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The Wages Book of a Fethard Farmer, 1880-1905

By Cormac Ó Gráda

This note is based on the wages book of a prominent farmer from the Fethard area, Michael O'Donnell. The wages book, which is in very good condition, contains over 200 pages measuring approximately 13 inches by 6 inches. It is currently in the possession of Michael O'Donnell's grandson, Brian O'Donnell of Garrinch, Fethard.¹ The book covers a 20-year period between the early 1880s and the early 1990s. All the entries seem to have been made in Michael O'Donnell's own hand.

Michael O'Donnell was born in 1851. The eldest of a family of seven, he seems to have acquired the farm at Bannixtown on his marriage; his wife was Maria Josephine, daughter of John Shea of Bannixtown. O'Donnell's father lived on in nearby Kilsheelan until 1895 and his mother until 1902. Michael O'Donnell himself survived to a ripe old age, dying aged 82 years in January 1933. Some years before his death he moved home from Bannixtown to Byrne's Kiln. He handed the farm and house at Bannixtown over to his youngest son Bryan. Bannixtown is situated on good land about four miles east of the town of Fethard, facing south towards Slievenamon.

The wages book gives several hints of Michael's prosperity. On a fly-leaf it reports that in 1894 he insured his life for £500, and his houses etc. for £700. In 1897 he insured the residence and furniture at Bannixtown House for £1,000. For some of the period covered by the wages book he bred and kept riding horses, and he employed a live-in teacher and a music instructor for his daughters. In 1897 he hired Maggie Cummins "to take Josie to school and to do some cleaning about house".²

Other sources corroborate the impressions of prosperity. The lands acquired by O'Donnell on marrying Maria Shea totalled over 200 acres in the townlands of Tober and Bannixtown.³ In 1886 he paid James Cullinan, a cooper, £3 15s 10d "for the season 35 firkins". The 1901 census describes his home at Bannixtown as containing ten rooms and 16 outhouses and farmsteadings. By 1911 Bannixtown House had 14 rooms, and Michael O'Donnell was head of a ten-person household, which included four live-in servants.⁴

As noted, Bannixtown was not the O'Donnell family home; Michael had been born not far away in Lower Seskin, Kilsheelan. Two of his brothers became parish priests in Cahir and Dublin. He hunted with the Waterford and Tipperary Hounds and was a keen supporter of the Clonmel Horse Show. "A well-known and popular figure in the Fethard district", O'Donnell had served as a local magistrate and had also been secretary of Tipperary South Riding County Council for several years. In the latter position "he commanded the confidence and respect not only of these who were brought immediately in contact with him but the ratepayers in general". According to his obituary in the [Clonmel] *Nationalist* (14 January 1933) "he was connected with the leading farming families of Counties Tipperary and Kilkenny".

Such evidence bespeaks wealth and respectability. It also suggests that Michael O'Donnell typified that stratum of strong Catholic farming families that had never quite lost their influence or self-respect before Catholic Emancipation, and whose power was on the rise in the post-Famine decades. Families like the O'Donnells of Seskin formed a true "hidden Ireland", hitherto largely ignored by historians.



However, they are the leading players in Eoghan Ó Néill's remarkable *Gleann an Óir* (1988), and recently historians such as Louis Cullen, Kevin Whelan, and Thomas P. Power have been giving them their due. Indeed, *Gleann an Óir* (pp. 21-2, 30, 33) contains several references to Michael O'Donnell's paternal forebears, and Eoghan Ó Néill has traced Michael's roots back to another Michael, his great-grandfather "Daddy Michael" of Lower Seskin (c. 1720-1819).

By allying their fortunes to those of the Butlers of Cahir in the sixteenth century, earlier O'Donnells had salvaged much of the family's prestige and comfort; the connection later helped the family to survive the vicissitudes of the Cromwellian and Williamite Wars and the Penal Laws. Michael O'Donnell's in-laws, the Sheas or Shees, were also long established in south Tipperary, and several townlands around Fethard and Mullinahone are named after them.

