

raibh an bheirt i bhfad tar éis bháis nuair airíodar é. Bhí an Ghaelainn ag na daoine bochta go léir. Ní raibh sí ag na huachtaránaibh, nó ní raibh sí acu ach go holc. D'fhéadadh na daoine bochta eolas d'fháil ar a chéile go minic i ngan fhios do na huachtaránaibh. Chomh luath agus fuair an t-athair agus an mháthair go raibh an bheirt leanbh tar éis bháis, tháinig a leithéid sin de bhuaire agus d'uaigneas orthu ná féadfaidís fanúint san áit. Bhíodar deighilte óna chéile ach fuairéadar caoi ar fhocal éigin do chur chun a chéile. Shocraíodar ar éaló as an áit.

Cáit a b'ainm don mhnaoi. Do shleamhnaigh Pádraig amach as an dtigh ar dtús. Do stad sé thuas i mbarra Bhóthar na Sop ag fanúint le Cáit. I gceann tamaill do chonaic sé ag teacht í, ach bhí sí ag siúl an-réidh. Bhí an bhreiteacht uirthi. Chomáineadar leo suas i dtreo Charraig an Staighre. Tháingadar chun na háite ina raibh an poll mór. Bhí fhios acu go raibh an bheirt leanbh thíos sa pholl san i measc na gcéadta corp eile. Do stadadar in aice an phoill agus ghoileadar a ndóthain.

Thuas ar an nDoire Liath, lastoir den Chathairín, a bhí an bothán ina rabhadar ina gcónaí ann sara ndeachadar isteach i dtigh na mbocht. D'fhógadar an poll mór agus thugadar aghaidh siar ó thuaidh ar an nDoire Liath mar a raibh an bothán. Bhí an áit sé mhíle slí uathu agus bhí an oíche ag teacht, ach chomáineadar leo. Bhí an t-ocras orthu agus bhí an bhreiteacht ar Cháit. B'éigean dóibh siúl an-réidh. Nuair a bhí cúpla míle den tslí curtha díobh acu b'éigean do Cháit stad. Ní fhéadfadh sí dul a thuilleadh. Do casadh comharsain orthu. Do tugadh deoch agus blúire éigin bia chucu, ach ní ligfeadh scanradh d'éinne bheith istigh a thabhairt dóibh toisc iad a bheith tagtha lom díreach ón bpoorhouse, agus an drochbhreiteacht a bheith ar an mnaoi. Níor dhein Pádraig ach an bhean do thógáil chuige ar a mhuin agus comáint leis siar ó thuaidh fé dhéin an bhotháin . . .

Amárach a bhí chugainn tháinig comharsa éigin chun an bhotháin. Chuaigh sé isteach. Chonaic sé an bheirt istigh agus iad araon marbh, agus dhá chois a mhná istigh ina bhrollach ag Pádraig fé mar bheadh sé ag iarraidh iad do théamh . . .

[*Mo Sgéal Féin* Peadar Ua Laoghaire; 1915]

## British Public Opinion and the Great Irish Famine 1845-49

Peter Gray

After a considerable period of academic neglect, the Great Famine is again at the forefront of debate in Ireland, with historians openly engaging in heated debate over its meaning and significance.<sup>1</sup> Central to this historical controversy is the British government's response to the Famine, and the degree of responsibility that can be attributed to its actions, or inaction, for the excess mortality of over one million in five years. At the heart of the matter lies the factor of ideological motivations and constraints on the government, and of the effect of these on the formulation of policy. In reasserting the importance of ideology, post-revisionist historians have highlighted the need for research into the long-neglected political aspects of the Great Famine, but at the same time they have run the risk of slipping into *ad hominem* attacks in the style of Woodham-Smith's spirited but somewhat narrow castigation of Charles Trevelyan. Over-simplified accounts of the relationship between political economy and government policy are unhelpful. The nature of each and their interrelation during the Famine was highly complex, and was refracted through political mentalities and relationships which owed much to other factors – such as religion. One of those vital factors was British public opinion.

