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A statistical and documentary primer on rundale in Ireland

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Why study Rundale?

The study of rundale has slowly graduated from a relatively isolated debate within Irish historical geography, to a subject of wider consideration amongst anthropologists, sociologists, agricultural scientists, archaeologists, and historians. This widening of the scope of debate has brought renewed attention not only to the social, cultural, and geographical features of rundale, but to the variety of sources brought to bear on its study. As a result, the incorporation of new source materials, and new approaches to analysis, has breathed life into an important aspect of Irish social history for which further discovery doubtless remains. Since the publication of Estyn Evan's foundational paper 'Some Survivals of the Irish Openfield System' in 1939, subsequent major works in the field have revealed additional layers of complexity to rundale which, rather than closing down debate, have served merely to keep it alive by raising new questions. The publication of works beyond the field of Irish studies has also placed the study of rundale in comparative context, as social scientists pay greater attention to historical modes of production across Europe and beyond. By revealing historical systems similar to rundale in operation in locations as diverse as Germany, Romania, and Russia, renewed attention is being paid to fundamental questions regarding the evolutionary precursors of our modern capitalist society.

Additionally, by focusing greater attention on the institutions and governance practices of rundale, and the extent to which they may have engendered greater or lesser environmental sustainability, rundale joins debate on the nature of the 'commons', or common-pool resource governance systems. Contributors to this field suggest that institutions of collective governance, such as are found in rundale, may have offered competitive advantage over systems governed by formal-legal regulation. In this way, the study of rundale also has something to contribute to modern discussions on resource governance, on the construction of sustainable institutions - and for the famine era in particular - on the preconditions of ecological stress. What follows is a primer not only on common sources suited to the study of rundale, but some provisional guidance on integrating different sources within specific case studies. Included also is a brief summary of the current state of knowledge based on outstanding works in the field. It is hoped that this piece will contribute to widening the net of sources typically invoked in the study of rundale, as well as pointing to areas of potential future discovery.

Making sense of rundale

The publication of Evans' 1939 paper marked the beginning of a wave of seminal works on rundale in Ireland. Prominent amongst these are the theses of Desmond McCourt, a student of Evan's at Queen's University Belfast. The addition of Ronald Buchanan's thesis in 1958, and the subsequent output of this group would later earn them the title of 'Queen's School' of historical geography. McCourt's theses (1947, 1950) are defining works in the field, and an essential primer to rundale. Buchanan's (1958) is a comprehensive study of the Barony of Lecale, Co. Down, influenced by 'regional personality' constructs which owe their lineage to Carl Sauer and H.J. Fleure, the latter of whom Evans had previously studied under. The relative coherence of this Queen's group would soon bring them into conflict with other Irish historical geographers due to their hypotheses on the antiquity and evolutionary lineage of rundale, which Evans previously claimed could trace its origins to the Iron Age. This position was strongly disputed by J.H. Andrews, most notably in papers presented to the Annual Conference of Irish Geographers in 1974 and 1977, respectively titled 'The Ethnic Factor in Irish Geography' and 'The Geographical Study of the Irish Past'. Both

are essential reading in order to make sense of this important area of dispute, which largely defined debate on rundale for much of the twentieth century (Doherty 2000). Evans claimed that archaeological evidence was silent on the habitats of the peasantry, suggesting that '…working back from the recent past, we can say that the traditional unit of settlement accompanying rundale or infield/outfield system was the hamlet or kin-cluster' (Evans 1976: 53). Conversely, Andrews argued that such reasoning was far removed from physical and documentary evidence, and based on a form of ethnic determinism reasoned through a process of logical elimination; '…Villages are Norman, towns are Scandinavian, raths are Celtic. What can clachans and rundale be? On the ethnic hypothesis, the only people left to attach them to are the people who preceded the Celts' (Andrews 1974:7).

