons and Daughters*	206,382	191,429	160,024
Other assisting relatives	57,713	52,768	43,436
Paid agricultural employees	139,104	140,656	140,295
Total Agricultural Occupations	672,129	643,965	593,653

Breakdown by Gender	1926		1936		1946	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
Farmers	220,442	48,488	212,596	46,516	207,895	42,003
Sons and Daughters*	152,897	53,485	146,471	44,958	131,083	28,941
Other assisting relatives	39,424	18,289	38,633	14,135	34,296	9,140
Paid agricultural employees	137,409	1695	139,542	1,114	138,853	1,442
Total Agricultural Occupations	550,172	121,957	537,242	106,723	512,127	81,526

Table 4.1: Source: Census 1926-51 Central Statistics Office

*For 1946 includes daughters-in-law

Agricultural Population

Population on holdings up to 30 acres

1926	Male	Female	Total
Farmers in Twenty -six counties	120,649	29,725	150,374
Meath Farmers	2,079	606	2,685
Meath Agricultural Occupations on all sizes of farms	11,172	2,159	13,331
Total Meath Population			62,969
Rathmore DED (Rathcairn)			567

Population on holdings up to 30 acres

1946	Male	Female	Total
Farmers in Twenty -six counties	99,014	22,629	121,643
Meath Farmers	2,361	546	2,907
Meath Agricultural Occupations on all sizes of farms	15,829	2,037	17,866
Total Meath Population			66,337
Rathmore DED (Rathcairn)			772

Population on holdings up to 30 acres

1951	Male	Female	Total
Farmers in Twenty -six counties	90,612	20,394	111,006
Meath Farmers	5,120	1,019	6,139
Meath Agricultural Occupations on all sizes of farms	13,578	1,572	15,150
Total Meath Population			66,337
Rathmore DED (Rathcairn)			723

Total Population engaged in Agricultural Employment

1926	672,129	
1946	593,653	-78,476
1951	512,510	-81,143

Table 4.2: Source Census of Ireland 1926-1951

The statistics relating to Meath for holdings up to 30 acres, the type of farm likely to be affected by migration, showed that after twenty years of redistribution, agricultural occupations in Meath had not increased significantly, reflecting the overall trend. (Table 4.2) In Meath in 1926 there were 2,685 small farmers which increased by 222 in 1946 to 2,907. Breaking down this group by gender showed that only 606 of the 2,685 farmers were women and by 1946 this had fallen to 546. Women in the whole of Meath engaged in agricultural occupations had fallen as well from 2,159 in 1926 to 2,037 in 1946.

Looking further ahead to the census of 1951 (by comparison) all agricultural occupations had dropped by 519,619 persons across the country. In Meath there was a decline from the 1946 figure of 17,866 to 15,150 a drop of 2,716.⁵² The population data appears to give the impression of a relatively small number of people migrating to swell the agricultural population. Of those families that did come a considerable number of the members left to emigrate after a short time as can be seen in table three. This may be the reason why there were so few difficulties in Meath with the locals; most never had the occasion to interact with the newcomers.

VIII

A summary of the Gaeltacht colonies, in a report of 1943 placed the colony scheme in context with the later Group Migration schemes. Authorised by Sean Moylan, Minister for Lands,⁵³ and intended as a report to An Taoiseach, it reflected the type of migrant that was heretofore chosen. The department realised, through experience with the first colony, that it was necessary to place people on holdings with knowledge and capital who stood some chance of success.⁵⁴ The report described the Ráth Cairn migrants as:

‘the weakest of all possible migrants and they had to be assisted to an extent which would not be necessary in cases of migration from other uneconomic areas of the Congested Districts.....many of them had never seen a plough much less used one. They knew nothing about handling horses and little about stock so that during the first year the tillage on their holdings had to be carried out by the Land Commission and they had to be instructed in the most elementary methods of agriculture.’⁵⁵

However, it also reassured the Taoiseach that the migrants had become competent farmers and were tilling the land themselves. In the same manner the report assessed the further four colonies and singled out the Gibbstown and Kilbride migrants as both needing help with the new agricultural techniques.⁵⁶ Later, in 1946, Moylan in response to members’ questions regarding the

⁵² Census of Ireland- 1926-1951; In 1951 the Census increased the categories of farm occupations and, apart from farmers, cannot be accurately compared with the previous twenty years.

⁵³ Seán Moylan (died 1957) Fianna Fáil, Cork North: Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Defence 1939-1943, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Finance 1943 Minister for Lands 1943-1948.

⁵⁴ Economic and social aspects of land policy c. 1945 (NAI, DA, S12890 (B)).

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Gaeltacht Colonies in County Meath c.1942 (NAI, DA, S10764).

selection of allottees admitted that there had been some failures but this was due more to the size of the holding and lack of capital than any fault of their own.⁵⁷

IX

The advent of World War II caused a hiatus in land redistribution. The whole administrative system of the Land Commission was disrupted by the Emergency which would eventually bring about a complete rethink of the agricultural policies. In 1939 the Irish government, with the prospect of the European war about to begin, prepared an *Emergency*⁵⁸ Order concerning the allocation of staff for essential staffing of what was described as Emergency services.⁵⁹

It was intended that the staff working for the Department of Lands would be seconded to other areas, which were considered to be more essential. Most were sent to the Department of Finance and the Department of Agriculture. The result was that certain activities were curtailed within the Land Commission in particular, acquisition and distribution was suspended.⁶⁰

At the time the amount of land "in the machine" was 695,500 acres. Of these, 98,000 acres had actually been acquired, 23,700 had been agreed a price and 109,800 had been notified of compulsory purchase, resumption (taking back land previously allocated) or had been offered a purchase price figure.⁶¹ This last group of activities was the work that was being suspended. Ultimately it was this area that would lead to internal government tensions as the pressures of staffing arrangements due to the Emergency increased with the passing years.

The Minister of Lands wrote to the Department of An Taoiseach that he felt the Land Commission should not be closed down entirely due to the Emergency and any arrangements that would jeopardize the re-settlement schemes 'should not even temporarily be suspended in any circumstances'⁶² although he agreed that experienced staff could be sent to operate the Tillage and Turbary Schemes. It was felt however that the reduction of staff should be

⁵⁷ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, ciii, 1861 (4 Dec. 1946).

⁵⁸ In Ireland 'The Emergency' was the term used to cover the 1939-45 period otherwise known as World War II.

⁵⁹ Emergency Order 110 1941 (NAI, DT, S11465 (A)).

⁶⁰ Effects of the emergency on the Department of Lands (NAI, DT, S11465 (A)).

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² *ibid.*

carried out gradually. Ultimately staff numbers were reduced in many of the Land Commission departments resulting in a 50% reduction in personnel.