As I was working on British government policy towards Ireland in the 1840's, it became increasingly clear to me that policy did not exist in a public vacuum. A British public opinion had clearly played an active role in moulding the perceptions of the government elite, and in determining the directions and limitations of state action during this period. Looking for historical literature on this subject I was surprised to find that virtually none existed: a chapter on British public opinion had been suggested for the Edwards and Williams volume, but was never submitted.<sup>2</sup> This paper is meant as a step towards filling that gap.

I have concentrated here on a section of the British press which I believe to have had the greatest political influence in the later 1840s. The press and 'public opinion' are of course not synonymous, but what I am primarily concerned about are those sections of the English bourgeoisie who took their opinions from the liberal metropolitan press, and to whose feelings and presuppositions it in turn appealed. This is the social group that was mobilised by a series of political campaigns in the 1830s - 40s into a sense of independence from the existing political structures and into

vociferous criticism of certain elements in the British social system. The rise and success of the Anti-Corn Law League in the 1840's promoted the development of a politically self-conscious British middle class. The energies unleashed by the League lacked the same unifying force after the Corn Laws were repealed in 1846, but were kept very much alive by the continuing economic instability (Britain underwent a financial and industrial slump in 1847 - 9), and by campaigns for retrenchment and in defence of the new free trade system against an aristocratic-led protectionist backlash. The middle classes rallied to the state against a working-class Chartist 'threat' in 1848, but this was by no means uncritical, and was accompanied by an upsurge in free trade radicalism. The political importance of such opinion was increased by the political conditions of the later 1840s - a time of party flux and the apparent bankruptcy of old identities (particularly that of 'Whig'), during which the country was governed by a weak and divided government.

The papers I want to consider here are all part of a broadly liberal metropolitan consensus - all were committed to free trade and reformism, although they differed on specific partisan alignment and on some points regarding state action. While there was no unanimity in their prescriptions for Ireland, the parameters of what was acceptable to liberal opinion can be discerned in their pages, and points of shared interpretation taken to indicate the dominant consensus. The seriousness with which ministers of both the main British parties regarded the press is evident from the attention given to newspaper opinion in their private correspondence and diaries, and in their attempts to influence public opinion through selective leaking of official information and social flattery of editors.

By far and away the most influential and powerful newspaper of the day was *The Times*, which by the mid-1830s had far outdistanced its rivals in circulation and authority, leading the way in the articulation of a non-partisan 'voice'. J. T. Delane, editor from 1841, claimed that the paper's unique role in politics was as spokesman and model for the 'fourth estate'; its constituency was wider than any politician, he claimed, and it represented the sovereign opinion of the educated 'ruling classes'. *The Times'* relationship with politicians was always somewhat ambiguous, but the substance of its claims to represent the political classes were conceded by leaders - to Sir Robert Peel it was the 'barometer of public opinion'. Significantly, the paper did not merely report, but sought to interpret events and mould attitudes: it was a political actor in its own right, but careful not to stray too far from the dominant 'fashion' of the day. The paper's circulation was rising steadily in this period, and was to exceed 40,000 daily by 1850. up to one third of this outside London. Its readership was much larger than this figure would suggest; papers were

frequently read in exchanges, libraries and reading-rooms. It has been calculated that the readership may have been as high as half a million by 1850. In addition, *The Times'* opinions were disseminated by the provincial press who would often reprint articles.<sup>3</sup>

If *The Times* dominated the daily market, it was not without rivals; the Whig-radical *Morning Chronicle* was declining in sales in this period, and was eventually sold to a Peelite group in 1848 by its proprietor Sir John Easthope. *The Daily News*, founded in 1846 under Charles Dickens's editorship, was cheap, popular, and more inclined to radicalism, but lacked the political weight of its rivals. Of the weeklies, *The Economist* had risen rapidly from its foundation in 1843 as the voice of doctrinaire free traders. Edited and mostly written by James Wilson, it was widely respected for its statistical and factual information, and Wilson's personal interest in Irish affairs and 'improvement' ensured considerable coverage of the Famine. Wilson's concern to print what he regarded as the truth, however unpalatable, marked *The Economist* off as the most uncompromising and ideologically committed element of the British press. At 2-3000, its circulation was limited, but it was nonetheless influential in certain circles. Other weeklies like the more centrist *Spectator* were also formative influences on the 'political classes'.

