MYTH VERSUS REALITY – UNDERDEVELOPED IRELAND IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE SOUTH-WEST

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INTRODUCTION

Late nineteenth century Ireland possessed many 'hidden Irelands', both real and imaginary, but at the hands of Irish nationalists it was very often the Ireland of myth and imagination which was committed to the pages of history. This has resulted in the caricaturisation of many of the realities of nineteenth century life in Ireland. Underdevelopment along the western seaboard was one reality of nineteenth century Ireland which has been seriously misrepresented in nationalist literature and nationalist ideology in general. However, in the late nineteenth century an underdeveloped Ireland was uncovered by philanthropic and 'self-help' enthusiasts. These were drawn mainly from the English ruling class and from the Anglo-Irish ascendancy. This clash of perceptions of the nationalistic peasantry and underdeveloped Ireland forms the basis of this paper. Divided into three sections, the paper will focus initially on the perceptions of cultural nationalists. These viewed the west as a distinctive cultural region harbouring the remnants of Gaelic Ireland. Thus it will be argued that cultural nationalists idealised the peasant and obscured the realities of hunger, hardship and deprivation which were the basis of the peasants' world. The second section considers the west of Ireland as revealed by the "official mind" in the late nineteenth century when steps were taken to allieviate the problems of this other 'hidden Ireland'. Finally, section three will consider under-developed Ireland as revealed through the "base line" reports of the Congested Districts Board for the south-west of Ireland. This section will focus on County Kerry and parts of West Cork in particular.

THE "HIDDEN IRELAND" AND THE NATIONALIST

Garvin categorises the period between 1891 and 1910 as the 'reconstructionist' phase of nationalist politics in Ireland. While all too often this era is considered as a time of little action, it was, in fact, the beginning of the 'nation-building' phase of Irish history (Garvin, 1981; 89). This was the time when the structures and institutions of the Irish state were laid down, structures and institutions which would later serve vested interests, like landowners and shop-keepers, rather than the people of under-developed Ireland and the small farmers of the west in particular. This was also the era when cultural nationalism was articulated in the larger provincial towns and in nationalist circles in and around Dublin. It was, of course, the age of the great literary revival. The Gaelic League which was formed in 1893 ran amok in the ethos of the day – Romanticism. The League found particular favour with middle-class townspeople and returned emigrants concerned with discovering a Gaelic culture in rural under-developed Ireland. Gaelic culture was seen to be still intact in the west of Ireland as the following statement of Daniel Corkery makes clear:

> one must, leaving the cities and towns behind, venture among the bogs and hills, far into the mountains even, where the Irish still lurked
>
> (Corkery, 1924; 19)

These "bogs and hills" and "mountains" were the western congested districts which harboured poverty, illiteracy and disease. Cultural nationalists paid little attention to this reality. Tempered in Romantic idealism, they viewed the west as the final outpost of 'Gaelic man'. This illusive figure was well captured in Yeats' poem, 'The Fisherman', as a dream-like character far removed from the realities of rural poverty then prevalent in the west of Ireland. These literary revivalists and cultural nationalists, in true Romantic tradition, imagined worlds and obscured the realities of poverty and misery in which the ideal Gael lived. The myths created by cultural nationalists penetrated the whole nationalist move-ment, so much so that the state-builders, those seeking political separation and economic independence, came to see the future in terms of these myths. As Garvin states:

> "Synge and Yeats valued peasant culture because it was non-bourgeois and reflected older and presumably nobler values. Ironically, middle-class Catholics often saw an idealised Catholic piety in the Gaelic tradition where the Anglo-Irish poets saw pagan heroism"
>
> (Garvin, 1981; 104)

THE "OTHER IRELAND" AND THE PHILANTHROPIST

As we have seen, the realities of under-developed Ireland were largely uncovered by the landed aristocracy and subsequently by the government in Dublin. Infrastructural development, especially the extension of railways into western areas, and the emergence of the thriving tourist industry, brought the ascendancy and the new middle class into contact with the poor in the west of Ireland. Newspapers related accounts of poverty. Journalistic accounts of hardship and the development of photo-journalism suddenly revealed the almost inhuman conditions which existed on the 'back-door' of one of the most powerful empires in the world. The political response which sights of poverty in the poorest districts of the west aroused was well captured by George Wyndham who toured the congested districts in 1901:

> "If one could turn the river of Imperialism into this back-water spawned over by obscene reptiles . . . if one could change these anaemic children into full-blooded men"
>
> (Curtis, L. P., 1963; 374)

The revelation of poverty and hunger on such a large scale, and so close to home, sparked off a wave of philanthropic zeal among the aristocracy, including the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. Men like Horace Plunkett were responsible for nurturing this philanthropy and channelling it to provide self-help projects for the worst-off in rural Irish society. Plunkett, referring to the landed-gentry, argued that "they were now free to inspire and lead in innovation" (R.T.E., 1985: "Shadows"). Educational reform was initiated, the gentry sponsored agricultural shows and charitable reforms were enacted, but it was the government which took responsibility for the west of Ireland by establishing the Congested Districts Board (C.D.B.).