In 1941 further difficulties arose when despite earlier complaints more reductions in staff had been taken by the Department of Finance and again the Minister for Lands wrote, this time to the Tanaiste then Minister of Finance, of his regret at the decision. He went on to indicate that it would be impossible for normal activities to continue if staff was reduced any further. 'It is impossible for the Land Commission to recognise what precisely the Department of Finance has in mind [and] this indicates serious lack of understanding of current problems of Land Commission.'⁶³ They requested that the choice of staff to be loaned out should be decided upon by the Land Commission itself. The letter underlines the supreme importance to the Land Commission that staff were not to be disturbed any further. The Draft of Emergency Powers order concerning suspension of operation of certain Provisions of the Land Acts was put in place in 1941⁶⁴ and in 1942 a staff quota was agreed. While the normal staffing numbers was 655, during the Emergency this was reduced to 393; however the Minister for Lands stated that he would not co-operate with any further staff secondment requested by Minister of Finance, in the future staff should be found elsewhere.⁶⁵

Toward the end of the Emergency period in 1944 there was an acknowledgement that the experienced staff of the Land Commission would be brought back into the department provided they applied within one year of the end of war. With the resumption of normal working arrangements it was recognized that allotment should take precedence over acquisition and resale otherwise 'the machine would become completely clogged and chaos instead of progress would result.'⁶⁶

The Department of Agriculture files showed that the government, in the mid 1940s, while the war was still ongoing in Europe and the Pacific, were anxious to begin resuming 'normal' staffing and functions when the war was over. There were a number of requests to submit proposals to the Department of An Taoiseach in order to have ready employment schemes for the post war

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ Emergency Order 110, 1941 (NAI, DT, S11465 (A)).

⁶⁵ Effect of the Emergency on the Department of Lands (NAI, DT, S11465 (A)).

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

period however, most departments were reluctant to commit themselves and the response was largely to say that it was not possible to anticipate future projects. Instead progress reports on planning of major activities for the post-war period were agreed.⁶⁷ In 1947 a memo began with the statement that 1947 'was the first full year of renewed land re-settlement activity since the beginning of the emergency.'⁶⁸ but a memo from 1948 revealed that the Land Commission had not, three years after the Emergency ended, achieved full staffing levels and was still not engaged in the functions it would have earlier carried out. In this memo the Minister of Lands was preparing to submit a proposal to remove all the restrictions that the Emergency had imposed and in particular resume land acquisition to deal with the 'appalling conditions' still prevalent in the congested districts.⁶⁹ The quarterly report of the Department of Lands for 1948 indicated that normal working conditions were not resumed until April 1948 but, following this decision inspectors were engaged throughout the country catching up on the work begun many years previously. Among the many statistics presented the amount of 80,931 acres was stated as being prepared for 'schemes' and that for 21,392 acres the schemes were ready to be implemented.⁷⁰ It is unfortunate that annual summarised reports of the Department of Lands are not available so that a better picture would emerge of the number of migrated people these figures represent.

Tom Garvin wrote that in post-war Ireland, a direct reference to Fianna Fáil's manifesto, that once divisive differences over the Treaty had softened, public politics 'settled into a mainly agrarian pattern and still revolved around the plough versus the cow, land redistribution and the fantasy of settling as many people as possible on the land'.⁷¹ There had not yet been a realisation that Irish society might in the future have to become urban with a non-farming economy. If they had, an active land redistribution policy was a resistance to what, on a cultural and civilisational change, it might entail. He considered that 'a series of decisions concerning economic policy would have to be made.'⁷² Garvin questioned whether anyone, lest of all the politicians, who were 'themselves recently urbanised countrymen' even knew what the vague term modern required, like Janus they looked both forward and backward. In many ways Post War Ireland, Garvin suggested, was like John Huston's *Quiet Man*,

⁶⁷ Committee on economic planning (NAI, DT, S13481).

⁶⁸ Relief of congestion by the Land Commission (NAI DT S6490 B/1).

⁶⁹ Submission to government land acquisition and division, 25 March 1948 (NAI, DA, G601-1948).

⁷⁰ Quarterly report for 1 April to 31 December 1948, Department of Lands (NAI, DT, S13481).

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² Tom Garvin, *Preventing the Future* (Dublin, 2004), pp 62-63.

wanting to be knowledgeable about what was going on in the outside world but still rooted in the soil.⁷³

It was in the 1951/52 Land Commission Annual Report that a summary of the Gaeltacht Colonies of County Meath appeared. The report was conclusive in nature as the policy of putting in place these artificial Gaeltachta had long since been abandoned. Indeed it would even be difficult for the residents of the original colony of Ráth Cairn to be given official status as a Gaeltacht. This report repeated the information that a total of five Gaeltachta were established in Meath between 1935 and 1940. It also gave the figure of a total of 122 families amounting to 772 individuals. However, how the Land Commission chose to arrive at the published numbers is not understood and as Michael O'Conghaile⁷⁴ has suggested above they appeared to be inaccurate in the case of Ráth Cairn.

X

In 1957 the National Farmer's Association (NFA) presented their own overview of the success, or failure, of the Land Commission.⁷⁵ This body considered Farm Apprenticeship and Land Holding and proposed a type of migration of young men to sustainable holdings. As a result the authors made some very interesting observations, particularly in the size and number of farms and the attitude to migrants. They informed the Department of An Taoiseach in a memorandum in May of that year that the 'published statistics show that the number of farm holdings of less than 30 acres has decreased spectacularly and was still decreasing over the years in spite of the policy of the Land Commission in setting up small holdings.'⁷⁶ In the same period the allocation of larger farms of 30 to 100 acres increased by 3,390.⁷⁷ However the increasing size of farm holdings left fewer available acres for potential farmers, contributing to the already declining rural population, demonstrating that rearrangement was not the answer to emigration.

Instead the NFA suggested an acreage for new holdings 'of approximately 50 acres of good land, or the equivalent, should be set up varying

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ O'Giollagain, *Stairsheanchas Mhicil Chonrai*, p. 135.

⁷⁵ In Irish: *Na Feirmeoiri Aontuithe*

⁷⁶ Farm apprenticeship and land holding (NAI, DT, S16265).

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

in size according to the type of land.’⁷⁸ They justified their stance with the opinion that ‘these holdings would be calculated to maintain their owners at the standard of living of skilled men and to educate their children to make them in their turn efficient and progressive farmers’. However, the very fact that land was increasing in value and the availability of areas large enough to create farms in one unit meant that this would become less easy to accomplish. Their own report included the information that the size of available estates for acquisition had decreased to [on average] 96 acres and that less land had been divided in 1955 than in 1938, in addition out of every 1,000 farms inspected only 150 were acquired.⁷⁹ While criticising the work carried out by the LC they recognised that ‘the cost of Land Division is heavy’ noting that the cost per acre had risen to £48 of which only £12 was repaid in annuities. It is hard to imagine how the government would agree to their suggestions of increasing the migrant holdings to 50 acres. In view of the negative attitude to grazing the larger size of 250 acres was verging on the size of farms that had previously been so abhorrent in the 1920s and 30s.