The dispute between these rival factions encapsulates a core issue in doing research of this nature; the appropriate dialogue between theory and data. Recasting the controversy in these terms places it in a more useful position for researchers. Whilst many tended to pitch the question of rundale as one of mapping its chronology and spatial distribution, the makeup of its social institutions are also central to its very physical constitution. Without the cultural and institutional features that make it so recognisable, - such as allocation of tillage by shares, scattering of plots, or seasonal livestock migration – it is largely indistinct from settlements of comparable morphology. Grasping the reasons and motivations underpinning the formation and reproduction of such common-pool resource systems over time is not one which lends itself well to empirical research. Accordingly, a reasonable dose of theory is needed. Whilst this does not diminish the need for sound empirical work, it at least suggests that something might be gained by thinking beyond source materials alone: by reasoning about the internal cultural practices which contributed to the reproduction of communes from generation to generation, by inferring how an implicit concern with ecological sustainability may have driven cultivation strategies, or how, as Evans reasoned, the inherent evolutionary nature of social systems implies the existence of predecessors to individuated agriculture, if not the continuity of common-pool systems from antiquity. Much of this line of reasoning may be usefully supplemented with casework from other countries (Stahl 1980).

In fact, if we 'zoom out' further from the specifics of Ireland, we find some interesting consistencies in the manner in which rundale, or the practice of farming in common, has been discussed in terms of research practice. The divide between Evans and Andrews marks a largely academic dispute in terms of the appropriate use of data, and suitable methods of research. Evans' use of contemporary folk accounts and field evidence mark his research apart as one of combined anthropology-geography, at a time when historical geography at large was driven by cartographic and documentary evidence. More recently, Kevin Whelan's work (1995, 1999, 2011, and 2012) suggests rundale was a functional adaptation to the specific ecological circumstances of the Irish Western Seaboard. As such, the pooling of resources was a rational response both to the labour demands of bringing new lands under cultivation, and a means of hedging against seasonal variations in climate and food availability.

Dodgshon's (2012) recent chapter further outlines a connection between the social institutions of common holding and the unique ecology of these settlements, by suggesting that openfield common systems evolved from a need to maintain year-round fertilisation by combining infield-grazing with winter housing of livestock in order to collect manure. In this way, reserves of fertiliser could be maintained, whilst also ensuring a balance between tillage and stock. Dodgshon also offers the useful concept of decision 'caging' as a means of understanding why common holding systems may or may not have emerged in areas of similar physical characteristics. This concept further challenges general models of rundale such as those that lean heavily on population as a primary driver, by suggesting that contextual circumstances played an important role in determining ('caging') decisions around resource use. Contextual factors such as the strength of

direct control over estates or letting of land in defined quantities therefore impact on later decisions of tenants to subdivide.

Others such as Yager (2002) interpreted modern survivals of strong community sentiment as evidence of previous communal settlement, whilst Gibbons (1997) has asserted that communalism formed the basis of a distinct 'moral economy' through webs of close affiliation between members. James Connolly was equally taken with the political implications of a foregoing communalism in Irish society, suggesting that collective organisation was the norm prior to planation (Connolly 1944). This approach to the use of cultural sources was defended in context of the work of the Queen's School by Buchanan, who stressed that such reasoning was essential in order to '…make connections across great distances of time and space, to stress ecological settings…and to show the relevance of space-time relations in the evolution of culture' (Buchanan 1984, p. 133). Despite some reasonable dispute concerning the evidence base for some of these claims (i.e. Connolly), they at least suggest that there is something of value in 'zooming out' from our specific sources, and giving some attention to the cultural and social mechanisms that bound the system together, to the circumstances that made rundale a viable or necessary means of cultivation, and to the ever-tantalising possibility – perhaps as yet to be verified by arachnology – that Evans was right.