The C.D.B. was established in 1891 by an Act of Parliament which focused particularly on the social and economic grievances of the west of Ireland. The establishment of a Board whose functions were practically similar to that of a modern regional development authority, marked a new departure in the Conservative Party's perception of the problems of the west of Ireland. The search for solutions now departed from the road building neurosis which had characterised regional development earlier in the century. The C.D.B. sought to improve agriculture by improving agricultural techniques and supplementing it, where possible, with fishing and land tenure reforms aimed at eliminating the worst aspects of land-holding practices and underemployment in the west of Ireland. A "congested district" under the terms of the 1891 Act was one where the total valuation per head of population was less than thirty shillings. Congested districts were located along the north-west, west and south-west of Ireland. They included most of Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Roscommon, Galway, Mayo, Kerry, parts of West Cork and Clare. The category "congested" is, in fact, a misnomer, implying as it did over-population which was not the case. The issue in these districts was not scarcity of land, but the scarcity of any but the poorest land. The C.D.B. was concerned with a class of farmers whose holdings were far from being economically viable, and with fisherman who held token holdings and engaged in fishing in a desultory, non-professional manner. Here, then, was a peasant tenantry living on the poorest patches of land, a society both of tradition and superstition, a society born from the upheavals that Irish society in general had experienced from the close of the nineteenth century.

THE POVERTY OF CONGESTED IRELAND

To appreciate social and economic conditions in under-developed Ireland, it is useful to focus on particular regions. Here, the south-west, incorporating Kerry and parts of West Cork, will be considered, using the evidence of the base-line reports of the C.D.B.

As a region, the south-west was defined as a marginal area of poor agricultural land with little or no economic potential at the beginning of this century. The rugged coastline, the bogs, the rock-scarred landscape, the patchwork farms, the mountains lost in low cloud, settlements in out-of-the-way places and miles and miles of road (the legacy of imperial penetration of the Atlantic frontier) are the usual images transmitted by wealthier inhabitants and visitors alike when describing conditions in the West of Ireland at this time. The word pictures of picturesque and rugged countryside, however, mask the real story. In every county there are stretches of both 'good' and 'bad' agricultural land. While in many areas poor soils covered a greater percentage of the total area, richer soils were to be found in all counties that had congested districts. Table 1 shows the percentage of 'difficult' or marginal land for each of the four provinces in 1979.

TABLE 1: % Difficult or Marginal Land per Province, 1979.

PROVINCE	% MARGINAL LAND
Leinster	24
Munster	44
Connaught	57
Ulster	60

(Gilmore, D, 1979; 104)

From this it can be seen that then, as now, there was a high degree of spatial concentration in the location of marginal lands, the western seaboard having 70% of all land classified as marginal or difficult. However, terms like 'marginal' or 'difficult' do not imply that such lands were agriculturally useless. Rather, their agricultural capacity at this time was severely limited by social, environmental and economic factors. While much of the south-west could be considered marginal, land reclamation, drainage and suitable farming techniques could have helped offset the difficulties experienced in this part of the country in the late nineteenth century.

The region under consideration in this study (Figure 1) was surveyed by the C.D.B. officials in 1891 and found to have nineteen separate congested districts. Taken together these contained one hundred and ten congested district electoral divisions (see Table 2). The base-line reports for these districts were compiled by Redmond Roche and James E. Butler, the latter a cattle dealer from Waterville, Co. Kerry. The number of reports compiled by each inspector is given in Table 3.

TABLE 2: Number of Congested Electoral Divisions in each District.