This NFA report in many ways reflected the new attitude to the realities of farming by the general farming population or was perhaps even a backlash against government policy. In the mid to late 1930s the government had been encouraging the preference of tillage over grazing which was why some of the land at Ráth Cairn was ploughed and planted with wheat and oats. This was, according to Dunphy, to move production away from grazing since the English cattle market had collapsed and when Fianna Fáil came to power they hoped to reorientate production back to the home market. Farm incomes which had seriously declined by 12.8 percent between 1929 and 1931 fell further and between 1930 and 1934 the collapse had affected all classes of farmers.⁸⁰ When the Second World War began, an even bigger increase in tillage was required by the government where every farmer was obliged to till a quarter of their land. This also coincided with the necessity of Ireland to be self-sufficient, especially during the war years. Professor Johnson a member of Seanad Éireann stated that farm incomes, according to his calculations, showed an average of £60 per annum between 1932 and 1936 which was a drop from £88 of the 1926-7 period.⁸¹ Figures shown by Lee indicated that in 1939, tillage was at 230,000

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil* p. 151.

⁸¹ *Seanad Éireann* deb., xxi, 246 (6 July 1938).

wheat acres and by 1945 this had increased to 662,000.⁸² The obligatory tillage ruling helped the Ráth Cairn migrants because the local farmers of Meath, in order to fulfil this requirement, rented out their lands while they continued with pasture and stock under their own management.⁸³ The difficulty arose in the post war period when the graziers no longer wished to continue this practice, but in any case, in the late 1940s both the tillage requirement and the grain markets evaporated. It was then the colonists began to realise how difficult it was going to be with only twenty-two acres. During the war there had also been plenty of work on the bog with no coal available from Britain, but after the war, the demand here too fell away. Eventually by the early 1950s many Ráth Cairn farmers had abandoned tillage altogether and had gone instead into dairy farming which in many ways was exactly what the local farmers had been doing and what everyone had objected to so strongly in the early 1930s.⁸⁴

Although the NFA acknowledged that migration increased economic holdings in the west by the relief of extreme congestion, their comments on migrants were not complimentary. 'Migrants are chosen to convenience re-arrangement and are not selected for farming competence', this quite clearly, in their opinion, did not 'contribute to economic expansion'.⁸⁵ In addition they were not prepared to give credit to the Land Commission for their activities concerning the small economic farm redistribution even though the report showed that from the 1920s up to the time of the report in 1957 over a million acres had been distributed to 71,245 allottees.⁸⁶

On the most fundamental level the NFA report questioned the Land Commission policy of migration and by doing so undermined the support their members had for the existing system. Modern farming, not just subsistence, had become the new approach. The critics asked would it not be better to spend £3,400 per holding on production of the small farm to the greater advantage to the people concerned. Antagonists were even questioning the accepted emotive attitudes when they suggested that 'there may be some alternative solution giving greater benefit than reversing the Cromwellian settlement.'⁸⁷

⁸² Lee, *Ireland* p. 185.

⁸³ Interview with Bartle O'Curraoin of Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (25 Jan. 2006).

⁸⁴ Mícheál Seoighe, 'Ráth Cairn 1939-1967' in O'Conghaile, *Gaeltacht Ráth Cairn*, pp 91, 93-4.

⁸⁵ NFA, (NAI, DT, S16265).

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p. 5.

XI

By comparing the agricultural model of 1931 and 1949 it can be seen that the pressure to move into tillage had not been successful and tillage had decreased, matched by an increase in cattle⁸⁸ for fattening, indicating that the move was back in to the live export practices of the large ranches. This too was reflected in the demand for larger farms. Evidence that perhaps grazing was after all the most economic way for the future was seen when Seamus Kennedy commented on the system of agriculture, then in practice. It seemed that while the Land Commission had been breaking up ranches and bringing people from Gaeltacht areas into places such as Ráth Cairn and Gibbstown, the small economic farmer was disappearing. The thirty, forty or fifty acre farmer was disappearing by selling out and his neighbour was buying his farm on the open market. 'While ranches are being smashed up on the one hand they are being created on the other.' He believed that if the government wanted to keep the population in rural Ireland, they would have to rethink agricultural policies. He admitted however that he could not see a solution to the problem.⁸⁹

By the end of the 1940s the dissatisfaction with Fianna Fáil's policies and to a great extent the agricultural policies resulted in a swing of electoral opinion. Dooley makes the case that 'the failure to fulfil promises was perhaps one of the most important reasons for the post Emergency shift away from Fianna Fáil'.⁹⁰ The shift had occurred however, much earlier in the political affiliations of the Meath Gaeltacht migrants, when in 1937 as noted in *Labour News* they had moved to Labour and would move again after 1938 to Clann na Talmhúain.⁹¹ As the Fianna Fáil Party shifted their attention to the working classes in urban centres and the 'new territory of the middle strata... they forfeited some rural support to Clann na Talmhúain.' The move to this small farmers party, originating in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon, was a reflection of the discontent by farmers at the ending of the Economic War and the trade agreements settlement with the United Kingdom. Rural supporters, despite the difficulties of sustaining any level of economic viability however, clung to Fianna Fáil because of the culture of dependence they had created with price supports and welfare concessions.⁹² Finally, in 1948, after sixteen years, the general election of that

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸⁹ *Dáil Eireann deb.*, cxi, 343 (3 June 1948).

⁹⁰ Dooley, *Land for the people*, p. 207.

⁹¹ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 210.