The early 1840s saw not only the foundation of the heavyweight *Economist* but of several more popular ventures. Technological advances made possible the development of an illustrated press, the most successful examples being the satirical *Punch* (1841) and the more serious *Illustrated London News* (1842). *Punch* from the start had a moralistic cutting edge and a belief that humour should be about more than mere laughter. W. M. Thackeray, a regular contributor, and indeed the writer of much of the paper's Irish coverage, expressed the view that humour ought to 'awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness; your scorn of untruth, pretension, imposture; your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy'. The paper's radicalism was middle class and philanthropic; hostile to Chartism and to O'Connellism, and wholeheartedly committed to free trade and financial reform. By 1850 it was well on the way to becoming the more conservative patriotic national institution of the mid-Victorian 'age of equipoise'. Its political weight was substantial; its circulation was around 30,000 and concentrated in London, but it reached many of the metropolitan opinion formers who set the tone of middle-class attitudes nationally. Most importantly, *Punch* existed as part of a network of similarly-minded journals. Its authors and cartoonists took their priorities and often their line on public affairs from *The Times*. Indeed one contributor, Gilbert à Beckett, was simultaneously also a leader writer for *The Times* and the *Illustrated London News*. Founded in 1842, the

*Illustrated London News* soon proved its popularity, selling 67,000 copies weekly by 1850. Its buyers were mostly upper and middle class (it cost 6d), but it appears to have been popular with many self-improving artisans. Like *Punch* it took a relatively radical position on many social questions, while remaining hostile to Chartism.

The illustrated material on the Irish Famine in *Punch* and the *Illustrated London News* is familiar, but its political significance is worth considering. These journals were not alone in publishing images of Ireland in the later 1840s, and some less familiar images can be found in the several short-lived rivals of these two publications. I must admit to being rather surprised at the wealth of Famine-related material that I had never seen republished which I came across recently. It is an indication of just how much remains to be unearthed about this central event in modern Irish history.

The political history of the Famine is complex and related to British high-political fluctuations as well as to changing agricultural conditions over a five-year period. What I shall do here is sketch in some of the broad themes as reflected in the British liberal press and suggest some of the political consequences.

British opinion had shown some interest in the social condition of Ireland before the first outbreak of the potato disease in autumn 1845. Attention had been focused on Irish events by Daniel O'Connell's mass 'monster meetings' for Repeal in 1843, during which social questions such as land tenure began to come to the forefront of nationalist demands. Many British liberals and radicals had some admiration for O'Connell as a champion of such liberal causes as religious equality, anti-slavery, parliamentary reform and free trade; yet repeal of the Union was unanimously rejected as both dangerous to British security and disastrous for Ireland's chances of economic improvement and social 'progress'.

*The Times* was more resolutely hostile to O'Connell, but it too believed that Repeal agitation reflected underlying social problems. In 1845-6 a 'Times Commissioner' (Thomas Campbell Foster) produced a long and extremely influential series of articles on 'the condition of the people of Ireland' denouncing landlord abuses and calling for British public opinion to be 'extended' to Ireland to expose such misconduct. One persistent theme of British middle-class perceptions of Ireland was thus firmly established by the eve of the Famine: that Irish rents were 'an infamous source of profit, a base and immoral traffic, or at least ... something not becoming of a gentleman'. The Whig *Morning Chronicle* was if anything more scathing: Irish landlords were guilty of 'wholesale, unmitigated murder - we can designate the 'system' by no other term -

which had converted Ireland into a lazar-house of death and destitution, and a charnel-house of death'.<sup>4</sup> Much of this hostility was fuelled by a more general antagonism towards landlords in both islands as upholders of the much-resented Corn Laws, but those in Ireland were seen as more vulnerable and explicitly guilty of the sin of permitting social and moral backwardness to continue in Ireland.

