The Triumph of Dogma Ideology and Famine Relief

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Irish poverty increasingly preoccupied British observers. This sketch from O'Connell's Co. Kerry estate appeared in early 1846.

The triumph of dogma

ideology and Famine relief

by Peter Gray

How far can British government be held responsible for the Famine mortality of over one million in five years? What were the ideological motivations and constraints on ministers, and the effects of these on the formation of policy, particularly in the worst years of the Famine from mid-1846 to mid-1849?

By ideology is meant the framework of ideas—the world-view—that moulded how individuals and groups perceived the problems that faced them. Ideological constructions shaped the interpretation of catastrophes like the potato blight. They were significant in determining what were acceptable modes and levels of response to the crisis, giving legitimacy to some and not to others. Ideology must also be considered in a dynamic sense as the competition of rival ideas for political supremacy. So if the role of ideology is to be properly understood, it must be linked to a detailed study of the political history of the Famine years, and of the broader public and intellectual context of British politics.

Intentions or consequences?

The allocation of responsibility for actions a century and half ago poses serious problems. Historians risk falling into gross anachronism in attempting to pass judgement on long-dead individuals. Yet the attempt should be made. The question then arises whether intentions or consequences should be the criteria for judgement. Any neglect of the adverse consequences of policy may be treated as culpable, if it can be shown that these were public knowledge. Yet it is the active intentions of policy-makers that may be considered more reprehensible. An evalua-

tion of responsibility thus requires an understanding of the debates of the time, and the existence of feasible alternative policies. That such choices were perceived to exist, and that they were linked to ideological differences, is suggested by Lord Clarendon's agitated appeal to the Prime Minister in August 1847: 'We shall be equally blamed for keeping [the Irish] alive or letting them die and we have only to select between the censure of the Economists or the Philanthropists—which do you prefer?'

Classical political economy

Before considering some of the crucial decisions taken by the government, the main ideological and political groupings need to be sketched out. The tradition which has often attracted most attention is that of classical political economy. The leading practitioners of this increasingly technical 'orthodox' system were anxious by the 1840s not only to refine economic theory, but to translate it into policy. They included Nassau Senior, G.C. Lewis, and Richard Whately. Politically, they were associated with the 'Bowood set' presided over by the Whig Lord Lansdowne which included Lord Monteagle and other 'moderate liberals'. Orthodox economists were, however, partisans more of policy than of party, and often looked as much to liberal Conservatives such as Sir Robert Peel. Malthus and Ricardo had been pessimistic about Irish over-population and underdevelopment, but the next generation of economists were generally more hopeful about the growth of agricultural productivity at a rate faster than that of population. Encouraging capital investment in land became their priority, along with guaranteeing security for freedom of outlay and certainty of return. To be successful, a re-organisation of landholding was declared essential, as they held that only large-scale capitalist farming on the English model could be efficient. Greater productivity would provide increased and more regular employment for labour; higher expectations and consumption would be made possible by the replacement of subsistence crops by wages.