⁹² *ibid.*, p. 154-5, 183; Bew et al, *Irish politics*, p. 78.

year saw Fianna Fáil out of office and in opposition to the Fine Gael party. Deputy Bernard Commons⁹³ summed up the change that year in a Dáil debate when he explained the type of supporter that Fianna Fáil then represented. He outlined that when the party first came to power they sincerely wanted to rapidly solve the land problem but slowly the position changed and instead of the uneconomic holders being the largest supporters it had become the ranchers. The small farmers were 'up in arms' because of the Fianna Fáil Party's failure to fulfil their manifesto; the relief of congestion and the provision of economic holdings.⁹⁴ The move away by Fianna Fáil, this time to the new industrial bourgeoisie, and the recognition by the small farmers that they were no longer a priority to the Fianna Fáil policies drove them into the arms of other smaller parties. In 1948 after Fianna Fáil's defeat there would be a five-party coalition of Labour, NLP, Fine Gael, Clann na Poblachta and Clann na Talmhúain under the leadership of John Costello, Fine Gael.⁹⁵

XII

The Irish language in the 1940s had not fared well nor had the rural population which was rapidly falling and in many ways the two were linked. The promotion of the Irish language which had been an important part of the political identity of the newly independent government was, by the 1940s, an issue that was no longer being as actively pursued. Adrian Kelly writing about the language revival described the early preservation and expansion policies of the 1920s as a linguistic revolution.⁹⁶ It was principally the primary schools followed by the secondary schools that were seen as the most appropriate vehicle through which the language should be used to promote the use of Irish. Fianna Fáil, in 1932, during their first year in office, had addressed language revival with renewed vigour in its attempts to gaelicise the education system.⁹⁷ Kelly argued that with the emphasis on children's education for the language revival their general education suffered, resulting in public apathy and even antagonism for the language.⁹⁸ In 1943 Deputy Cole asked in the Dáil the annual

⁹³ Bernard Commons (1913-1965) Clann na Talmhúain, Mayo South.

⁹⁴ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, cxi, 353 (03 June 1948).

⁹⁵ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, pp 306-7.

⁹⁶ Adrian Kelly, 'Cultural imperatives: the Irish language revival and the educational system' in Joost Augusteijn (ed.) *Ireland in the 1930s* (Dublin, 1999), p. 29.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 30.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

cost of the steps taken to make Ireland Irish speaking and in the categories of education this figure came to £124,244.⁹⁹ The total for all areas including education came to £319.993. A rather telling figure of £3,542 appears, the cost of translation for the houses of the Oireachtas. During the course of research for this thesis many requests by senior civil servants and Land Commission officials were seen for correspondence in Irish to be translated into English. It was not until the late 1940s that Irish increasingly became the dominant language in government papers, however from 1937 entry to the Civil Service had required Irish.

XIII

The Ráth Cairn migrants were experiencing their own difficulties with regard to the official use of Irish by the Meath County Committee of Agriculture. Concerned that the ethos of Irish for everyday use be faithfully adhered to in 1944 they complained about a *laissez-faire* attitude to their interests. The MCCA had proposed a Poultry Keeping lecture at the new school in the Ráth Cairn settlement and produced a poster to advertise the event.¹⁰⁰

Meath County Committee of Agriculture

A

LECTURE

On

Poultry Keeping

WILL BE DELIVERED BY

MISS MACDERMOT

POULTRY INSTRUCTRESS AT

Rathcarne New School

On

Friday 24th March 1944

At 5 o'clock pm sharp (summer time)

All poultry keepers in the district are invited to attend

W. J. CORCORAN

CHIEF AGRICULTURAL OFFICER

⁹⁹ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, xc, 542 (26 May, 1943).

¹⁰⁰ MCCA, use of Irish (NAL, DT, 97/9/470).

The poster (reproduced above) indicated to those who might attend that this lecture would, in all likelihood, not be delivered in Irish. Two days before the lecture was to take place Micheal (Sean) MacConnchadha, secretary of the local Fianna Fáil cumann wrote (in English) to the Department of Agriculture, enclosing a copy of the poster. In the accompanying letter he stated that the woman engaged to give the lecture, Miss MacDermot, did not have Irish and that the local people had not asked for a lecture in English.¹⁰¹ Through MacConnchadha, the Ráth Cairn community appealed to the Minister for Agriculture to put a stop to the introduction of English by MCCA. MacConnchadha in his letter was uncompromising, 'No other organization has been permitted to give lectures in English and the fact that an organization working under the auspices of the government would be permitted to do so only shows that 'the government is mocking Irish and in that the Irish speakers'¹⁰² He asked 'What would be the Taoiseach's opinion of them if they deserted Irish?' He observed that it was a disgrace when at the same time as the Taoiseach was advising other people to learn Irish these notices were exhibited in the Gaeltacht in English. The fact that Ráth Cairn would not officially become a Gaeltacht until 1967 was a matter of little concern to MacConnchadha who was making a propagandist comment. He went further with a veiled threat when he suggested that this was serious enough to be raised in the Dáil if the lecture should go ahead.

MacConnchadha's letter pinpointed that the fundamental problem lay with the Committee of Agriculture and went on to indicate some sort disagreement with the approach regarding the in-house policy. He had been informed by the Department of Agriculture's private secretary that there were two opposing sections; the majority, supporting W. J. Corcoran, Chief Agricultural Overseer, who it appeared had organized the lecture, and the minority, mainly Fianna Fáil supporters. Furthermore 'two male instructors employed by the committee cannot agree among themselves and recently their differences were the subject of an inquiry.'¹⁰³ Once again it seems the MCCA was conducting the programs in their jurisdiction under their terms.

¹⁰¹ MacConnchadha to Department of Agriculture 21 March 1944 *ibid.*

¹⁰² 'ag magadh fe n Ghasdhilg agus fe Ghasdhilgeoiti', *ibid.*

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

Although it was not mentioned in the Dáil the situation warranted personal attention by Eamon de Valera and the matter was raised at that day's meeting of the government. The Minister of Agriculture stated at the time that 'the Meath County Committee of Agriculture is an autonomous body' and that he could not give them instructions as to the use of Irish in a lecture by one of their employees. It was suggested that arrangements should be made for the local agricultural overseer who was an Irish speaker, employed by the Department of Agriculture, to give the lecture. Alternatively, another employee or poultry instructor from a different county who spoke Irish could be brought in to give the lecture.

In the continuing debate over the Poultry Keeping lecture the opinions of the senior civil servants could be seen in a way that would rarely be revealed officially. Mr Twomey the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture viewed the Ráth Cairn migrants with some exasperation giving an airing to a range of problems he had been dealing with.