Like other old Catholic and Gaelic farming families, the O'Donnells and Sheas continued to prosper in a quiet way as tenants of considerable landholdings. Avoiding politics and conspicuous consumption, and largely excluded from the professions, they concentrated on enlarging their holdings, on accumulating dowries for their daughters, and on educating their sons. They married their own kin, valued family traditions, and were slow to let go of the Irish language. Breeding and racing horses were abiding interests. With the gradual democratization of politics in the nineteenth century, these families played leading roles in a succession of parliamentary-nationalist movements.

The first contract in Michael O'Donnell's wages book dates from February 1880, a few weeks after his marriage. The wages book indicates little sign of any sustained rise in nominal wages paid over this period (compare Bowley, 1899; Fitzpatrick, 1980). Between the early 1880s and the early 1900s he typically paid men 10d-12d per day, 5s per week, or £8-£11 per annum. O'Donnell paid boys and young men about £6 per annum.

Women were typically paid by the quarter or yearly, at a rate of about £7-£8 per annum; only rarely did O'Donnell hire them from week to week. The implied difference between men's and women's wages is somewhat smaller than expected. Only further research can reveal whether this difference was representative of Ireland in general or, indeed, Tipperary. If representative, it runs somewhat counter to the doleful conventional wisdom on women's fate in post-famine Ireland (compare Ó Gráda, 1994: ch. 10, and the sources cited there).

This does not take account of one likely gender inequality: on several occasions, O'Donnell paid shopkeepers in Fethard and Clonmel for boots and dresses for his female servants, and cut their pay accordingly. For example, in 1886 he paid the Bradford Manufacturing Company 5s 3d for a dress and Tobins of Clonmel 6s 3d for a pair of shoes for Marian Kirwan. Presumably women servants had to be more careful about how they dressed for work than the men. Overall, since the cost of living fell somewhat over these decades, a modest rise in living standards is indicated for both men and women.

The wages book refers to over 60 men and over 40 women who worked for O'Donnell during the period covered in the wages book. Entries are usually in the first or second person singular, such as "Pd your wages . . .", "You got . . .", or "Watt Power entered my service as horse trainer [*sic*] on this date". Though a few had travelled some distance to work for O'Donnell, most employees were local people from Cloneen and Fethard; several of them have descendants still living in the area. At any one time, O'Donnell would have employed five or six people.

An important feature of these accounts is that they betray a considerable turnover of staff. A few left because they were ill or had been injured at work. Willie Kelly left for home in June 1902 "to recover from effects of a fall off a horse". In late 1888 Maggie Wall left after working for O'Donnell for less than four months to go to America. One employee died. But most left without any reason being given in the wages book. Whether such a large turnover of labourers



was typical of the market for farm labourers, or was due instead to Michael O'Donnell's reputation as a demanding taskmaster, can only be determined through the study of further evidence of this kind. Certainly the impression given by anecdotal and literary evidence is of a much lower turnover of farm labour than seen here.

The wages book tells us little else about Michael O'Donnell's affairs in these years. However, an entry in a special account at the end of the book notes costs of £21 "incurred in struggle with landlord". Another entry reports that Mary Guilfoyle lent Michael's father £160 at a rate of four per cent per annum in 1886. Michael paid the interest half-yearly, and kept on the loan after his father's death. He occasionally paid off some of the capital, but Guilfoyle was still due £133.70 in 1899.

A list of the men and women engaged by Michael O'Donnell, and details of their terms of pay and period of employment is given below.