Researching rundale

What follows is a primer on common available sources, with notes on the uses to which they have been put - the list is far from exhaustive. Some of these have been mined extensively, others are relatively new. This list is drawn largely from my own background in social science, and ignores sources essential to other disciplines such as the physical landscape (although some references are made to photographic evidence), or the soil, of which Jim Collins (2008) has written expertly and exhaustively. This is due solely to shortcomings in my own knowledge and experience, and the presence of suitable experts within this volume, and I make no claims regarding source superiority. I believe that the further discoveries and greater understandings of rundale which remain, will only come about through a combination of various source materials – documentary and physical.

Statistics

We are slowly beginning to scratch the surface of the role of rundale during the Great Famine (1845-1852). The validity of this work hinges on estimates of the extent of rundale around this time which contradict common narratives of its sharp decline in the wake of tillage price fluctuations after the Napoleonic Wars. Estimates such as those of McCabe (1991) show that up to 831,000 acres – 63% of the total area of Co. Mayo – were recorded as held in rundale in the 1840's (see McCabe's extensive and essential footnotes on estimation issues, including comments on the collection of figures by local union clerks, which he suggests may in fact have underestimated its extent). Almquist's work on county-level data from the census of 1841 shows that the presence of common tenancy correlates strongly with other regional characteriscts, where it was associated with significantly higher rates of early marriage, higher rates of low-class housing, and lower land valuation (Almquist 1977: 213). Together, these works suggest that not only was rundale a significant feature of the Irish landscape right up to the mid-nineteenth century, but that it was strongly associated with a range of factors which had a direct bearing on settlement viability and ecological stress.

What are the vital statistics on rundale in Ireland? Of all 130 poor law unions which returned estimates of common holding to the Devon Commission (1845), the country-wide mean rate of lands held in common or joint tenancy was 8%. This average, as alluded to above, conceals vast between-county inequalities. Co. Mayo recorded an average of 42% amongst its unions, Clare 41%,

and Kerry 10%. The distribution is profoundly skewed, with the majority of counties recording less than 5%. Kildare recorded the lowest rate, at 0.43%. Furthermore, the use of county-level aggregation conceals inequalities amongst unions themselves. In Co. Mayo for example, we observe a rate of 83% in the union of Westport, whilst the largely urban union of Castlebar records 0. Similarly in Donegal, we find rates of 45% in the union of Millford, and rates of 2.7% in Ballyshannon. The existence of this variance, coupled with our knowledge of the potential for large qualitative differences in modes of estate management between neighbouring districts, should immediately sensitise us to the need for careful qualification of any observed country-wide trends or averages. Unfortunately, owing to difficulties in definition, and its exclusion from the formal agricultural censes which began in 1847, the Devon Commission appendices remain the only comprehensive source of country-wide estimates of common holding at this time.

My recent work has examined the role of common holding in explaining quantitative patterns of distress during the peak famine months of 1847 (Flaherty, 2014). Using data aggregated at county level, I performed a cluster analysis using the following input conditions: land-labour ratio, poor law valuation, females 26-35 married, holdings 1-5 acres, wasteland below 800ft above sea level, and land held in common or joint tenancy, the sources for which are listed below under references. This exercise showed that counties may be grouped into a number of distinct regimes, which may serve as useful predictors of potential ecological stress exposure. In particular, the rundale-dense cluster of counties Clare, Donegal, Galway, Kerry and Mayo, recorded low land valuation, high land-labour ratio, high rates of early marriage, high holding fragmentation, and high levels of wasteland. Working with low sample sizes is an unfortunate consequence of the quality of data available, which naturally limits the ability of analysts to build more complex statistical models of famine-era conditions. Clustering data in this way allows us to include more variables than is possible with standard models, and these exercises are slowly revealing the mix of conditions which may have contributed to rundale-dense areas faring significantly worse during the famine years. The missing link however, is to understand whether this was a consequence of the manner in which production was organised under common holding systems, or whether the constraints of landlordism impacted more harshly on these high-density systems already stretched by overpopulation.