County	District	Number of Congested Electoral Division	Name of each Congested Electoral Division
Cork	Courtmacsherry	1	Courtmacsherry.
"	Baltimore	4	Tullagh, Aghdown Stn., Cape Clear, Castlehaven Stn.
"	Schull	8	Ballydehob, Coolagh, Crookhaven, Dunbeacon, Dunmanus, Goleen, Schull, Toormore.
"	Sheepshead	5	Glanlough, Seefin, Sheepshead, Durrus East and Durrus West.
"	Ballingeary	6	Ahil, Drimoleague North, Ballingeary, Glanrath, Slieverath, Bredagh.
"	Castletownberehaven	9	Adrigole, Bear, Coulagh, Curryglass, Kilcaskan, Killaneagh, Kilcotherine, Kilamanagh, Glengarriff.
Kerry	Kenmare	9	Ardea, Danawn, Danros, Glanlee, Glanlough, Glanmore, Kenmare, Kilgarvin, Coolies.
"	Sneem	3	Castlecove, Tahilla, Sneem.
"	Waterville	4	Ballybrack, Caherdaniel, Derrynane, Loughaurane.
"	Valencia	2	Portmagee and Valencia.
"	Caherciveen	10	Caher, Canuig, Ballinskelligs, Emlagh, St. Finan's, Teeraneragh, Bahaghs, Castlequin, Deeriana, Killinane.
"	Killorglin	8	Curragbeg, Glanbehy, Cloon, Lickeen, Maum, Caragh, Curraghmore, Killorglin.
"	Dingle	8	Dingle, Dunquin, Kinaro, Kilmackeder, Kilquane, Marhin, Ventry, Dunurlin.
"	Brandon	2	Brandon, Cloghane.
"	Castlegregory	7	Baurtegaun, Kilgarrylander, Deeus, Lack, Ballynacourty, Castlegregory, Ballinvoher.
"	Coom	3	Clydagh, Coom, Doocarrig.
"	Brosna	7	Brosna, Derreen, Gneeves, Kilmurray, Knocknagashel, Millrook, Mount Eagle.
"	Causeway	6	Ardagh, Causeway, Killury, Kiltwomey, Ballyheigue, Kerryhead.
"	Listowel	8	Ballyconry, Duagh, Guilane, Leitrim, Listowel, Kilshenane, Kilflyn.

Fig:1.

THE CONGESTED DISTRICTS BOARDS OF THE S.W.