MALE EMPLOYEES

<i>Barnable, John</i>	£11 per annum from 12/4/92. Left 10/9/92. Returned at £10 per annum from 17/5/94. Left 19/1/95. Died 29/3/95.
<i>Barnable, Larry</i>	Worked odd days at 2s from June 1895 to Feb. 1896.
<i>Brien, Jack</i>	1s per day as stable boy 21/7/02. Left 23/9/02.
<i>Brien, Paddy</i>	4s per week from 3/4/91. Back for 6d per day from 23/1/93. Discharged 7/7/93.
<i>Byrne, John</i>	£6 for 12 months from 16/12/95. Left 13/3/96.
<i>Byrne, Pat</i>	1s per day as groom and trainer from 9/9/01. Left 17/9/01.
<i>Cahill, James</i>	£9 per annum as general farm hand from 21/9/00. Left 3/11/00.
<i>Cantwell, Tom</i>	5s per week from 10/5/84, left 29/6/84. Returned 3/7/84. 12/9/84 hired for 12 months at £10. Left 29/8/86. Returned 20/6/87 for £9 per annum and the grass of a sheep on Ballinatin hill. Left 17/7/88. Returned on same terms 21/7/88. Account settled 27/11/89. Came to work 21/7/91. at £10 per annum. Left 1/3/92.
<i>Carroll, Jack</i>	3s per day from 9/7/95 for work at house. No account after 22/8/95.
<i>Condon, Michael</i>	£11 per annum from 20/8/92. Left 21/2/94. Returned at 5s per week 11/3/95. Left 16/5/95.
<i>Connell, Wm.</i>	£1 for 3 months from 10/5/85. Returned 5/9/85 for a year at £5. Left 12/3/86. Returned at 30s for 3 months from 12/6/88.
<i>Cullinane, Jas.</i>	Cooper, paid £3 15s 10d for 35 firkins (i.e. 2s 2d each) in Jan. 1886.
<i>Cummins, Dick</i>	Various payments for milk and smith work, 1888-1903.
<i>Cummins, Dick Jr.</i>	£1 per quarter from 29/3/96. Left 24/10/97. Returned at £6 for a year from 25/1/98. Left 31/12/99.
<i>Davis, Jas.</i>	10d per day from 13/3/81; record ends 1889.
<i>Donovan, John</i>	1s per day from 14/6/95. Left 10/11/95.
<i>Duggan, John</i>	10d per day from 12/7/81. Left Dec. 1881.
<i>Duggan, Tim</i>	£6 10s per annum from 3/6/1889. Left 24/10/89.
<i>Dunn, Pat</i>	£8 per annum from 6/8/90. Left 20/10/90.
<i>Dwyer, John</i>	£4 for 6 months from 28/4/87. Left 30/8/87.
<i>Fraher, Patt</i>	£10 for a year as general farm servant from 1/1/98. Left 16/5/98.
<i>Gleeson, Dick</i>	2s per day from 15/6/95. Worked 21 days.
<i>Gleeson, Jas.</i>	Carpenter/wheelwright, worked on on-off basis at 1s per day from 1891; still there summer 1894.



- Grean, Ned* 1s 6d per day from 25/10/02. Worked 4 days at 1s per day from 1/12/02. Last paid 21/2/03.
- Guilfooy, Pat* £12 for 12 months from 28/10/83. Left 15/2/97. Paid Guilfooy interest also on loan of £160 at 4 per cent made by Mary Guilfooy. £125 14s still due 16/12/00.
- Hanly, John* £5 10s for 12 months from 12/11/84. Left 5/4/85.
- Harrington, John* 25s for 3 months from 18/4/84. Went home sick 15/5/84 and did not return.
- Harrington, John* £5 per year from 25/3/86. Left 2/8/86.
- Healy, Michael* £6 for 1 year from 28/4/87. Left 3/8/87.
- Hearne, John* Mason, 3s per day in 1895.
- Heelan, Jas.* 1s per day from 13/8/89. Left 20/9/89.
- Heffernan, Billy* 10s for 1 month from 31/8/87. Left 8/4/88.
- Hickey, Jas.* £8 per annum from 23/3/80; left 10/7/81.
- Kane, Bill* 1s per day for painting from 9/9/98. Left 23/12/01.
- Kearney, John* 5s a week from 23/2/80; left 29/6/81.
- Kelly, Willie* 5s per week from 1/1/02. Left 23/6/02 (to recover from effects of a fall off a horse).
- Kennedy, Michael* £2 10s for 3 months from 24/2/85. Left 30/5/85.
- Kennedy, Michael* Hired first in 1885 for three months for £2 10s. Paid in full May 1885. Hired again in February 1887 at 37 per year "while I may want him. He is not bound for any term". Left 27/4/87. Hired again from 17/11/90 at 39 for 12 months. Discharged 23/3/91.
- Lonergan, Michael* £1 5s per quarter from 22/3/89. Left 26/5/89.
- Maher, Davy* £1 2s 6d per quarter from 29/4/90. Left 1/11/90.
- Maher, Mickey* 1s per day with 1s per week stopped for rent. Last record 13/6/91.
- Mara, Ned* 30s for 3 months from 14/11/90.
- Meany, Billy* 1s per day from 5/8/86. Stopped 13/11/86 (?).
- Morris, Denis* 30s for 3 months from 12/8/91. Left 20/10/91.
- Needham, Wm.* 25s for 3 months from 9/4/85.
- Noonan, Dan* Paid 7s for week of 15/10/81; "wages for the future to be 5s per week". Left 27/11/81.
- Philips, Tom* 10s per week as trainer and groom from 22/9/01. Left 12/10/01.
- Power, Watt* 10s per week as horse trainer from 18/11/01. Last paid 4/12/01.
- Reilly, Johnnie* £1 per quarter from 7/4/91. Left 8/8/91.
- Ryan, Jim* £4 per annum on 25/8/88. Left 11/6/88, having been paid 9s.
- Ryan, Johnnie* 1s per day from 9/10/95. Left 24/11/95. Returned 10/1/96 at 4s per week. Left 17/2/96. Returned at same pay 10/1/96. Left 17/2/96.
- Ryan, Tom* £10 per annum from 22/9/91. Left 1/2/92.
- Shee, Arthur* £15 per annum as general help on farm from 20/11/99. Last paid 10/2/00.
- Tobin, Michael* Commenced 15/1/82 at 1s per day. Left 5/12/83.
- Tobin, Peter* 4s per week from 14/3/82. Paid Tobin's father. Left 11/7/82, but returned a few days later at 10d per day. Left 3/4/83.
- Tobin, Philip* 3s per week from 2/7/84. Left 26/10/84.
- Tobin, Phil and William Slattery* to level fence by the avenue for £5.
- Tobin, Phil* 10d per day from 10/3/90. Left 24/5/90.
- Toole, Tom* 5d per load for quarrying and screening sand for house from 1/7/95.