'The Irish speakers who had been migrated to Rathcarne were a very difficult set of people to deal with and had given a good deal of trouble in such matters as the payment of rates and Land Commission annuities. At the beginning of the settlement's history the agriculture overseer who was a good Irish speaker and an Irish scholar had done his utmost for the people not only in discharge of his official duties but also organizing games and recreation. The people however had turned against him on the ground that they expected him not merely to instruct them in agricultural operations but actually to carry out the operations for them, for example to plough their fields.'¹⁰⁴

This reference to the agriculture overseer may refer to a petition submitted to the Department of Agriculture on behalf of the Ráth Cairn Migrants in 1937. Unspecified allegations fully investigated by the Department of Agriculture and found to be without basis, demanded that the overseer be removed from the district. The Minister for Agriculture stated in an answer to a Dáil question that after two years of assistance by the overseer the stage might have been reached where only occasional advice was required rather than a full time arrangement.¹⁰⁵ During this time period it was very likely to have referred to Padriac Gleeson however, there were no corresponding files in the Department

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Dáil Eireann deb.*, lxvii, 11 (11 May 1937).

of Agriculture to indicate the name of the overseer or the nature of the complaints.¹⁰⁶ The only insight into the circumstances of the question are when Micheal MacCraith was interviewed in 1937 and said that 'for fourteen months we have urged for the transfer of the instructor' because they were of the opinion that they would have learned new agricultural techniques more quickly from Meath farmers.¹⁰⁷ When members of the community were asked in 2006-7 about these circumstances none were aware of the situation. Sean Curran however was of the opinion that Gleeson favored certain families that were relatively well educated and well connected to the Fianna Fáil party and this may have been part of the problem.¹⁰⁸ Pádraic McGrath, when asked about Gleeson's contribution to the organized games and recreation mentioned above, stated that he was responsible for GAA games for the boys and he thought there might also have been something organised for girls.¹⁰⁹

Mr Twomey also went on to give his opinion of the MCCA describing them in much the same vein. 'The Meath County Committee of Agriculture were a difficult body to handle and would be sure to show resentment if the department were to leave itself open to a charge of interfering in their business.' Referring to the poultry lecture he suggested the best arrangement was to let Miss MacDermot proceed but to arrange for the lecture to be introduced in Irish. Breaking his own code Mr Twomey added that he would communicate with the Meath County Committee of Agriculture with a view to ensuring that in future posters for display in the Meath Gaeltacht areas would be in Irish. The Taoiseach agreed to the procedure outlined above and directed the Department of Agriculture to write to the MCCA. This would draw their attention to the importance of using Irish in dealing with the people of the Meath Gaeltacht. De Valera paid close attention to the situation and indicated that he wished to see the letter before it was sent to MCCA.¹¹⁰

Mr Twomey then sent the letter to the Committee, approved by An Taoiseach, before the lecture was given pointing out the inappropriate nature of a poster printed in English.¹¹¹ He went on to remind them that the greatest

¹⁰⁶ Parliamentary Questions (NAI, DA, G1429/1937).

¹⁰⁷ *Labour News*, 3 April 1937.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Sean Curran of Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (18 Sept. 2006).

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Pádraic McGrath of Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (18 Sept. 2006). He is Mícheál MacCraith's grandson.

¹¹⁰ NAI, DT, 97/9/470.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

benefit to those who attended a poultry keeping lecture at Ráth Cairn, new school would occur if it were delivered in Irish. He concluded that if lectures were given in 'this or any similar colony in the county, posters advertising the lecture should be printed in Irish or if the committee so desires both in Irish and English and also that so far as possible the lectures themselves should be delivered in Irish.'¹¹²

Very smartly a letter acknowledging Twomey's diplomatic instructions was received from Sean Doyle, a member of the MCCA. Doyle revealed the internal divisions within the MCCA that Micheal MacConnchadha had only hinted at earlier. In the letter he told the Department of Agriculture that this was not the first time that the Committee had failed to comply with the 'Herculean' efforts of the government in attempting to revive the Irish language. They have he explained, despite instructions from the Department of Agriculture, twice declined to appoint a competent Irish speaking instructress. Apparently aggrieved by other small incidents he pointed out that an application for a lecture in Irish was declined the previous winter. Although the excuse made was that the instructor was too busy, he noted there were no such classes in the area at all. He went on to say that various submissions in Irish to the annual report have been 'suppressed' and used the opportunity to state 'It is a puzzling surprise' that this 'well calculated sabotage of the Gaelic revival is contrary to the strenuous efforts of the government.'¹¹³

The government recognized a crusader and apparently, being familiar with Mr Doyle's line of correspondence, did not reply. Internally they justified, quite reasonably, all his points and acknowledged one mistake, but put it down to a misprint.¹¹⁴

Doyle wrote for the last time in October 1944, directly to de Valera, pleading for consistency on the part of the government regarding Meath. Here he explained that the Irish speaking families continued to be without a horticulturalist or instructors in poultry keeping, butter making and beekeeping who could converse with them in Irish. He then implied that he had washed his hands of the situation and claimed that he 'cannot take any responsibility for the

¹¹² MCCA, use of Irish, 22 March 1944 (NAI, DT, 97/9/470).

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Memo, Department of Agriculture's Private Secretary to de Valera 25 Sept. 1944 (NAI, DT, 97/9/470).

performance of the official's duties'.¹¹⁵ Once again there would be no reply to the criticism of the government and the workings of the MCCA. It transpired that the lecture went ahead in a somewhat extended format. An Irish speaking inspector introduced the lecture in Irish, followed by Miss MacDermott's lecture in English, which was then repeated in Irish.¹¹⁶ In the following months Doyle and another member of the Committee, James Tallon, strived to have the Department of Agriculture's recommendations put in place, however, not until 11 December 1944 was a Miss T. Ahern appointed. This woman, qualified as an Irish speaking instructor in poultry keeping and butter making, would live in Athboy,¹¹⁷ Two year later by an extension of her employment for a further six months was agreed by the Committee.¹¹⁸ The episode evidently had a successful outcome because the Ráth Cairn Co-operative has on display a poster, from 1946, announcing that a Miss Sweeny would give a poultry lecture in Irish. Pádrac McGrath, assistant manager of Ráth Cairn co-operative, when pointing out the exhibit, commented that the grammar was rather faulty but at least the effort had been made to produce a poster in Irish.¹¹⁹

XIV

This poultry lecture episode was not the first time MCCA had to deal with the difficulties that arose over the use of Irish. Ten years earlier the minutes of the Committee show that to some extent they had been willing to comply with the request of the Department of Agriculture to employ Irish speakers but found it difficult to do so. The combination of horticultural qualifications and Irish language were not easy to find. The recommendation by the Department had been for an Irish-speaking instructor but recognized that a suitable candidate was unlikely to be found. They suggested a two-year probationary period for any individual hired who would improve his standard of Irish during that time. The Committee in their minutes agreed to the proposal provided that 'Irish men are appointed'.¹²⁰ A rather curious proviso considering that very few foreign nationals would be Irish speakers and that most of the poultry keeping and

¹¹⁵ Doyle to de Valera, 1 October 1944 (NAI, DT, 97/9/470).

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ MCCA minutes of proceedings: 11 April, 12 June, 9 October, 11 December 1944, Teagasc Archive, County Office, Navan; NAI, DA, E-1682-44.

¹¹⁸ MCCA minutes of proceedings 12 June 1944, 4 Nov. 1946, *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Interview with Pádrac McGrath of Ráth Cairn, Co. Meath (18 Sept. 2006).