The answer appears to lay somewhere in between, as models using more detailed data and geographically sensitive techniques, are beginning to yield further secrets concerning the role of rundale during the famine. Using data at the level of poor law unions instead of counties has greatly helped, by offering a more detailed view of differences between districts within counties. Data at this level offers 130 cases (unions) as opposed to 32 (counties), and permits the specification of more detailed models than is possible at lower levels of aggregation. Preliminary results from this exercise, conducted with the assistance of Florence Maguire, show that the presence of common holding correlated strongly and significantly with greater uptake of relief rations during the peak famine months. More detailed models show that even when conditions such as land valuation and population density are considered and controlled for, the presence of common holding is strongly associated with greater rates of relief ration uptake. Whilst this evidence points toward further statistical exploration of the role of common holding during the famine, it is incapable on its own of explaining how common holding and collective governance specifically translated into greater distress. Making this connection requires detailed qualitative work, and further interrogation of scarce documentary sources as discussed below.

Documents

Documentary sources with definitive reference to rundale are difficult to come by. Useful sources related to land reorganisation such as the baseline reports of the Congested Districts Board for

example, make scant reference to rundale despite the clear legacy of scattered holding and high density settlement, which provided the very rationale for reorganisation in marginal districts toward the close of the nineteenth century. Sources such as this have been put to good use by authors such as Kevin Whelan (1999) in his contribution to the New Survey of Clare Island, and this work is exemplary of the benefits of careful use of multiple sources – documentary, cartographic, and statistical. Copies of the original baseline reports reside in the Berkeley library of Trinity College Dublin, and are available for consultation by visiting readers on application. Use of this source requires careful qualification however, as it is difficult to infer residual traces of rundale in many districts. However, the difficulties encountered by the board in its redistribution efforts, and extensive references to rundale visible within parliamentary transcripts long into the twentieth century, lend some credence to Yager's (2002) argument for the residual presence of the cultural influence – if not the physical and social infrastructure – of rundale itself. In this respect, the reports serve as a useful tool for profiling areas which, with corroborating statistical evidence, we may identify as locations of former high-density common holding.

A useful context for such locations may be constructed using information from Griffiths Valuation. James Reilly's (2003) useful guide to this source shows how common tenancies may be identified from the notation used by valuators in their compilation of the returns. According to Reilly, Griffith's field staff held to the convention of bracketing joint tenants in their final returns – a practice Reilly accepts as indicative of rundale. Unfortunately, it is difficult to surmise from the forms alone whether a bracketed settlement denotes a joint occupation with the classical 'diagnostic criteria' of rundale such as governance by council or periodic redistribution, or whether such grouping represents an arrangement of bulk rent payment. Corroborating these returns with accompanying 6-inch maps allows researchers at least to observe the structure of such settlements, and to corroborate their judgement with the presence or absence of nucleated settlement. Useful reference may be made to the work of Andrews (2009), and Buchanan (1973), whose typology of Irish field systems remains an indispensable reference for distinguishing the characteristic morphology of rundale.

Other sources, such as those mined extensively by Fergus Kelly (1988, 1997) demonstrate something of the connection hypothesised by Evans between forms of settlement antecedent to plantation, by outlining the precedent for common holding in Irish customary law. This fascinating area also includes Kenneth Nicholl's work on Gaelic Ireland (1976, 2003), both of whom have assembled and debated a body of evidence drawing on the Irish law tracts which provide considerable insight into the operation of common property regimes under indigenous customary code. Together, these works give insight into the problematic layering of customary and formal-legal code following the outlawing of partible inheritance (Kinealey 2008: 82, Wylie 1975: 19), and of processes of land division, kinship-reckoning, and governance under Tanistry (Kelly 1997: 430). Notes on the periodic reallocation of shares within communes may be found in sources such as Arthur Young (McCourt 1955: 373-375), Henry Piers (1682: 115-117), and Peter Knight (1836), and a list of useful secondary works is provided below.