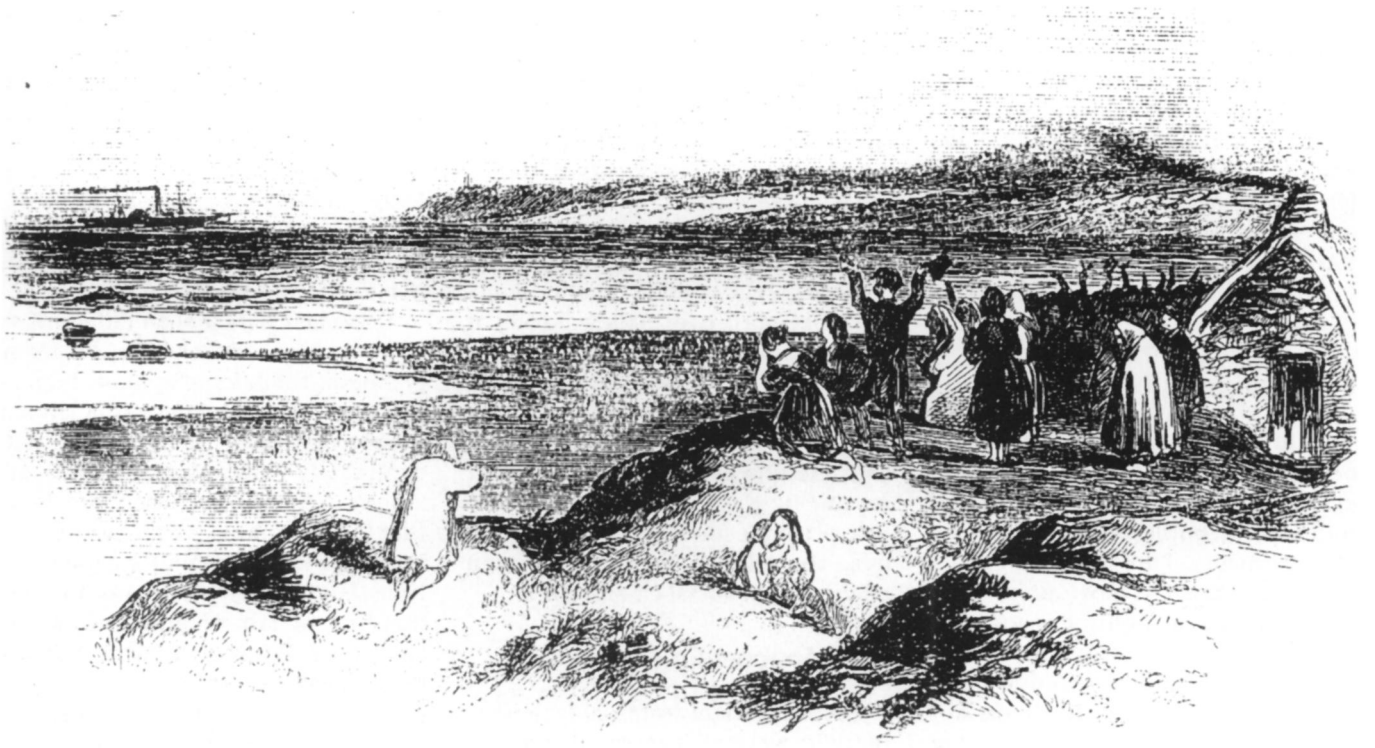
Senior and his associates resolutely opposed the extension of a compulsory poor law to Ireland, on the grounds that in such a poor country, it would drain scarce resources away from employment into 'useless' relief to the able-bodied. Yet the failure to prevent Whig governments introducing a limited Irish poor law in 1838, and then extending this as the central plank of famine-relief policy in 1847, demonstrates the limited influence of Senior over policy-making at pivotal times. Orthodox economics was more important in the broad appeal of its arguments for rejecting so-called 'visionary' experiments with existing property rights, and for producing a climate of opinion that prioritised economic development over the relief of suffering, even in conditions of social catastrophe.

The Manchester school

Several variant forms of economic thought were at least as significant. What became known as the 'Manchester school' was more radical, extreme and optimistic. It drew on general principles of orthodox thought, such as the desirability of free trade and laissez-faire, popularised them and made them more dogmatic. Lacking any outstanding theorists, this group was committed to campaigning for changes in policy, and was most influential among the politicised middle classes and in the liberal press. The Anti-Corn Law League was its initial focus; after 1846 it turned towards a more direct assault on landowners and their social privileges as obstacles to economic development.

This class antagonism differentiated the Manchester school from orthodox thinkers, but more important was their adherence to a labour theory of value—the doctrine that capital is merely accumulated labour. From this flowed the idea that economic backwardness stemmed not from under-capitalisation, but from restrictions on the freedom of labour and the use of resources. When applied to Ireland these ideas rejected Malthusian pessimism entirely: Ireland was seen as a potentially wealthy country that could support several times its current population. What was required were measures to force Irish landowners to employ the poor, and

The Minister's Dream (PICTORIAL TIMES). *The potato blight stirred apocalyptic fears for many observers: 'The opening of the sixth seal' by Francis Danby.*



RELIEF FOR IRELAND.