¹²⁰ 12 November 1934 (NAI, DA, E1716-34).

butter-making instructors were women. Subsequently with only two suitable applicants to choose from in 1934 Mr J. McNamara of Cavan was appointed.¹²¹

In 1935, Mr Walsh of the Department of Agriculture wrote to the Department of Justice on this same subject of language. They required that posters concerning Agricultural matters displayed outside Garda Stations in Irish speaking districts would in future be printed in Irish. This prompted a memo to the department from Mr Foley of the Department of Justice who explained his experience with Irish versus English posters. It appeared that in the 1920s he had commented on this problem, that those who spoke Irish did not read Irish and those who spoke English could read English but not Irish. In a responding memo Walsh was of the opinion that although everyone's education had improved the poster should be in both English and Irish.¹²² There seems to have been an informal arrangement toward the implementation of the use of the language in everyday life, rather more reactive than proactive.

On the eve of the final months of Fianna Fáil's first term in power (1933-1948), Richard Mulcahy asked the Taoiseach if, in the last ten years, the Irish language had reached such a level in any part of the country so as to be described as the vernacular language of that area.¹²³ De Valera responded that there had not been any investigation into the question asked but because of the Irish language content of various schemes a certain amount of information could be extrapolated. The Department of Education, schemes for the preservation of language in the Irish-speaking districts or as part of the Government's general policy to extend the use of the Irish language was the source of the information. For example, annual inspections were carried out by the Department of Education in order to ascertain who was eligible for the £5 grant to Irish speaking children. In conclusion de Valera hoped that the 1946 census statistics relating to the Irish language would indicate the position of Irish in the country as a whole and, in particular, in the Gaeltacht and the Breac-Gaeltacht areas.¹²⁴ The reply was rather surprising in view of the emphasis the language had been given by Fianna Fáil in coming into office. This seems to be far from an active engagement with the cause of the Irish language revival. The statistics showed

¹²¹ 17 December 1934, *ibid.*

¹²² MCCA, Use of Irish (NAI, DT, 97/9/470).

¹²³ General Richard Mulcahy (1886-1971), *Fine Gael*, Tipperary.

¹²⁴ *Dáil Éireann deb.*, cv, 2081-82 (06 May 1947).

that out of a population of 3,360,382¹²⁵ those who claimed to speak Irish numbered 588,725, which was twenty-one percent. This of course was problematical because, as has been shown in the recent discussions leading up to the 2006 census, this was self judgment and does not reflect fluency. The largest numbers of Irish speakers were in Connaught at thirty-three percent, next was Ulster (part of) with twenty-six percent then Munster with twenty-two percent followed by Leinster at fifteen percent. Compared to nineteen percent in 1926 before the determined Galicisation of Ireland this was still a far cry from a hoped for majority.¹²⁶ Broken down into the Fíor and Brec-Gaeltacht areas of County Galway; in 1926 there were a total of 110,782 Irish speakers and in 1946 this had increased only slightly to 111,080.¹²⁷ Only five years earlier, in the 'comely maiden's' speech, de Valera had urged the population to learn to speak Irish which 'is for us precious beyond measure... bearer of a philosophy, of an outlook on life deeply Christian and rich in practical wisdom... To part with it would be to abandon a great part of ourselves, to lose the key to our past, to cut away the roots from the tree.'¹²⁸

XV

When Fianna Fáil lost the election in 1948 there was, as one would expect, a considerable degree of criticism of the party by the new government in the first Dáil Debates. Regarding the specific question of land division, Joseph Blowick, then Minister for Lands,¹²⁹ summed up Fianna Fáil's record. Blowick, whose political allegiances would lean toward the small farmer, complained that Fianna Fáil had 'burst into the land question without a single person in their party being experienced in the matter.' He noted that the large scale land division that they embarked on in the early years, following the peak in 1935, was in a steady decline in both the acquisition of land and the acreage divided, notwithstanding the war years.¹³⁰ In addition he observed that by 1935 Fianna Fáil realised that 'they had made a very bad job' of distributing the large amount of land they had acquired and this accounts for the fall off in the amount of land divided. The evidence was contained he maintained in the number of 'bad users'

¹²⁵ Census of Ireland 1946.

¹²⁶ Census of Ireland 1926-1946.

¹²⁷ The Irish Language in Irish-speaking areas.

¹²⁸ Moynihan, *Speeches* p. 466.

¹²⁹ Joseph Blowick (1903-1970), Clann na Talmhúain, Mayo South, Minister for Lands 1948- 1951 and 1954-1957.

¹³⁰ *Dáil Eireann deb.*, cxi, 459 (03 June 1948).

whose land was resumed.¹³¹ The numbers of these so called bad users had reached the figure of 1,000 and Joseph Blowick believed that this was only the tip of the iceberg and that if the present government could go into it fully he was certain 'it would reveal a scandal of the first magnitude'.¹³² The Department of Lands in their report for April to December 1948 gave the figure for some 542 allottees whose agreements are to be terminated, 650 unsatisfactory allottees to whom warnings were issued, and a further 1,600 who were under observation.¹³³ Blowick, also referred to the cost of setting up a holding as £1,460, a gift he felt that 'the bad users have lightly thrown back', and revealed how the costs had risen since 1935. Originally the Ráth Cairn Gaeltacht colony holdings cost, calculated in 1939, £1,010 at a time when every aspect of the migrants needs were provided by the state.¹³⁴ However, from the 1940s onwards the state had limited its cost provisions to the land and the dwelling only. In this example the point of view voiced by Blowick, while prejudicial, represents the attitude, throughout the debates on land division, that Fianna Fáil had not been fulfilling their mandate to relieve congestion and create economic holdings.

XVI

A speech given in 1959 by the then Minister for Lands Michael Moran¹³⁵ to the Agriculture Science Association assessed the social impact of the work of the Land Commission. In a monumental understatement he remarked that the subject was so vast and complex that only the main aspects could be examined. Throughout the course of the text he summed up various topics and by paragraph nineteen arrived at the 'transformation' of some eastern counties with the introduction of large-scale migration. Giving credit to the migrants for the transformation 'due to their courage, hardihood and keen determination' he wished to remind his audience of the contribution of the Agricultural Instructors.

Although the large scale migrations came to a halt with the advent of the Emergency the Minister revealed that migrations of smaller schemes, known as Group-Migrations, continued apace consisting of fifty long and fifty short

¹³¹ *ibid.*, 460.

¹³² *ibid.*, 462.

¹³³ Statement for Taoiseach on operations of the Land Commission (NAI, DT, S15066).

¹³⁴ *Dáil Eireann deb.*, lxxiv (8 February 1939).