The second major theme regarding Ireland on the eve of the Famine was expressed by James Wilson of *The Economist* in 1843. He was profoundly optimistic about Ireland's economic prospects once aristocratic 'misgovernment' was ended, religious equality assured and the right economic environment created. He wrote:

Ireland has been hitherto most grievously misgoverned ... and ... even now we are reaping the fruits of that unjust, absurd, and wicked, because unchristian, system, from which we were formally emancipated in 1829 ... Since [then] Ireland has been making rapid progress, and ... it requires but continued perseverance in a bold, kindly and equally discriminative system ... There still exist in Ireland grievances of a very aggravated description ... [A] bold, determined, cautious statesman, no matter whether he be Whig or Tory, would deal practically with these grievances ... and would carry on the imperial government on such a system and in such a spirit as would give to any Irishman the same advantages, economical and political, as Englishmen and Scotsmen enjoy.<sup>5</sup>

The important theme here is that Irish policy should be about moral and social integration into Great Britain. British Famine policy is inexplicable unless this objective is recognised. Optimism about Ireland's potential for rapid development - if only this could be unlocked by free trade - was widespread. Malthusianism in the classical sense of pessimism about population inevitably outrunning agricultural productivity, was remarkably rare amongst liberal writers in the 1840s. Foster's *Times* articles claimed that Irish resources were grossly under-utilised and squandered by inefficient and extravagant landlordism. Ireland, he argued, needed only better landlordism and greater incentives for the poor to work to unlock its resources and become prosperous with her present or a larger population. Opinion of this sort was widespread and genuine, and was shared by many in the political elite (including in differing degrees by Sir Robert Peel and Lord John Russell). Policy differences existed only over how much state aid and/or compulsion was necessary to promote such desirable change. While some, like Peel, favoured transitional aid (and a firm guiding hand), Foster, in common with the editorial staffs of *The*

*Times*, *The Economist* and *Punch*, believed it was self-exertion and not capital grants that was required. He declared: 'When Irishmen, as a nation, learn that true spirit of self-supporting strength, then, and not until then, they and their concerns will command respect.'<sup>6</sup>

One interesting side effect of Foster's tour of Ireland was the controversy that followed his attack on O'Connell's record as a landlord in County Kerry. The political hostility on both sides was so intense that neither Foster nor O'Connell's defenders can be trusted as independent witnesses, but the argument drew artists to Iveragh to depict the disputed scenes. The *Illustrated London News* drawings of the O'Connell estate are quite poor, but its rival, the *Pictorial Times*, produced a quite extraordinary sequence of sketches by Frederick N. Sheppard in early 1846. That paper's reporters were careful not to single out O'Connell as a uniquely bad proprietor, but instead took the opportunity to bring before their English readership a graphic representation of the poverty of the peasantry in the Irish west.

Fig. 1 depicts the labouring poor near Derrynane, O'Connell's country house, fig. 2 the squalid conditions of the poorest one-roomed



Fig.1 - Peasantry of the O'Connell Farms

stone and turf cabins. Fig 3 shows an interior with cottier family. The vital components of the peasant domestic economy – hens and a pig fattened for sale with spare potatoes, are prominent. The potato blight was not



Fig. 2 - Cabin at Ardara

universal in Kerry in the 1845-6 season, but some fields were devastated. The small farmer, shown in fig. 4 is reported to have demonstrated to the artist the extent of the blight already spreading through the potatoes stored in his cabin.<sup>7</sup>

When the potato blight – a new and little understood disease – hit Ireland in 1845, it crystallised and gave greater urgency to the pre-existing perceptions of Ireland and its problems. Inevitably, liberal opinion connected crop failure and the consequent threat of famine with the Corn