(Above) ***Relief for Ireland.*** *(PICTORIAL TIMES) The British press reassured its readers that everything possible was being done for Ireland: above a fanciful image of the arrival of a relief steamer, January 1847.*

(Below) ***New Government.*** (ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS) *Many hoped the new Whig government formed in July 1846 would bring 'justice to Ireland'; they were rapidly disillusioned.*

H. E. R. MAJESTY'S CABINET MINISTERS

a 'free trade in land' to replace them with agricultural entrepreneurs if the current owners failed.

A second, heterodox off-shoot

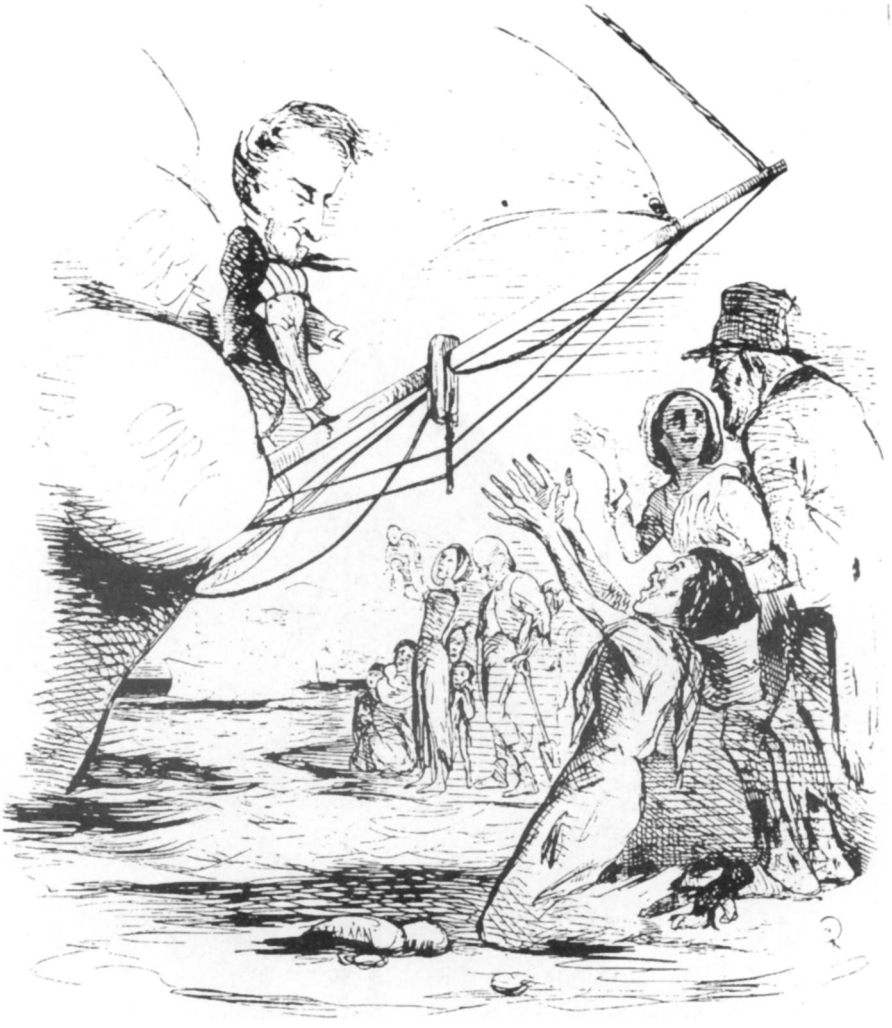
A second off-shoot from classical economics was that associated with a smaller group of heterodox writers. Theoretically more sophisticated than the Manchester school, they shared much of its optimism and criticism of aristocracy. They differed most in their support for alternative models of Irish development to that of crude anglicisation. William Thornton, J.S. Mill and Poulett Scrope agreed that it was the relationship of landlord and tenant that lay at the root of Irish economic backwardness: all looked positively on the alternative model of peasant proprietorship existing in other European countries. Once predatory landlordism had been restrained and peasants secured in their holdings, they believed the 'magic of property' would create the necessary motivation for investment and exertion from below. Detailed suggestions as to how such a revolution in agrarian power-relationships could be brought about were more troublesome, but all these writers agreed that the Famine presented the government with an opportunity to intervene to reconstruct Irish society, preferably by confiscating waste and uncultivated lands for reclamation by the rural poor.