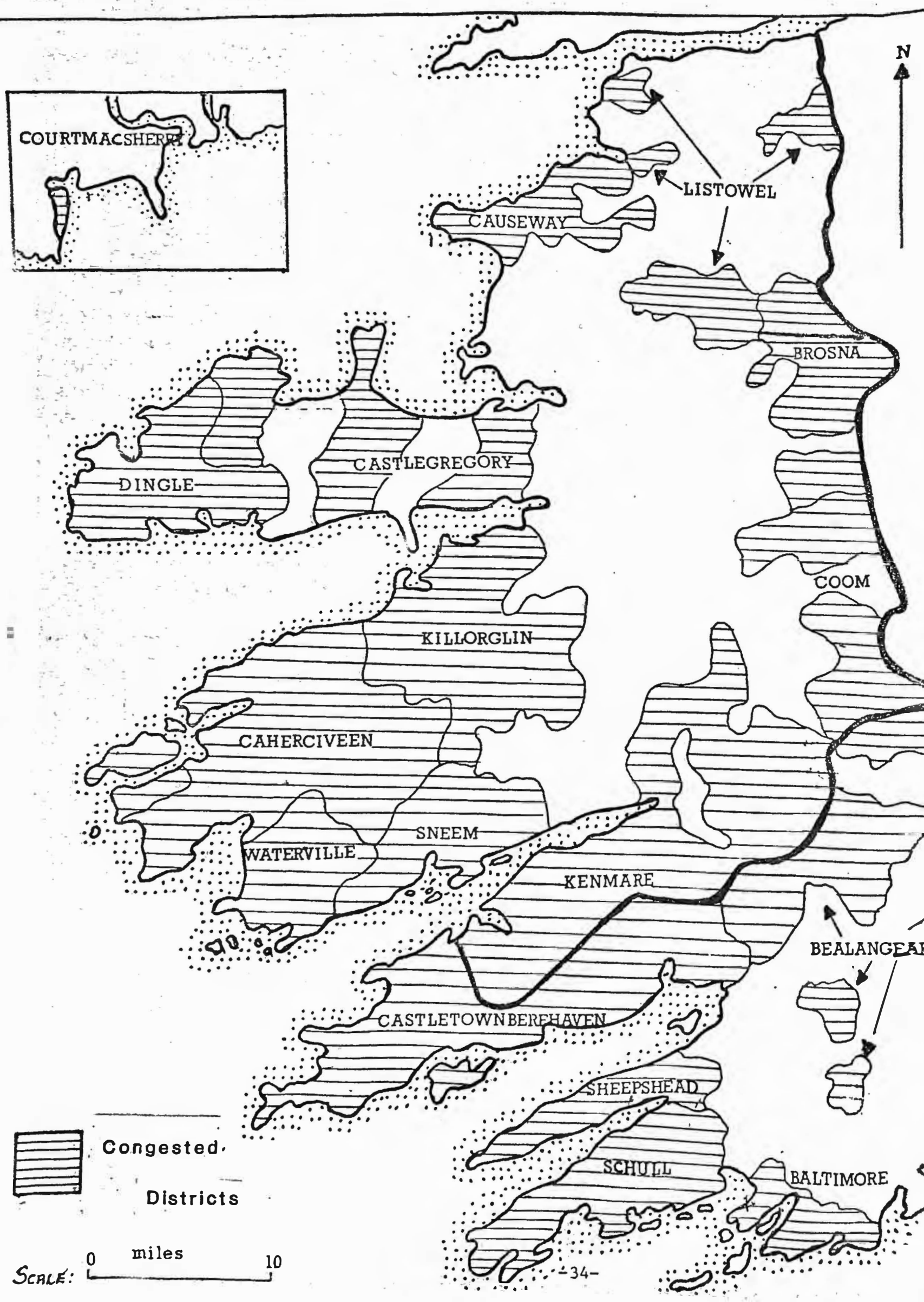


TABLE 3: The Reports Compiled by the C.D.B. Inspectors for West Cork and Kerry.

Name of Inspector	Number of Reports Compiled	Name of each Report	County
Redmond Roche	10	Courtmacsherry	Cork
		Baltimore	"
		Schull	"
		Sheepshead	"
		Ballingeary	"
		Castletownbere	"
		Coom	Kerry
		Brosna	"
		Causeway	"
		Listowel	"
J. E. Butler	9	Kenmare	Kerry
		Sneem	"
		Waterville	"
		Valencia	"
		Caherciveen	"
		Killorglin	"
		Dingle	"
		Brandon	"
		Castlegregory	"

TABLE 4: Information on Population and Farm-Structure in 1891, from the 'Base-line' Reports.

County	Area in Statute Acres	Population in 1891	Number of Families in 1891	Number of Families on holdings exceeding £2 and under £4 valuation	Number of Families on holdings at and under £2 valuation	Number of Families in very poor circum-stances	Number of Families without cattle
Cork	237,992	40,466	6,428	1,088	1,135	940	1,128
Kerry	662,421	90,781	14,961	2,227	5,095	1,601	1,757
Totals	900,413	131,247	21,389	3,315	6,230	2,541	2,885

The base-line reports are a remarkable set of historical documents. They contain information on the social and economic conditions of the people of the West of Ireland between 1891 and 1923. Altogether, 84 reports were compiled, one for each of the areas listed as congested. Although the format of each report was similar (each report was based on a series of 32 questions), the quality varied with the individual inspector. The type of information contained in the base-line reports can be classified under eight headings:

1. Situation.
2. Land Use.
3. Agricultural Pursuits.
4. Services, Employment and Industry.
5. Fishing.
6. Financial and Other Pursuits.
7. Living Conditions of the People.
8. Possible Improvements.

It is now generally accepted that both Roche and Butler were the least particular of the local inspectors involved in the compilation of base-line reports. Cuddy and Curtin have argued that:

> There is considerable variation between reporters in the quantity and quality of socio-economic information provided. This varies from the very great detail recorded by Micks and Gaskell, for example, in certain districts of Donegal and Galway, to the almost total absence of detail in the case of Roche and Butler for all districts in the counties of Cork and Kerry.
>
> (Cuddy and Curtin, 1983; 2)

In 1891 the congested districts of West Cork and Kerry accounted for a quarter of the total area of "congested" Ireland. The population of the congested districts of this part of the country in 1891 was 131, 247 individuals or 21,389 families. The average family size was six, including parents. Table 4 gives the population, area, and the number of holdings that were considered to be in extreme circumstances of poverty in 1891. A total of 29% of families lived on holdings at and under £2 valuation. Just over fifteen per cent lived on holdings valued between £2 and £4 per annum. Altogether, as much as 44.5 per cent of the population of the congested districts in this region lived on holdings of £4 valuation or less. Ten per cent of these families had no cattle, and nearly twelve per cent lived in what the inspectors described as "very poor circumstances". This meant that even in a good year they were "little more than free from the dread of hunger".