¹³⁵ Michael Moran (1912-1983), Fianna Fáil, Mayo South Minister for the Gaeltacht 1957- 1959 Minister for Lands 1959-1961 Minister for Lands and the Minister for the Gaeltacht 1961-1968.

distance migrations *per year*. If one considers the migration to Ráth Cairn of twenty-seven families and realise that it affected 182 people (or more) then the effect of moving the sample 100 group-migrations families above would, using the average family members as six, easily represent roughly 600 people on the move around the same time. Other single family allottees were also being transferred around the country and whose numbers are lost in the aggregate figures of the total. Between 1923 and 1959 when this speech was given, 96,805 allottees of all types had been given untenanted lands.¹³⁶ It would be impossible to know the accurate average of family numbers so once again by using six to estimate the numbers of people affected, this would come to 580,830 individuals of all ages. Finally to look at the broad total for the entire period of land readjustment from 1923 to 1978, when the announcement of the discontinuation of the Land Commission was made, Sammon's statistics show the broad numbers as 2,186,930 acres distributed among 133,932 allottees, multiplied by 6 gives 803,592 individuals. This represents a considerable demographic and cultural shift that has largely been undocumented.

XVII

Migration is not part of Irish Agricultural policy today and indeed the Land Commission is no longer an active department, however their legacy remains. Ireland was an example to other countries dealing with their own land issues. As early as 1938 the United States Department of Agriculture was interested enough to ask Elizabeth Robbins Hooker to report on the progress of Fianna Fáil land policies.¹³⁷ An indication that her report may have had some impact on the American Department of Agriculture was reflected in President Truman's speech in the 1950s, which had remarkably strong echoes of de Valera's own rhetoric and of Fianna Fáil policy. 'We believe in the family size farm that is the basis for our agriculture and has strongly influenced our form of government.'¹³⁸ Even more significant was the link of land redistribution and agricultural productivity¹³⁹ which had become the aim of Fianna Fáil from the early 1940s and was reinforced in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the post war period land reform became a feature of international politics and the more ambitious schemes, enacted for example in Japan, where the American

¹³⁶ Sammon, *A Memoir*, p. 256; Figures given by speakers in Dáil and Seanad debates vary and were impossible to verify.

¹³⁷ Hooker, *Readjustments*.

¹³⁸ Russell King, *Land Reform, A World Survey*, (London, 1977), p. 45.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

government reallocated 700,000 Japanese peasants, within five months, and gave them farms of their own. While the numbers for Ireland remain significant, regarding their effect on local areas, the scale of foreign migration would position Ireland's experience as proportionately more modest but not without a far reaching impact on the smaller population.

In the 1950s, in Italy, land reform policy laws, linked to the Catholic small farm policy, were passed. These laws addressed the same precepts as previously dealt with in Ireland and included the establishment of small scale peasant farms. It applied mainly to the southern region and affected the move of people from overpopulated southern hill and mountain regions to the area of the attendant plains.¹⁴⁰ The discussion paper quoted reinforces that ideologically the attempt to make landless labourers into farmers was 'an illusionary hope'. The success the reforms achieved in the migration of farmers onto larger holdings was only achieved with the unexpected economic boom experienced by Italy in the 1950s and 1960s. This boom resulted in the emigration of a considerable number of the population to the north. However the arrival of large industrialised farming techniques eliminated the livelihood of the remaining small farmers. As Russell King's research showed, Italy's land reform was based on the nineteenth century ideal that a peasant with a plough could hope to be economically sustaining,¹⁴¹ a lesson Ireland was already coming to realise was not true. His overview of colonisation schemes on an international scale in 1977 argued that in general settlement schemes were 'extraordinarily prone to failure, probably more so than any other agricultural development strategy.' He went on to observe that while model farms may have been 'showpieces with privileged settlers enjoying an artificial existence they have little value' and 'may represent a waste of resources.'¹⁴²

Other countries through out the world initiated migration schemes as part of their land reform policies in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Today the Indonesian government is continuing a land redistribution program through the World Bank. This at its most general has strong resonance with Irish land redistribution. Begun in 1903 the migrants received, in addition to houses, farm land, in addition to a subsistence and production allowance during the first

¹⁴⁰ Russell King, *Land Reform in Italy, A Geographical Evaluation*, Discussion Paper no. 39, London School of Economics (London, 1970), p. 11.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.* p. 13

¹⁴² King, *Land Reform* (1977), pp 22,23.

years. The applicants, mostly landless, far exceeded the numbers accommodated in Ireland and are estimated to have been 3.6 million between the years 1903 and 1999. The sizes of the plots of land however at 2.5 hectare (six acres)¹⁴³ are sharply different from here in Ireland. Regardless of the eventual outcome of the land reform strategies for countries around the world the overwhelming ambition has been to secure a guaranteed income for the land poor peasant farmers. As this thesis has shown this too was a significant issue in Ireland in the post independence period, manifested in particular by Fianna Fáil in the 1930s.

¹⁴³ Transmigration in Indonesia (<http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/oed> (18 September 2006)).

Conclusion

*Compass'd about with Hev'ns fair
Great Tracts of Land there may be found
Enricht with Fields and fertile Ground¹*

This thesis has focused on the emergence of Fianna Fáil's decision to implement a Gaeltacht Colony and the subsequent outcome of the decision. With the Land Acts of the 1930s put in place by Fianna Fáil they were free to implement the redistribution that had been demanded. From the earliest years of independence land was the issue that occupied the largely rural population and now Fianna Fáil had the tools and the mandate to accomplish this.

For the first years of Fianna Fáil's political dominance the rural population looked to them to rectify the poverty that Cumann na nGaedheal had tackled but had failed to rectify. The allottees who received land were initially thankful for the lands they were given in Meath and elsewhere. However as time passed they realised the land was not enough. There is little doubt that on a farming level it was also less than successful. What can be said is that it was a valiant and innovative step by a new government and a new party, Fianna Fáil, struggling to find its way in a new political climate. In the early 1920s Cumann na nGaedheal had seriously considered the Irish language as part of their policy and later Fianna Fáil too placed the Irish language as one of their guiding principals. But it was Fianna Fáil who, encouraged by a number of factors, followed the suggestion of the Gaelic Report of 1927, *Muinntir na Gaeltachta* and other influential politicians, and moved the Irish speaking migrants into the midlands of Ireland. By this time Fianna Fáil had begun to look to the economic future of the country concentrating more and more on the urban centres and the increase of manufacturing. By the end of their time in power Fianna Fáil too had failed the rural poor. Emigration remained high and the problem of congestion and poverty countrywide had not gone away. In greater numbers the small farmers turned to Clann na Talmhúain and in 1948 Fianna Fáil was pushed into opposition.