For a number of Whig politicians anxious to defuse the cry for Repeal by granting a measure of 'Justice to Ireland', such ideas were particularly attractive. Lord John Russell and his Lord Lieutenant Lord Bessborough had a reputation for reformist co-operation with O'Connell. They identified themselves with the populist or 'Foxite' tradition of Whiggery rather than with orthodox liberalism, and were anxious to introduce 'some great scheme' for Ireland in 1846. The intensification of the Famine was to expose both the limitations of this commitment and their political weakness, but the interventionist leanings of this group should not be underestimated.

Providentialism and Christian political economy

All these schools of thought interpreted the Famine disaster in the light of their own diagnoses of the 'Irish problem' and plans for Irish reconstruction. The very scale of the crisis tended to push each towards an inflexible insistence on their own panaceas. These economic ideologies were in turn variously affected by a pervasive religious mode of thought—Providentialism, the doctrine that human affairs are regulated by divine agency for human good. More an interpretative language than a unified body of thought, Providentialism took several forms. What concerns us here is the extent to which ideological stances on the Famine were validated and intensified by the widespread belief that the potato blight had been sent by God for an ascertainable purpose.

Ultra-Protestants predictably saw the blight as divine vengeance against Irish Catholicism and on the British state that had recently committed such 'national sins' as endowing the Catholic seminary at Maynooth. Many more interpreted the 'visitation' as a warning against personal and national pride and extravagance, and as an inducement to engage in charitable works. The Christian duty of charity continued to dominate the actions of groups like the Quakers, but for many in Britain, philanthropic feelings existed alongside a strong desire to see the fundamental changes in Ireland they believed would prevent the need for continuous private generosity. What gave Providentialism some degree of ideological coherence was the existence of a Christian political economy that had evolved alongside the classical tradition in economics. Clerical economists had a profound influence over a British social elite that was imbued with the ethos of evangelical Protestantism. They urged governments to remove



YANKEE DOODLE'S CORN EXCHANGE.

Yankee Doodle's Corn Exchange. (YANKEE DOODLE) *This American cartoon praises that country's ability to feed Ireland from its surplus grain; but it is unclear just how the desitute were expected to purchase such supplies.*

A Marvellous Cure. (PUPPET SHOW) *Russell and Clarendon discuss how to cure 'Paddy', who is under the sedation of the coercion acts.*

restrictions to economic freedom less to promote economic growth, than to subject individuals to the moral discipline of the 'natural economic laws' instituted by God. 'Direct' acts of Providence, such as the potato blight, could be interpreted in this tradition as special 'mercies'. Sir Robert Peel's tying of the potato blight of 1845 to the policy of removing the Corn Laws can be read in this light. The British obsession with free trade in food from 1846 reflected the power of this ideological connection.

Many of the Christian political economists were conservative, and had most influence over Peel and his followers. Popularised and radicalised forms of the doctrine had a greater impact on the early-Victorian middle classes and their political leaders. Providentialism blended with Manchester-school economics to produce a moralistic reading of the Irish crisis, that put the blame for the state of society squarely on the moral failings of Irishmen of all classes. Consequently the Famine was welcomed as a God-given opportunity to enforce a policy that would transform Irish behaviour. Moralism was embraced by Whig-liberals such as Earl Grey, Charles Wood, George Grey and the civil servant Charles Trevelyan, who sought to place themselves at the head of radical public opinion, and who were deeply infused with evangelical piety. To Trevelyan the blight was 'the cure...applied by the direct stroke of an all wise Providence in a manner as unexpected and unthought of as it is likely to be effectual'.

