

The Irish rural revolution

Mícheál Ó Fathartaigh
Dublin Business School.

Over the last nine years, and despite the recent disruption caused by COVID-19, Ireland has been commemorating the revolutionary period of a century ago with a 'decade of centenaries' programme. It is hugely important that we remember this political history, but it is unfortunate that we do not reflect on other significant aspects of our history with quite the same gusto.

For instance, agricultural and rural history is sometimes overlooked (though not by Teagasc) and, in terms of it, the whole 20th century – let alone one decade of it – was characterised by profound change. In 1900, rural Ireland and Irish agriculture were synonymous with poverty, but by 2000, they had become synonymous with progress.

Driving this Irish rural revolution were the people of rural Ireland themselves, chiefly farmers, but also their organisations, such as Macra na Feirme, the Irish Farmers Association (IFA) and the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association (ICMSA) and their other advocates, including the *Irish Farmers Journal*.

In addition, and consistently central to the revolution, were the advisory services.

They were founded at the start of the 20th century, thanks largely to the father of the Irish rural revolution, Horace Plunkett, who prompted the British government, in this final epoch before Irish independence, to establish an Irish department of agriculture.

In conjunction with this, together with the new county councils, each county in Ireland would, from the early 1900s, begin to recruit advisors (or instructors, as they were then called) to work with farmers to develop their agricultural practices and, as a consequence, develop rural Ireland more generally.

These advisors were trained to the highest international standards, principally at the Royal College of Science (the forerunner to UCD's faculty of agriculture and based at what is now Government Buildings), the Albert Agricultural College and the Munster Institute. Their brief was to help farmers improve their enterprises.

For much of the 20th century, there were three categories of advisor; the general agricultural instructor; the horticultural and beekeeping instruc-



DEVELOPING RURAL IRELAND

A History of the Irish Agricultural Advisory Services

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tor and the poultry-keeping and butter-making instructor.

Their interactions with farmers incrementally and very tangibly bore fruit. Enjoying the most immediate success were the poultry-keeping and butter-making instructors.

They were exclusively female and their assistance to farming women in sourcing pedigree hens and producing good-quality eggs often made the decisive financial difference on smaller farms. Each succeeding generation of instructors, and latterly advisors, co-operated with farmers and also research scientists to adopt the most modern agricultural approaches and then, increasingly, to implement

most efficiently the various agricultural initiatives brought forward by the government and, from the 1970s, Europe.

At the turn of the 21st century, although rural Ireland was by no means fully developed, it was clear that it had been transformed over the previous century. The rate at which its various structures had changed was without parallel.

There had been an Irish rural revolution and the revolutionaries who had led it on a continuous basis throughout the 20th century had been farmers and the advisory services. Both they, and their revolution, deserve to be commemorated.