

## **Ireland in 1913: Social Conditions**

Percy French (1854-1920) published his famous song about the West Clare railway, 'Are You Right There Michael', in 1902, and its commentary about substandard rolling stock and philosophical engine drivers and guards, could probably have been written about any of the 'light railways' built west of a line from Derry to Cork, from the late 1880s. Built by the British government to boost the economy and, it was hoped, to 'kill Home Rule with kindness', these railways despite their many flaws, changed Irish life forever. They opened up the west to tourists, brought goods and services to shops, hotels and other businesses, (creating jobs in these sectors, as well as on the railways themselves,) and facilitated distribution of the post and newspapers. Now the west was getting a share of the action that had been happening in the rest of the country since the 1850s. An efficient train (and steamship) service enabled Mrs O'Brien of Lough Gur, Co. Limerick, to send her newly-churned butter overnight to special customers in London in the 1860s (before refrigeration, remember); eels taken out of the Nore at Inistioge in the 1880s could be sold at Billingsgate fish market the following morning. 'Are You Right There Michael' was thought hilarious because at the time it was written, the Irish public had come to expect, and demand, a punctual and effective public transport system.

Adherence to clock-time had become crucial in other areas of life too. School attendance was compulsory only since 1892, but even the poorest people had embraced the idea of schooling, to a greater or lesser extent, at this stage. Irish literacy rates on the eve of the First World War were among the highest in Europe. Individuals who have their sights set farther than their home-place have to be literate and well-informed about their destinations, and able to communicate readily with home once they get there. By 1890 there were 3 million Irish-born people living outside Ireland, and substantial Irish

communities in North America and Australia, South America, New Zealand, and South Africa, not to mention Britain. Most of those who went to the New World in the early twentieth century were 'sent for' by friends, sisters, brothers and cousins, and most were aged between 17 and 25. Nearly all were single, and as many women as men left the country. Most of them never returned.

Not everybody emigrated of course, and Ireland was changing rapidly for those who did not. The short-lived boom which happened from the late 1880s created a variety of jobs in shops large and small, in transport and distribution of goods, in financial institutions and businesses. Office employment expanded and in the expanding army of white-collar workers, female clerical workers were starting to be recruited. Jobs, many of them for women, were also opening up in telecommunications. Skilled craft work was gradually undermined by the advent of cheap, mass-produced goods in shops, but dressmakers, tailors, blacksmiths, upholsterers, coach-makers, and carpenters held their own, while retail traders - grocers, butchers, bakers and drapers - had another fifty or sixty years before supermarkets and massive chain stores threatened them seriously. While the majority of factory jobs for men and women were in Ulster, other cities and towns always had some industrial work in food processing, brewing, clothing and textiles. Most sought-after of all were the permanent and pensionable jobs of National teacher (this profession had slightly more women than men, in 1901), policeman (all male by definition), nurse (all female except for male attendants in mental hospitals), or any kind of state employee at national or local level. Some level of teenage education was required for these posts, and the youngest child of a small farming or artisan family was often helped by older brothers' and sisters' earnings to 'stay at the books'. Wherever they worked, by the early-twentieth century more young men *and* women than ever before, were leaving their home-places every day to go to work. While they were single (and many never married), they had free time in the evenings and

weekends, so they joined cultural, social, political and religious organizations, toggled out for football, rowing or hurling and played in, or 'followed', the brass, reed and pipe bands that grew up in every sizeable town. The bicycle minimized the distance between country and town for farmer and labourer, male and female, alike.

Living conditions were also improving for most people. The Old Age Pension introduced in 1909 gave dignity and independence to the elderly. Most rural local authorities (and in the west, the Congested Districts Board) built good, solid houses from the 1880s onwards; the Irish had the best-housed rural labourers in western Europe in 1914. Some urban local authorities did likewise, but most town-dwelling working-class people were to remain crammed into badly-ventilated, unserviced rooms in tenements, lanes and courts for another generation at least.

As far as public health was concerned, typhus, smallpox and many other major killers were in retreat by 1900, but consumption, or tuberculosis, was a major worry, which government and voluntary agencies came together to combat in the early twentieth century. Apart from TB, the Irish were a comparatively healthy nation, especially in the countryside where water and milk were clean. Nutritionists, however, fretted about the excessive consumption of tea, available in even the remotest western outposts by 1890.

The institutional network so familiar to twentieth-century Ireland was well in place by 1913. The lunatic asylums/mental hospitals and the reformatories and industrial schools were filling up steadily from year to year. The Poor Law workhouses in the early twentieth century housed mainly the destitute old, and unmarried mothers and their young children, and operated as bad-weather stop-overs for people on the tramp. Abolished after independence, they became county homes in the 1920s, and the hospitals and dispensaries

attached to them evolved into the regional hospitals and community care centres of today. Any middle-aged or older Irish people of our time sent back 100 years would find a recognizable social landscape, and would encounter people with habits and aspirations not too different from our own. If any young people in 1913 were hurtled back even sixty years before that, however, they would have found themselves at a complete loss.

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