The view of administrators in Ireland

Government officials in Ireland were no more immune to the prevailing moods of opinion than were ministers. Nevertheless, administrators on the ground in Ireland were developing an ethos of their own, that to some extent counter-balanced orthodox or moralist obsessions with the economy as a whole. A Benthamite concern for the efficient operations of institutions established for specified purposes—to distribute food, to organise public works and to provide relief through the poor law—stressed the immediate and the welfare aspects of state action rather than the long-term consequences. The impact of this administrative ideology was curbed by Trevelyan's dictatorial omniscience at the Treasury and frustrated by lack of resources and local resistance, but it became the dominant attitude of a Dublin executive increasingly at odds with London.

The second and total potato failure fell on a Whig-liberal minority government led by Lord John Russell that was more a coalition of 'reformers' than a unified party with a shared ideological position, and was subject to shifting political balances in parliament and in the country. Irish policy was a point of contention for the various party factions. Virtually the government's only shared commitment was to upholding free trade against any revived protectionist threat. This conspired to rule out anything more than marginal tinkering with the Irish food supply, with fateful consequences in the terrible winter of 1846-7.

Differences on the size of the Irish wages fund

By 1846 it was widely believed in British political circles that Ireland could never return to its previous

condition, and that a great and inevitable 'social revolution' was under way. Interpretations varied according to attitudes towards Irish landlordism and widely divergent beliefs about the size of the Irish wages-fund: that is, the amount of capital that could be mobilised to employ labour. Irish landlords claimed that this was at an absolute minimal level, and demanded state help to promote development. English Conservatives and moderate liberals usually agreed that the wages-fund was low and that long-term aid through works projects and drainage loans was desirable, while remaining critical of the lax attitudes of many landlords. Russell's circle was not averse to state investment in the Irish infrastructure, but they shared a tendency with moralists and radicals to see the wages-fund as high, believing that landlords and large farmers were squandering or hoarding their resources, which they had amassed by ruthlessly exploiting the peasantry. Moralists parted company with others in claiming that the destitute population could be supported and the economy reconstructed simultaneously by measures of economic coercion. It was not enough for relief measures to provide the poor with the means of survival, they should do so in such a way as to discourage a culture of dependency and coerce the proprietors into undertaking their moral responsibilities.

The moralists sought to control Irish policy from 1846, but did not have it all their own way. Adjustments made to the public works legislation inherited from Peel were limited and were intended to eliminate abuse and manipulation by landlords and farmers. By December 1846, however, reports of the horrors of mass starvation at Skibbereen and other places demonstrated that traditional forms of relief were failing.

Radical departures

The initiative behind the radical departures agreed in January 1847 came primarily from the professional administrators of the Board of Works, who argued that labour and relief should be kept conceptually and practically apart. Public works relief had produced little of value at vast expense, had drained labour from agricultural cultivation, and had failed to prevent the masses of 'helpless' poor from death. Bessborough and Russell conceded that the scale of the 1846-7 crisis demanded humanitarian aid in food, followed by the permanent extension of the poor law to give a right to relief to the able-bodied. The principle of relief by the poor law attracted consensus in January 1847 because it meant different things to different people and because the existing system was clearly indefensible. It was only on its implementation that the huge gulf of interpretative differences became manifest.

The soup kitchens act of February 1847 was an unprecedented innovation, but a temporary and transitional one. The political circumstances that allowed the act to pass also constrained it to a fixed period of time. British public opinion, stirred by a genuine, if ill-informed and temperamental humanitarianism, was prepared to accept a degree of state intervention until the harvest (so long as Irish ratepayers would ultimately be liable). The feeling remained strong that responsibility lay with the proprietors who had exploited the rise of a potato-dependent 'surplus' population, and that they should be made to pay for the costs

of social transition. This was the logic, shared by most parliamentary liberals, that lay behind the decision to throw relief on the poor law as soon as that 'exceptional' season ended. What was at issue in the session of 1847 was whether any concessions should be made to landlords in the working of the act, and what degree of government help for economic reconstruction should be provided.