Fig. 3 - Ardara - Cabin of J. Donoghue



Fig.4 - Oughermung - bedroom of Tom Sullivan



Fig. 5 - The Minister's dream

Law question. To free traders, the event was a God-send, in a literal sense. Britain in the 1840s was a society suffused with the world-view of evangelical Christianity, in which the intervention of divine providence (either directly, or through the operation of so-called 'natural laws') was regarded by most as indisputable. Overtly secular thinking was limited to philosophers and political economists like John Stuart Mill and Nassau Senior. Much more typical was *The Times* moralistic welcoming of the potato blight as one of 'God's armies for the chastisement of mankind'; it was a warning to all against the 'excesses of unreal luxury' and an incentive for Britain to cling to 'the laws of commerce', which were 'the laws of nature and consequently the laws of God'. This, of course, was code for the repeal of the corn laws, and this sort of rhetoric was taken up at the meetings of the radical Anti-Corn Law League. Indeed Sir Robert Peel was also heavily influenced by the providentialist response to the potato failure and used this justification in moving to end agricultural protection in 1846. The intimate relationship between potato failure, the Corn Laws, and the Irish situation was expressed graphically in a *Pictorial Times* cartoon (fig. 5) depicting Peel's tormented nightmare.<sup>8</sup>

Given the pre-existing ideas about development depending on the operation of 'natural economic laws', it is not surprising that the arrival of the blight was accompanied by optimistic hopes for Ireland. Insofar as Ireland's fate had 'ministered' to England on the evils of protection, it seemed only fair to many observers that it should be compensated by some relief aid. Peel's initial steps to set up public works relief and food depots were thus accepted with near unanimity by the press. Only the protectionist press – now increasingly marginalised and stigmatised as a 'class' interest – attempted to deny the danger of famine. Over time, they too fell into line as Irish landowners appealed for assistance. Many free traders went further and actually greeted the potato disease as a boon to Ireland. To *The Times*, the potato – the 'meanest of foods' – would now be replaced by foodstuffs of a 'higher order' – not defined in terms of nutrition (this was an era before nutritional science as we now understand it), but as commercial good. Cheap imported grain (especially Indian corn from America) would replace the potato as the food of the masses and promote the social transition of the Irish poor from cottier tenants growing their own potatoes to landless labourers buying grain with their wages. This anglicizing social agenda was central to English attitudes towards the Irish Famine; it was held in different forms by different people, but it was widespread, and as the Famine went on, it increasingly legitimised a policy that put the reconstruction of Irish society in a form acceptable to British interests above humanitarian action to minimise mortality.

In the first year of the Famine, a degree of state aid to the local famine



relief efforts was not controversial. *The Economist* was virtually isolated in taking a rigidly non-interventionist stance. This is the context in which Peel's relief measures (similar to those introduced in 1816-17 and 1822) were put into operation. Despite this, suspicion of Irish landlords was high, and many papers expressed concern that public works relief would be abused in the localities for their private interests; as early as November 1845 the *Illustrated London News* warned that the press must keep a close watch on relief operations to prevent the 'sordid jobbing and speculation' that landowners had engaged in on former occasions. However, increased taxation to pay for relief aid was at first tolerated as being likely to kill the demand for repeal of the Union with kindness. For a time in late 1845-early 1846 Daniel O'Connell was held up for pillory as both swindling agitator and a bad landlord, thus combining both liberal bugbears. In the *Punch* cartoon 'Rint' v Potatoes' (fig. 6) O'Connell is attacked for his alleged greed in collecting the 'Repeal rent' from the poor and for misleading his ignorant followers as to their true interests.<sup>9</sup>

British taxation was also taken to legitimise the demand for a more permanent change in Irish social organisation. From April 1846 *The Times*, the *Illustrated London News* and *Punch* were all calling for an extended Irish poor law (on the English model) to compel 'Irish property to support Irish poverty'.