Of the 900,413 acres of land in the congested districts of the south-west, 412,599 acres were categorised as mountain or moorland. This figure is not altogether accurate as the inspectors made rough estimates of the amount of land held in common and severalty in an area. The extent of mountain and moorland grazing (which comes to almost half the total area of the congested districts of this region) shows clearly the magnitude of the problem the C.D.B. had to face here. Only 2,145 acres of the mountain and moorland was held directly by landlords. Of the rest, 65.5 per cent was held in common, 30 per cent was held in severalty and 4 per cent was held jointly by two farmers or more. The ordinary tenant farmer was the most dependant on the grazing facilities available in the mountain and moorlands. On a typical farm of £4 valuation or less, three and a half acres were estimated to have been cultivated as follows:

Oats	1 acre
Potatoes	1 acre
Meadow	1 acre
Greencrops	½ acre
Total	3½ acres

The usual crop rotation on these patches of farms was (1) Potatoes; (2) Oats; (3) Grains (sometimes green crops). On larger farms the usual rotation was (1) Lea Oats; (2) Potatoes; (3) Oats; (4) Potatoes or Green Crops; (5) Oats, and (6) Grass. Throughout the congested districts of Cork and Kerry, cultivation was by spade (and shovel on smaller farms). The larger holdings in the congested districts of Courtmacsherry, Dingle, Baltimore, Sheepshead, Schull, Ballingeary, Brandon, Castlegregory, Brosna, Causeway, and Listowel used the plough. Farmers on all holdings had limited access to supplies of manure. In coastal areas this was seaweed and sand, and in inland areas farmyard manure was used. Lime was also used, having first been burned in the ubiquitous lime kilns which dotted the landscape. Generally speaking, cattle were of poor quality despite the fact that they were one of the most important cash products and export commodities of Irish farming in the 1890's.

In 1891, markets were held weekly and fairs were held monthly in nearly all the major centres in the south-west of Ireland. The importance of these fairs and markets is well described by Roche in his discussion on fairs in the district of Brosna, Co. Kerry:

> The fairs at which the cattle, sheep, pigs and horses are chiefly sold are Castleisland (12 in the year), Abbeyfeale (6 in the year) and Listowel (29 in the year). These are attended by graziers from the midland counties, by buyers from the great bacon-curing houses in Limerick, Cork and Waterford, and the Castleisland fairs by horse dealers from different parts of Ireland. There are weekly butter markets held at Listowel, Abbeyfeale and Castleisland, at which butter is packed in firkins (usually salted) and fresh butter, in lumps, is sold. In the winter season it is usually sold in fresh lumps and the buyers blend these lumps, having first assorted them according to quality, pack the butter into firkins and cools and ship it to England; and the small farmers (say one to five cows) now usually sell their butter weekly in lumps.
>
> Eggs are sold once every week to Huxters or local dealers who travel from house to house through the district. They in turn sell on the weekly market day to larger dealers in Abbeyfeale, Listowel or Castleisland, who ship them to Britain. Probably, eggs are three days old when they reach the consumers ... The food and other supplies are usually bought in neighbouring towns.
>
> (Base-line Report, Brosna, 1891; 2)