- Wall, Michael* £1 for 3 months from 23/7/88, but left next day.
Williams, James £6 per annum from 20/11/82, left 14/3/84.
Williams, James £10 per annum from 15/6/00. Left 15/9/00. Returned 26/11. Last paid 13/5/02.
Williams, William £1 for 3 months from 1/8/88, left 27/1/88. Hired for 12 months from 12/2/92 for £6. [William Williams was still part of the O'Donnell household when the 1911 census was taken. His age is given in the manuscript census form as 67 years.]

FEMALE EMPLOYEES

- Clancy, Bridget* 45s for 3 months from 5/12/98. Left 20/6/99.
Clancy, Mary £2 per quarter as kitchen maid from 4/11/96. Left 30/12/96. Returned 18/2/97. Left 22/7/97.
Cummins, Johanna 25s for 3 months from 24/1/98. Left 5/8/98.
Cummins, Maggie 15s per quarter to take Josie to school and do some cleaning about house from 1/5/97. Left 20/1/98.
Cummins, Mrs. 2s per week to milk the cows from 1/6/85. Stopped 1/11/85. Began again 2/8/86. Last reference is in 1902; wages is 2s 6d in 1902.
Davis, Bridget £1 2s 6d for 3 months from 1/2/93. Left 7/8/95. Died in America 10/7/1900.
Delany, Mrs. Engaged as dairymaid for 18983 at £7.
Doheny, Mrs. £1 per quarter to teach music to Kathleen and May from 24/6/94. Last paid 30/3/95.
Donovan, Ann £7 for 12 months from 20/8/90. Discharged 10/2/91. Returned at £6 per annum 17/9/91. Left 18/3/92.
Donovan, Mary £6 per annum as nurse 23/2/82; discharged 22/3/1883.
Duggan, Mary 3 months at £1 15s from 18/8/81. Left 14/10/81 and paid £1 1s.
Dunne, Hannah £9 per annum as general servant from 15/8/98. Left 11/11/98.
Dwyer, Maggie £5 as dairy girl for a year. Discharged 5/6/88.
Egan, Kate £9 10s for 12 months as dairy girl from 3/4/85. Left 1/4/86.
Fitzgerald, Mary £7 per annum for 3 months from 3/11/91.
Geoghegan, Maggie £8 for 12 months from 20/2/91. Discharged 21/5/91.
Gould, Miss L. £12 per annum for teaching children from 7/6/92. Left 21/4/93.
Halloran, Ellen 35s per 3 months from 25/8/84. Left 22/3/85.
Hogan, Ellie 15s per quarter from 23/9/89 for minding children. Left 6/1/90.
Hogan, Hannah £1 10s per quarter from 16/6/91. Left 16/9/91.
Hogan, Mary £1 for 3 months from 26/7/86. Left 26/3/88. Returned 9/10/89 at 30s per quarter. Left 14/4/90. Came to work at 4s per week 10/9/92. Discharged 21/10/92.
Kearney, Bridget 33s for 3 months as general servant from 1/3/01. Last paid 5/7/01. [Bridget Kearney was part of the O'Donnell household when the 1901 census was taken. The manuscript census form gives her age as 15 years.]
Kennedy, Ellen 30s per quarter from 16/7/89. Left 15/9/89.
Kinane, Norah £6 for twelve months as nurse. Left 10/6/84, getting 17s.
Kirwan, Marian £3 for 1 year from 16/3/86 as nurse. Left 19/7/86.
Lambe, Kate £7 for 12 months from 25/2/91. Left 21/5/91.