The second and much more serious failure of the potato crop in 1846 (estimated at a loss of over four fifths) reinforced many of the trends of the previous year. Providence was again assumed to have acted – although the now defunct corn laws could no longer be identified as the target. To *The Times* the second failure exposed conclusively the culpable reluctance of Irish landlords and peasants alike to abandon the potato 'system' – this was a direct judgement, it was believed, on Irish society. It followed that the task of government was to disabuse the labourer and landlord of the idea that the British taxpayer would bail them out and to eradicate what was seen as the dependency culture in Ireland. It did not follow that Ireland should be left to *laissez-faire* in anything except the supply of food. *The Times* urged instead the creation of moral mechanisms that would enforce Irish obedience to the 'will of Heaven'. The *Illustrated London News* joined the *Times* in intensifying the campaign for a stronger poor law, but was less retributive in its tone. Like all liberal journals it was deeply sceptical of the idea that the state could or should feed the people – non-interference in the food trade was a sacred cow after 1846 but like many in England it felt that the legacy of past misgovernment rendered some British assistance necessary as a form of national atonement.

These contradictions within liberal public opinion mirrored divisions



Fig. 6 -

"RINT" v. POTATOES.—THE IRISH JEREMY DIDDLER.

"You haven't got such a thing as Twelve-pence about you!—A Farthing a week—a Penny a month—a Shilling a year!"

in the Whig-liberal cabinet of Lord John Russell in 1846-7. Rigidly moralist ministers like Charles Wood and Earl Grey – both of whom were under the influence of Treasury secretary Charles Trevelyan – explicitly sought to stoke up and use the power of British public opinion against further relief expenditure, and were in communication with Delane of the *Times*. In 1846-7 however, even *The Times* was obliged to admit that public opinion was more mixed in its view. While there was agreement on the fundamentals of maintaining free trade (few voices were raised against the government decision not to directly import food or to prevent its import from Ireland in the savage winter of 1846-7), and also on the need to penalise landowners for their prior mis-management, there was much confusion as competing stereotypes of Ireland fought for ascendancy.

*Punch* cartoons show the degree to which famine relief was bound up with ideological considerations. In 'Union is Strength' (fig. 7), 'John Bull',



Fig. 7 - UNION IS STRENGTH.

*John Bull* - "HERE ARE A FEW THINGS TO GO ON WITH, BROTHER, AND I'LL SOON PUT YOU IN A WAY TO EARN YOUR OWN LIVING."

the personification of Englishness, presents his Irish 'brother' not only with food, but with a spade – to put him 'in a way to earn your own living'. This moral paternalism must be understood in the context of the popular economic ideas that stressed the essential fertility of Ireland and placed the blame for its backwardness on ignorance and lack of enterprise. The idea that wealth could be created by industrial exertion alone acquired considerable popularity. *Punch* acknowledged that in the terrible conditions of 1846-7 Ireland required some assistance in the short term, but was concerned that too great or too lengthy an activity would be counter-productive. By May 1847 the paper was advocating total reliance on the new poor law and leaving Ireland to 'shift for herself for a year'. Like much of the British press, *Punch* was constantly finding evidence of Irish 'ingratitude' for English relief exertions. Two months later it had decided that the Irish had rejected the proffered spade and relapsed into atavistic violence. In 'Height of impudence' (fig. 8) John Bull is accosted by a



HEIGHT OF IMPUDENCE.

Fig. 8 - Irishman to John Bull - "Spare a thrifle, yer Honour, for a poor Irish Lad to buy a bit of -- a Blunderbuss with".



peasant begging alms to 'buy a bit of a blunderbuss with'. In contrast, the Irishman is no longer 'brother', but a simianised creature of the sort that became increasingly common in nineteenth century cartoons. The impact of such racist stereotypes of Irish 'degenerates' (mirrored in the prose of the *Times*) was profound in moulding attitudes in the late 1840s. Yet the fact that both these stereotypes could exist side by side in the same paper and indeed within British public opinion is the point I would stress. This is reflected in the comment made by the diarist and political insider Charles Greville in spring 1847: in London, he wrote, people were 'animated by very mixed and varying feelings ... and are tossed about between indignation, resentment, rage, and economical fear on the one hand, and pity and generosity on the other'.<sup>10</sup>