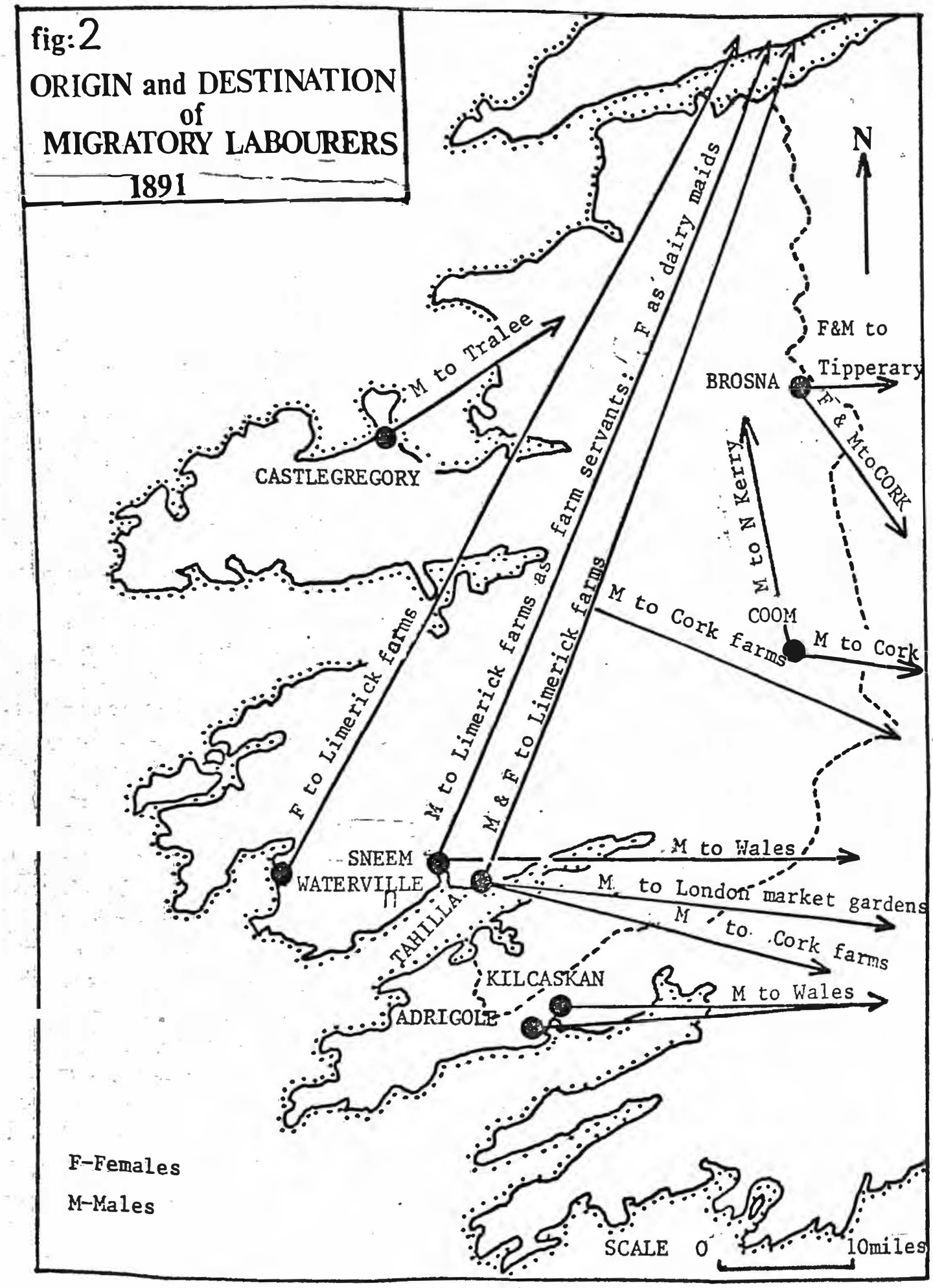
Most families in the congested districts lived from year to year only just managing to pay their debts. A failure of the potato crop meant financial ruin for many. Some depended on the returns from seasonal earnings of men and boys who migrated to Wales, Cork, Tipperary, North Kerry and Limerick for three to six months of the year. A small number of females went to work on farms in Cork and Limerick as dairymaids, earning between fifteen to eighteen pounds per year. Figure 2 shows the origins and destinations of a group of migratory labourers in this part of "congested" Ireland. It will be seen that migration in search of work was not as widespread here as it was in other parts of Ireland, notably the north-west of Donegal. Migration of labourers was particularly significant in the congested districts of Kilcaskan, Adrigole, Sneem, Tahilla, Waterville, Killorglin, Castlegregory, Coom and Brosna. In the congested areas of Courtmacsherry, men migrated each year to Baltimore and Kinsale for the fishing season. They worked on foreign fishing trawlers and earned between twenty and twenty-four shillings per week.

Farm labourers found limited employment opportunities in the more prosperous congested districts in the spring and autumn months. In general, however, farmers on small holdings did not employ labourers. Employment on larger farms and estates was regular between the first of March and the first of November each year and very irregular for the remainder of the year. Wages were on average six shillings per week with food, and nine shillings per week without a food allowance. Labourers receiving food in lieu of money received two or three meals a day. However, wages varied considerably between districts. Labourers in Kenmare could earn up to twelve shillings per week in a good year. In other areas, such as Brosna, the labourer found constant employment from February 15th to November 1st, while some labourers were provided with constant employment on estates and received a house and garden plot free of rent.

From information contained in the base-line reports, it is difficult to estimate the number of full-time fishermen in the south-west of Ireland at this time. Generally speaking, the local fishermen worked for part of the year fishing for mackerel, and remained idle or farmed their small garden plots for the remainder of the year. The fisheries off the south-west coast of Cork and Kerry appear to have been heavily fished by foreign trawlers in the 1890's. Local boats were small, and were described by some inspectors as canoes, although some larger boats were also worked from expanding fishing centres

fig:2

ORIGIN and DESTINATION of MIGRATORY LABOURERS 1891



such as Dingle and Baltimore. Many areas which were actively engaged in the fishing industry were poorly serviced and had very few or no landing slips or piers. Many of those which did function were in a poor state of repair or difficult to get at. Local inspectors recommended the construction of new piers and the repair of older boat slips, piers and landing-places in the major fishing districts (see Figure 3). The long stretch of coast from Fenit in Tralee Bay, to Tarbert on the Shannon, could not boast of even one pier or landing-place in 1891. The local inspector here recommended the construction of a pier at either Ballybunion or Ballyheigue to help promote a native fishing industry and to accommodate the foreign trawlers which fished this area.