Russell's waste land reclamation bill, drawn up in co-operation with his Foxite colleagues, was central to his legislative plan in 1847. The scheme was a radical one—to create peasant proprietors on Irish waste lands reclaimed with state aid. This bill was similar to schemes advocated by Mill and by Scrope. However, the measure was trimmed in cabinet by moderates anxious for the security of property rights, and then savaged in parliament by Peel and Stanley as an unwarranted interference with private enterprise, and Russell was forced to drop it. No major remedial scheme took its place.

Gregory's quarter acre clause

The 1847 poor law bill was rejected in principle by orthodox thinkers; Senior had become convinced by this time that the potato-failure had left Ireland over-populated by a redundant mass of two million people, and that there were no 'safe' means of giving outdoor relief. His position was, however, compromised by the intransigent opposition of Irish landlords led by Monteagle and Whately, which did nothing but confirm parliament's insistence on the bill. The character of the measure was, however, substantially altered by amendments forced by Stanley as the English Conservatives' price for allowing it through the lords. Chief amongst these was William Gregory's quarter acre clause, which denied relief to tenants holding more than a quarter of an acre of land, and which turned the act into a charter for clearance and consolidation. A cabinet majority of moderates and moralists supported the Gregory clause as a weapon necessary for forcing the pace of transition to an anglicised social and economic structure.

The British government deserves most criticism for abandoning Ireland with only the poor law for support from autumn 1847. Vast American imports made food readily available and the state had proved its administrative capacity by providing up to three million daily rations in summer 1847 at an unexpectedly low cost, yet little was done to meet the widespread destitution that continued to summer 1849 and beyond. For at least part of the explanation we must look to the strengthening of the moralists' hand in summer 1847. A general election produced a small majority of Whig-liberal MPs, many of whom were middle-class radicals who looked to Cobden, Bright and Hume for leadership. After several ministerial defeats, Russell drew the conclusion that 'we have in the opinion of Great Britain done too much for Ireland and have lost elections for doing so'. As the radicals came to hold the balance of power, Wood and Grey were further empowered. Secondly, the potato did not fail in 1847; few were planted and few harvested, but the apparent absence of any direct sign of Divine intent allowed Trevelyan to declare that the Famine was over, and that

no further extraordinary measures could be justified.

British hostility

Popular feelings on this were reinforced by the British banking crisis and financial crash of October 1847, which further boosted radicalism in its obsessive drive to retrench state expenditure. Government relief in Ireland was particularly targeted. Wood was thus not overly dismayed by the defeat of the 1848 budget, which had included a substantial increase in British income tax to meet the weight of Irish and defence expenditure, and which had been introduced by Russell. The setback allowed him to use the excuse that 'the British people have made up their minds to pay no more for Irish landlords' to reject Clarendon's increasingly frantic appeals for more aid. Russell's attempts to circumvent this obstacle by means of a state loan were blocked in cabinet by an alliance of moralists threatening a revolt of 'distressed English manufacturers' and moderates rejecting any additional taxation on Irish land or incomes.

There is no doubt that traditional anti-Irishness played a rôle in this British hostility; racial and cultural stereotypes were common in the press. An upsurge of agrarian violence in late 1847, and the nationalist activity culminating in the abortive rebellion of 1848, further convinced many of Irish ingratitude for English 'generosity' in 1847. Yet the most striking aspect of British opinion was the inclusion of Irish landowners in this moral censure. When the potato failed again in 1848, the dominant view was that Providence had again intervened to discipline all classes into the exertion and self-reliance necessary to maximise the use of undeveloped Irish resources.

Within a few months of his arrival in July 1847, the new lord lieutenant Clarendon had come under the influence of the senior Irish administrators, and shared their view that the saving of human life was imperative. While continuing to defend the broad outlines of government policy when pressed by Irish landlords, he demanded increased grants to assist the impoverished areas where the poor law was collapsing, and to introduce assisted emigration and other remedial measures. Clarendon and Russell collaborated in drawing up remedial proposals, but all these proved abortive. Russell had lost authority over his cabinet, and found his own position increasingly marked by confusion and indecision in the face of ideological certainty. On the failure of anything but the most modest of measures, he fell back on self-justifying rhetorical defences based on his continuing antagonism towards landlords, and on the 'inevitability' of mass suffering. Unable to choose between the imperatives of philanthropy and economy, Russell sought to steer an untenable middle course, and in the process presided over the decimation of the Irish people.