Other documentary sources provide contemporary insight into the organisation and practices of rundale, however these must be approached with caution. Transcripts of evidence brought before the Devon commission offer the advantage of being organised both by theme and location, however contributors to the commission were often sought amongst local landowners, agents, and clerks. As such, the accounts are prone to bias, particularly as many respondents desired legal reforms which would enable easier redistribution of congested properties. There are traces of nuance in their comments however which give insight into specific local practices, and there is also much of interest in the way their evidence is framed. The evidence of Cornelius O' Brien of Ennistimon Co. Clare, for example, gives insight into the manner in which notions of private

entitlement, imposed from without by local landowners, intervened in the mechanisms of common holding, resulting in profound disputes between rundale occupants;

> "15. Have any disputes arisen relative to the right of taking the sea-weed? – Never, until within the last two years. How did these disputes then arise? –
> 16. Some people in the neighbourhood, wishing to make it common property, came in crowds and destroyed the weed; they cut it, and cut each other too…
> 21. In speaking of the injury which the public being allowed to appropriate the growing weed themselves might have, does that arise from its being necessary to protect the weed in its early growth? – It arises from the same cause that makes the commons of no value; where every one has a right, there is no one to protect it, for they will pull and drag it away from each other." (Devon Commission Part II, p. 693).

The various documents of the Poor Inquiry also offer some insight, district by district, into the poor standard of living conditions experienced in such areas. Coupled with the correlations observed above concerning the provenance of rundale and the experience of distress and food shortage these passages offer important corroboration concerning the ways in which the presence of rundale translated into greater physical hardship. Further general insight into living conditions and the effects of clustered habitation may be gleaned from sources such as the Disease Reports, which state the following with regard to Dingle, Co. Kerry;

> "A great increase of fever and small-pox. The number of patients at dispensary increased one-third. A thousand labourers unemployed in district. Fever very rife. No fever hospital within thirty miles. Suggests the giving of employment and the establishment of a fever hospital; the poor in district having generally but one bed, and therefore obliged to sleep together." (Disease (Ireland)… p.2-8)

Finally it is important to stress the importance of sources which might be considered tangential – to academic social scientists at least – but which have long been a staple of detailed local history research. Academics are only now coming to terms with the importance of visual sources such as photographs, as a means not just of gleaning specific information on landscape layout or material culture, but as a window into greater questions concerning the administration of land and exercise of power. The online repository of the National Photographic Archive houses photographs from the Welsh collection (Robert Welsh was charged with producing images of western rural congestion for the Congested Districts Board), and those of the Lawrence Collection which features images from across the country, examples of which are cited below. Useful analysis of these sources has been initiated by Justin Carville (2007), and a comprehensive guide to visual sources has been published under the Maynooth Research Guides series (Kelly 2008). Finally, Ordnance Survey Ireland's (2014) Historical Mapping tool offers an important source for visualising long-term patterns of settlement change from the 6-inch maps of 1829-1841, to the 25-inch maps of 1897-1913. Coupled with the work of the National Centre for Geocomputation (2010) which has digitised population and land-use variables within a publicly-available GIS visualisation tool, both sources greatly enhance the scope for source triangulation in ways not possible in the heyday of the Queen's School.

Future research

As historians and social scientists pay greater attention to historical precursors to modern capitalist society, it is clear that Ireland has much to contribute to this debate. This new line of dialogue is one which promises to internationally sustain a topic such as rundale, which continues to capture domestic attention. Works such as Anderson (2010) and Brown (2010) have revealed the

importance of historical modes of production, and of the case of Ireland, to classical social theorists such as Marx. Additionally, Ireland continues to produce fertile scholarship on the nature, geography, and impact of famine (Nally 2011, Delaney 2012), works which bring the insular case of Ireland into comparison with other historical cases, and broader social issues. Additionally, by focusing on the role of rundale as a precursor to the geography of famine distress, investigation continues on the relationship between communality, ecological resilience, and adaptive capacity – how the institutions and practices of rundale served to enhance sustainability, how culture, social structure, and environment interacted to produce a unique and dynamic form of settlement, and how rundale eventually succumbed to its numerous ecological and political constraints (Flaherty 2013, 2014).

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