In general, most families in the congested districts of this part of Ireland survived from year to year only just managing to make ends meet. The cash receipts and expenditure for the average small farmer having 30 acres of land, four cows and mountain grazing in proportion, were estimated as follows:

RECEIPTS	£	s	d	EXPENDITURE	£	s	d
Sale of Butter	12	0	0	Rent	6	0	0
Sale of Young Stock	8	0	0	One-half Poor Rates	0	7	0
Sale of Pigs	7	0	0	2 Young Pigs	2	0	0
Sale of Sheep & Lambs	3	0	0	Food, Breadstuffs etc.	15	0	0
Sale of Eggs, Wool, etc.	3	0	0	Groceries	3	0	0
				Clothes, Tobacco etc.	5	0	0
				County Cess	1	0	0
Total	33	0	0	Total	32	7	0

The cash receipts and expenditure of a labourer's family of six persons, with one wage earner at £30, was as follows:

RECEIPTS	£	s	d	EXPENDITURE	£	s	d
Wages	15	0	0	Food	20	0	0
Sale of Pigs (profit)	5	0	0	Clothing	6	0	0
Sale of Eggs & Fowl	10	0	0	Sundries	4	0	0
Total	30	0	0	Total	30	0	0

In nearly all households extra income meant increased expenditure on sundry items such as drink and tobacco, so that a second wage-earner rarely can be interpreted as materially benefitting a household. Neither did he or she add to the investment capital of smallholders. In general, the buying and selling of livestock involved cash transactions, while food, clothes, seeds and other household items were obtained on credit. The latter was particularly widespread. Home-grown produce, including potatoes, fish, and milk was estimated by the local inspectors in this part of Ireland to be worth on average fifteen pounds, ten shillings to small farmers. The corresponding figure for labourers was only six pounds per annum. The typical diet of the inhabitants of the congested districts was described as follows:

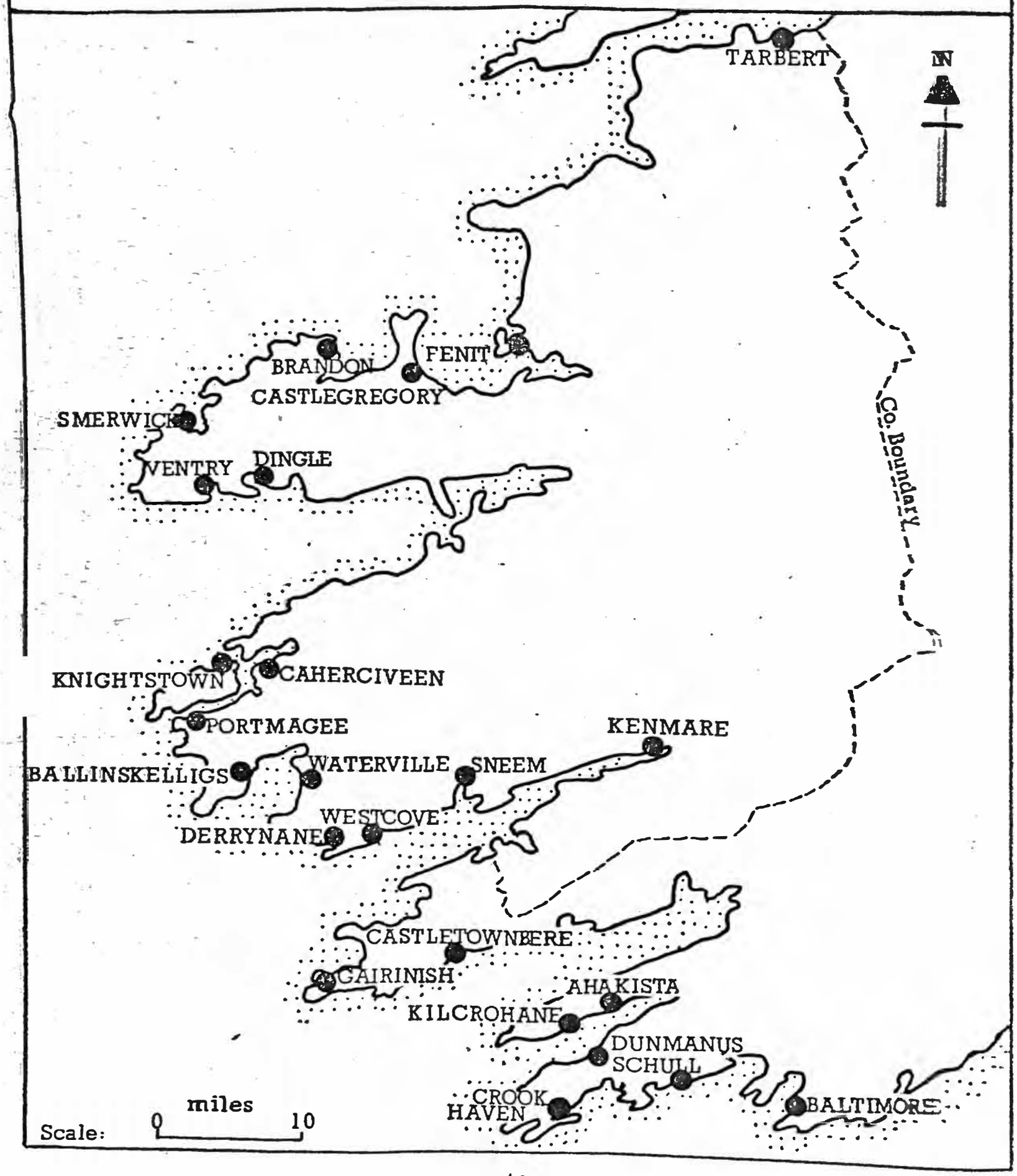
> BREAKFAST: Bread and milk or tea.
> DINNER: Potatoes and milk with fish or eggs, if available.
> SUPPER: Potatoes or bread and milk.