While British opinion rejected further spending in Ireland, it demanded more 'reconstructive' reforms. In 1849 parliament swung behind Peel's suggestion of a strong measure to force the sale of encumbered estates to new, active proprietors. Moralists like Wood had long been committed to an encumbered estates bill as the best mode of facilitating social transition in the west by sweeping away the existing irresponsible or indebted owners and replacing them with men of different values and available capital. To Wood, as to Peel, 'free trade in land' was the logical climax of response to the Irish crisis that had made 'free trade in corn' so vital in 1845-6.

PEEL'S PANACEA FOR IRELAND.

Russell. "Oh! this dreadful Irish Toothache!"
Peel. "Well, here is Something that will Cure you in an instant."

Irish panacea. (PUNCH) *Peel presents Russell with a panacea for the 'dreadful Irish toothache'–the encumbered estates bill.*

Alternatives?

In retrospect, the most realistic alternative to the moralist relief policy was presented by the Irish executive and administration under Bessborough and Clarendon.

THE MODERN SINBAD AND THE OLD MAN OF THE SEA;
OR,
JOHN BULL AND PADDY.

John Bull and Paddy. (PUPPET SHOW). *This January 1849 cartoon depicts 'John Bull' (England) on the brink of throwing off his ungrateful and troublesome Irish burden.*

Although bound by the constraints of early Victorian administrative thinking, the Irish administration was probably the most advanced and interventionist in Europe. Its senior officers recognised that the crisis of relief resolved ultimately into distributing money to specific areas and needs. Their bitterness at the state's unwillingness or inability to respond effectively to the crisis is demonstrated by Twistleton's decision to resign over the termination of all direct parliamentary subsidies and the planned imposition of the rate-in-aid in spring 1849. Clarendon explained Twistleton's motives: 'He thinks the destitution here is so horrible, the indifference of the House of Commons to it so manifest, that he is an unfit agent of a policy that must be one of extermination'.

The policy pursued from autumn 1847, against the advice of expert administrators, can only be condemned as adding profusely to Ireland's misery. It is difficult to refute the indictment made by one humanitarian English observer in the later stages of the Famine, that amidst 'an abundance of cheap food...very many have been done to death by pure tyranny'. The charge of culpable neglect of the consequences of policies leading to mass starvation is indisputable. That a conscious choice to pursue moral or economic objectives at the expense of human life was made by several ministers can also be demonstrated. Russell's government can thus be held responsible for a failure to honour its own 1846 pledge to use 'the whole credit of the Treasury and the means of the country...as is our bounden duty to use them...to avert famine, and to maintain the people of Ireland'.

Yet to single out the government alone for blame is to oversimplify. What ruled out alternative policies was the strength of the British public opinion manifested in parliament. During the Famine years the British economy went through a crisis that mobilised an assertive middle-class political opinion. Amid the confusion, those most in line with this sentiment, and those (as in the cases of Wood and Trevelyan) ready to exploit it, were at a political advantage. Thus the ideas of moralism, supported by Providentialism and a Manchester-school reading of classical economics, proved the most potent of British interpretations of the Irish Famine. What these led to was not a policy of deliberate genocide, but a dogmatic refusal to recognise that measures intended 'to encourage industry, to do battle with sloth and despair; to awake a manly feeling of inward confidence and reliance on the justice of Heaven' (in the words of Anthony Trollope), were based on false premises, and in the Irish conditions of the later 1840s amounted to a sentence of death on hundreds of thousands of people.

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Further reading:

C. Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger* (London 1962).

C. Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine* (London 1989).

P. Mandler, *Aristocratic government in the age of reform 1830-52* (Oxford 1990).

P. Gray, *The Irish Famine* (London 1995), publication due Sept. 1995.

A version of this article was broadcast in February 1995 as part of the RTE Thomas Davis lecture series on the Famine, published by Mercier Press.