Ráth Cairn, set up as the first Gaeltacht colony, embodied many of the utopian ideals and exemplified the identity of the new nation state. This case study has shown that it was not a straight forward or simple matter to go ahead

¹ Thomas Traherne, 'Shadows in the Water' in Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes (eds) *The School Bag* (London, 2003), p. 516.

with the implementation of the concept nor a foregone conclusion that it would succeed. Success is a relative term and today, although Ráth Cairn has continued as a community and as a community it has achieved its' own cohesive dynamic, it has been a failure in its effort to reintroduce the Irish language. That this social engineering was ultimately a failure is evident in the very fact that Irish is not the everyday language here in Ireland. In the original premise the colony was put in place to sow the seeds of the Irish language, which would then spread to the whole island and in this it has not succeeded, except perhaps some of the migrants' children and their descendants have become more fluently bilingual. While the Department of Agriculture was attentive to the agricultural development of the migrants nothing to further the spread of the language was ever put in place. Indeed the introduction of the language element does not appear to have received any forethought and could well have been little more than a piece of propaganda.

That Eamon de Valera was prompted into creating the Gaeltacht colony of Ráth Cairn has become part of the mythology that surrounds the colony but no evidence of the scale of his involvement has come to light.² All that can be stated with certainty was that on 15 June 1934 the Land Commission contacted the Department of Agriculture and told them that the decision had been made. The preparation of the colony was, to the credit of the Department of Agriculture, carried out by an Agricultural Overseer who had the lands ploughed and planted before the arrival of the migrants. The list of provisions provided for the migrants even today seems generous and with the cost of the endeavour it is not hard to see why the Minister for Finance was so worried about the expense. It was this very generosity that proved to be one of the factors that contributed to the discontinuation of the Gaeltacht scheme. It is the special treatment of the Gaeltacht colonies which were set up against a background of ordinary migration from west to east and did not receive the same benefits as the Gaeltacht migrants which may well have given rise to local animosity.

In the months prior to the creation of Ráth Cairn the *Meath Chronicle* published a number of letters that were anti-migrant and reported on attacks to the houses prepared for the migrants. The half expected confrontation between locals and migrants did not occur, instead a truce, if it were necessary, appears

² The Gaeltacht colonies are not mentioned in de Valera's papers in the Fianna Fáil Archive held in the UCD Archives.

to have been in place. After extensive searches, through contemporary newspapers, the extent of any problems was largely drunken encounters. The exception were the Gibbstown migrants who, on at least one occasion, did have serious disagreement, but with each other. These isolated incidents have been no more statistically significant than would have occurred in the general population and probably less.

The brief five years that the Gaeltacht colonies were part of the land policy, Fianna Fáil's popularity at first rose considerably then fell abruptly. Subsequently the policy was modified and then dropped. Cost of setting up the 'model' farms is a consideration but the unsustainability of the size of holding was another consideration. In effect Fianna Fáil was shifting the problems of small uneconomic holdings in the west to a similar situation in Meath. It has been shown that the quality of land was superior but without large amounts of land the holdings could not sustain what were then large families. Emigration, a feature of life in the west, inevitably became a characteristic of the east as well. As a result a discourse developed both inside and outside the Dáil that called for larger holdings of up to thirty acres with the the national Farmers' Association advocating even larger holdings. The slowness of the distribution of lands taken over by the Land Commission created dissatisfaction, alienating large numbers of farmers, which drove them into the arms of Clann na Talmhúain.

Change was the order of the day in the 1940s particularly after the end of the *Emergency*. Not only was the work of the Land Commission cut back but the modified migration policy and how it impacted on the migrants was altered. The migrants were no longer provided with out offices, only a house and the land were offered, and the generous equipping of the holding would be discontinued. Unemployment Assistance would no longer be on hand for the first twelve months although a grant was available, repayable through annuities.

The collapse of the scheme had the largest impact on the Irish language. Not only was it not a prerequisite for the final two colonies but the aspiration of the language becoming the touchstone of Irish identity also diminished. Ráth Cairn would be the only colony to retain the language and in 1967 became an official Gaeltacht area. After 1940 migrants were chosen not for their fluency in the language but from a list of more pragmatic reasons.

This thesis at the very least has shown that two accepted myths: the bicycle trip as the instigation of the Gaeltacht colonies has no proven foundation and that the antagonism between locals and migrants did not manifest itself in the 1930s or early 1940s. It has also shown that opposition was not confined to local people but that from the very start Dáil members were opposed to the theory and practice of the whole migration policy, not alone the Gaeltacht migration innovation. It has also shown that from the start of the first colony there were problems and that because of financial over reaching and human conditions this could not easily be rectified. One obtains the impression that the Department of Agriculture wished the migrants would be more grateful for what they had received and get on with it instead of being so demanding.

Behind what is essentially a case study of the settlement and consolidation of Ráth Cairn Co Meath lays the redistribution of land and the movement of people. The attempt by both Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil to further their control over public support was an overwhelming consideration regarding the decisions of political policy. Recent scholars who have begun to look at the Fianna Fáil party in a more analytical sense than previously have suggested that the political strategy of Fianna Fáil served to manipulate popular sentiments.³ There is some evidence of this in their response to public pressure groups. However it is in their use of the land acts to facilitate the redistribution of land that they can truly be seen to be influence public opinion. Through out the early years of independence there had been considerable emphasis on nationalism and the significance of land in rural Ireland, and this effected how the land policies, enacted by Fianna Fáil, were developed in the early 1930s. Fianna Fáil was not the only group for whom the rural idyll was of singular importance. Literary and artistic groups and other political parties also saw the rural as the essence of Irish identity. Although not universally greeted with approval, the Gaeltacht colonies were an embodiment of this ideal.

In the future if the Land Commission records open for research they may offer a greater insight into the activity on the part of the Land Commission as it applied to Ráth Cairn. It may also reveal when Eamon de Valera made the decision, if he did.

³ Dunphy, *Fianna Fáil*, p. 4.

This thesis should form only the introduction to the examination of the Ráth Cairn colony in the 1960s and 1970s. It was in this period that the fight to become an official Gaeltacht area was in progress, in order to maintain itself as an Irish speaking entity, and to receive the appropriate funding. The second generation migrants took up the political baton and began to campaign for the future of the colony and their place in an Irish speaking community. Many of those who are living and working in the area today have a first hand knowledge of the recent past and it would be of considerable value, for an Irish speaker, to engage with the later development now while those with a clear memory are available.

At the present time, Ráth Cairn, whilst still a Mecca for those studying the language and the phenomenon of the Gaeltacht colonies, remains a quiet hamlet that has only a community centre, church and a school to mark its presence. (fig. C.1) Increasingly however, as more houses are built, some by the community co-operative, they are beginning to form the pervasive ribbon development. In the present day, as the major transportation routes improve Ráth Cairn will soon lie within the commuter belt which presents a new threat to its integrity.



Figure C.1 The fields of Ráth Cairn. Source: Photograph taken by the author.

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