The following extract from the base-line report for Sneem best describes the dress of the people:

> Poor class women and girls retain the costume of cloak and shawl without hat, bonnet or shoes or stockings. Wives and daughters of larger farmers and better-off classes, wear hats and shoes and stockings. All men wear shoes and stockings.
>
> (Base-line Report, Sneem, 1892; 4)

Fig: 3.

Major Fishing Centres of the S.W in 1891.



The majority of houses in the congested districts were thatched and consisted of a kitchen and a lofted bedroom. It was not uncommon to find animals "living in" in the same dwelling as their owners. Slated houses were becoming more common, but even by 1891, they had made little impact outside the towns of West Cork and Kerry. The majority of houses were small thatched cabins with very often only one or two rooms per dwelling. In Brosna it was found that there were:

> ... 1074 dwellings inhabited, 700 are thatched and 374 are slated with three rooms or more. Of the thatched houses, 200 have only one room, 200 have two rooms and 300 have more than two rooms.
>
> (Base-line Report, Brosna, 1892; 4)

CONCLUSION:

The base-line reports reveal the harsh realities which existed in this 'hidden Ireland' of the west in the nineteenth century. Under-development, we have argued, has been all but written out of Irish nationalist history. Nationalist historians have focused instead on the nation-building efforts of nineteenth century nationalists. Efforts by the British administration to alleviate distress here have been perceived by nationalist historians as measures designed to quell nationalist disquiet or tear apart the Gaelic culture which was being defended by nineteenth century nationalists. The granting of aid to underdeveloped Ireland through the medium of the C.D.B. could also be regarded as an exercise in empire-building. The "backward" areas of the west were "opened-up" by the extension of railways, linking it to the rest of developed Ireland and ultimately to mainland Britain. Peripheral towns, villages, and isolated rural areas were thus integrated into the market economy of late nineteenth century Ireland and Britain. By this time, therefore, even on the isolated and smallest farms of the West of Ireland, the ethos of the market replaced peasant tradition and custom as the guiding force of the local economy. While poverty was widespread, changes were occurring slowly in the areas of improved farming. Even those on the smallest farms, however, were conscious of innovations that were spreading from the richer lands of the "other" Ireland. This in itself was an indication that the market was dictating what was, and what was not, produced in rural under-developed Ireland. The C.D.B.'s efforts to improve agriculture must be seen as assisting rather than creating a trend towards improvement. This is not to be-little the work of the Board. It was one of the leading organisations which tackled the realities of under-development in the West of Ireland at this time. While nationalists sought to preserve the Gaelic language, while they created myths of a Gaelic past and resuscitated legends of the native Gaels, British officials administered aid and tried to impress upon those in Dublin Castle the need for urgent social and economic change in rural under-developed Ireland. Indeed, the first series of photographs in Ireland to be used as social commemtary were presented to the Mansion House Commission of enquiry into life in the West of Ireland in 1896. These photographs showed the appalling living conditions in the congested districts, and like the 1985 B.B.C. pictures from Ethiopia, succeeded in highlighting the need for urgent change. Blanche Dugdale, Arthur Balfour's niece, described the legislation which established the Congested Districts Board as:

> a frank and striking departure from the Victorian tradition of laisse-faire. Balfour based it on the acceptance of the principle of State responsibility for poverty-stricken areas, and then proceeded to free his organisation as far as he possibly could from State interference
>
> (Dugdale, 1936, Vol. I; 175)

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