SINCE PREHISTORIC TIMES, farming and land ownership have been of enormous cultural importance in Ireland. Many families have lived on the same farmsteads for generations.

Northern Irish farms tend to be small—usually one hundred acres or fewer. Much of the region is hilly and rocky, but the moist, mild climate results in excellent pastureland for cattle and sheep. Irish beef, lamb, milk, butter, and cheese are renowned. Important crops include potatoes, wheat, barley, oats, and apples.

"Upland," or hill farmers, must often diversify to survive. In lowland areas with richer soil, many small farmers have been supplanted by large dairy and grain farms.

Today, agriculture accounts for less than 3 percent of Northern Ireland’s economy. Land prices are soaring. Many farmers must supplement their incomes with outside work, and their children often leave for more promising non-agricultural careers.

Despite challenges, agricultural production remains strong, thanks to increased mechanization, better fertilization, improved management, and investment from the public and private sectors.

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