<i>Landy, Mary</i>	£8 for a year from 22/2/81; returned 3/3/82 for 9 months for £9. Then worked until 5/1/83 at 4s per week.
<i>McCarthy, Mary</i>	£2 5s for 3 months from 11/7/00. Left 26/7/00.
<i>McGrath, Ellen</i>	£9 for 12 months from 30/5/92. Left 5/9/92. Returned at 45s per 3 months 12/12/92. Left 14/2/93.
<i>Maher, Mrs.</i>	Dairywoman for the season (8 months) at £1 per month 29/3/84.
<i>Mara, Margaret</i>	15s per quarter from 3/4/88 as nurse. Left 21/10/88.
<i>O'Brien, Margaret</i>	£2 per quarter as general servant from 2/12/96. Left without notice 17/1/97.
<i>O'Brien, Mary</i>	36 per annum from 19/2/89. Left 6/7/89.
<i>Nagle, Mary</i>	£8 for a year from 6/11/95. Left 16/1/96.
<i>Power, Eliza</i>	£6 for 12 months as dairymaid from 10/6/84. Left 11/8/84.
<i>Power, Maggie</i>	£6 for 12 months as nurse from 22/2/83. Left 24/9/85.
<i>Ryan, Kate</i>	£3 5s for 6 months as general servant from 1/6/99. Left 1/6/99.
<i>Ryan, Mary</i>	£8 for 12 months as kitchen maid from 19/10/97. Left 18/12/97. £2 5s for 3 months as general servant from 30/8/00. Left 11/11/00. Returned on same terms 11/9/01. Left 11/9/02.
<i>Shea, Kate</i>	£8 for 12 months from 18/2/96. Left 4/9/96.
<i>Slattery, Alice</i>	£4 10s for 12 months starting 30/9/85.
<i>Tobin, Nellie</i>	15s for 3 months from 1/4/82, left 2/12/82. £8 per annum from 6/4/86.
<i>Tobin, Norah</i>	£1 10s for 3 months from 1/11/88. Paid in full 3/2/89. £2 per 3 months from 21/4/90; discharged 10/8/90.
<i>Wall, Maggie</i>	£6 for 12 months from 23/6/88. Left to go to America 11/10/88.
<i>William, Mary</i>	£6 per 12 months from 2/1/83. Left 20/11/83. Returned 10/1/84; left 15/1/84.

FOOTNOTES

1. I am grateful to Bryan O'Donnell for allowing me to consult the wages book and proffering advice. My special thanks go to Eoghan Ó Néill for expert information both on specific points and on the local history of this part of south Tipperary. Thanks also to Marcus Bourke (Dublin) and to Tony Newport (Fethard).
2. One of six children, O'Donnell had seven children of his own between November 1880 and November 1892.
3. Valuation Books for Cloneen Electoral Districts, Tipperary S.R. (held in the Valuation Office, Dublin).
4. National Archives, 1901 and 1911 manuscript census forms for Tipperary South Riding, DED 41/13.

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