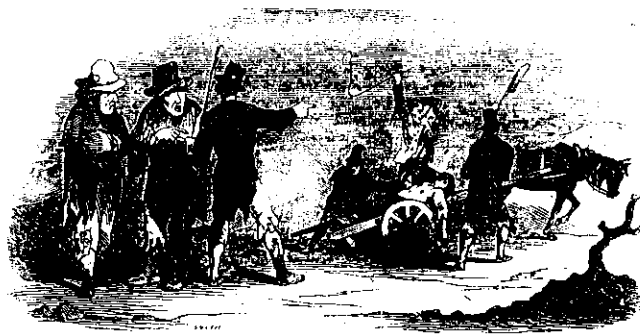


Fig. 9 - The Famine in Ireland - Funeral at Skibbereen

More than anything else it was the harrowing accounts from the Skibbereen area of South-west Cork in early 1847 that focussed attention on pity. Newspaper columns began to fill with detailed accounts of mass starvation and death, but it was the *Illustrated London News* which brought this home in a graphic way. On 30 January it published a front page drawing of a famine funeral at Skibbereen under an editorial calling for greater government action (fig. 9). A poem accompanying the sketch again hammered home some of the interpretative themes I mentioned earlier: the potential wealth of Irish resources and the inevitable beneficence of divine Providence:-

And yet — oh! paradox - oh! shame! -  
Oh blind improvidence! The land  
Is of the best that ever came  
Forth from the mighty Maker's hand.  
Fertile and fair, it should have been  
The glory of the British crown;  
And now, behold the shudd'ring scene!



Fig. 10 - Boy and Girl at Cahera



Fig. 10 - The village of Mienies

The seedless fields - the spectral town.  
But Nature vindicates her God;  
Teaches a lesson from the soil:  
A voice springs from the blighted sod  
In mercy for the sons of toil.  
Fair nature's energies expire  
When rack'd by one poor porcine root;  
And Labour merits better hire  
Than the sad fare of Raleigh's fruit.

On February 13 and 20, the paper followed this up with two series of reports and drawings from the same area by its regular Irish artist James Mahony (fig. 10).

These images may have now become familiar to us from their frequent reproduction; they are among the very few pictorial records of the Irish Famine. The illustrations are still deeply disturbing — although, as Margaret Crawford has pointed out, they fall short of a realistic representation of the ravages of famine on the human body. It is necessary to turn to the many eye-witness reports published in the press and pamphlets to get a real sense of the full horror.<sup>11</sup>

Many contemporaries appear to have been deeply moved by these reports and contributed generously to the charitable collections which

raised over £400,000 in this year. Yet what we now call 'compassion fatigue' appears to have set in soon after, and little of this initial sympathy fed through into medium-term policy. At best it can be said to have created the climate allowing the state to establish soup kitchens for the free distribution of food — a system which reached over three million people at its peak in July 1847. Certainly it was the evaporation of this mood that propelled the policy of closing down the kitchens from August, despite their success in getting at least a minimum of nutrition to vast numbers at much less cost than had been expected.

To understand the limitations of British humanitarianism in 1847, we need to consider the ideological context in which images of Irish suffering were placed. The *Illustrated London News* sketches were set amid columns of text discussing the providential meaning of the Famine. The paper was a strong supporter both of the British Association collection, and of the 'National Day of Fast and Humiliation' held in March 1847 (portrayed allegorically in fig. 11). Both of these transferred attention away from state relief to private charity and atonement, while endorsing the providentialist interpretation of crop failure. To the *Illustrated London News*:

'under the visitation of Heaven, some of the evil passions of men are at least suspended, and there is a wish to afford each other mutual help. It is better to fall into the hands of Heaven than those of man. The Psalmist chooses the chastisement of pestilence rather than the sword of the enemy; and in our present one, we have at least the consolation of trying to assist each other . . . we cannot hope to escape national trials; but, in our present one, we have at least the satisfaction of knowing that we have not brought it upon ourselves, that all efforts are directed to put an end to it, and that those efforts have the good wishes of all men for success'.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time both the *Illustrated London News* and *The Times* warned that the anger as well as the charity of 'John Bull' had been aroused by heavy taxation and that a punitive poor law to amend the social situation of Ireland must be put into place. Soup kitchen relief was tolerated only after Russell had committed the government to doing this in January 1847. In a typical purple passage *The Times* pronounced:

'Society is reconstructed in a disaster; each new birth is in throes, and institutions are the monuments of wrong. In 'clouds and darkness' it is necessary to take a short and simple rule, the guidance of some great moral truth. The first law of nature, that the people must be fed, and that more particularly from the work of their hands, is the clue to this labyrinth. In the public weal an enlightened statesman will discern the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night through this terrible



Fig. 11 - The National Fast

wilderness; and the public weal is an empty name unless it includes the relief of those who are ready to perish, and the employment of those who are able to work, but have not the opportunity.<sup>13</sup>

The responsibility for meeting Irish suffering was thus transferred wholesale onto the group held to be morally responsible for creating Irish backwardness in the first place: the Irish landlords. Indeed, *The Nonconformist*, the weekly journal of Britain's dissenters, followed an editorial in January 1847 calling on its readers to forget political economy and to 'Give! Give liberally!', with one less than a month later attacking Russell's dropping of half the public works debt as a boon to Irish landlordism: 'By a sort of hocus pocus, assuming the guise, now of charity, anon of statemanship, the net result of this series of measures is to be the transference of some millions sterling from the pockets of British tax-payers to those of a ruined Irish proprietary. The drift of the whole scheme is to make industry pay the piper for their improvidence.<sup>14</sup> Even at the height of private charitable giving, British opinion was highly critical of public assistance to Ireland.

By the summer of 1847 the view of *The Times* was the dominant one in British public opinion. Patience with the intractable and seemingly unimproving social problems of Ireland was wearing thin, and reports of exploitation, idleness and importunity were widespread. A letter from a Cambridgeshire clergyman to the Prime Minister summed up the popular mood. His parishioners had been generous, but 'we must not have it again'. To continue with extraordinary relief would be to create a 'vested interest'; what the country needed now, it was argued, was shock treatment. 'The lesson of self-reliance and practical industry', declared the *Times*:

is one of which her people are most in need - they cannot too soon begin their apprenticeship. The theory of relief was not to lead the Irish people on step by step until they could walk alone. A nation is not trained to manly virtue as an infant is taught to walk. A certain amount of misery and hardship [is necessary] . . . if they would be invulnerable to hostile attack. Had we persisted in the futile attempt to indoctrinate Ireland gradually into self-reliance, the tomorrow on which she was to have been liberated from tutelage would have never come. The endeavour which was made - with a wonderful degree of success - simply to feed the starving, was not intended to leave them at the end of that time precisely in the same situation as at the commencement. It was calculated that during the time of public support, owners and occupiers would prepare crops of a less perishable nature than those swept away by the mysterious visitation.

Ireland was now to be subjected to a rigorous reconstructive regime. If the *Times* was blithely optimistic about the costs of this, Chancellor of

the Exchequer Charles Wood was at least more honest, telling the Lord Lieutenant that 'except through a purgation of misery and starvation, I cannot see how Ireland is to emerge into anything approaching either to quiet or prosperity.'<sup>15</sup>

For a number of reasons then, the humanitarianism manifest in early 1847 failed to be translated effectively into the means of limiting mass famine mortality. An effective system of outdoor relief came only after considerable delays, and was hedged with financial and administrative checks. Having proved what it could do, the state rapidly dismantled the soup kitchen mechanism in September 1847, and threw subsequent relief on the grossly underfunded Poor Law system.

By September 1847, with the extended Poor Law in force, and new (and reasonable) grain harvest being gathered in, and huge American food imports pushing down the market price of grain, a major shift in British public opinion was evident, and was strongly articulated in parliament by

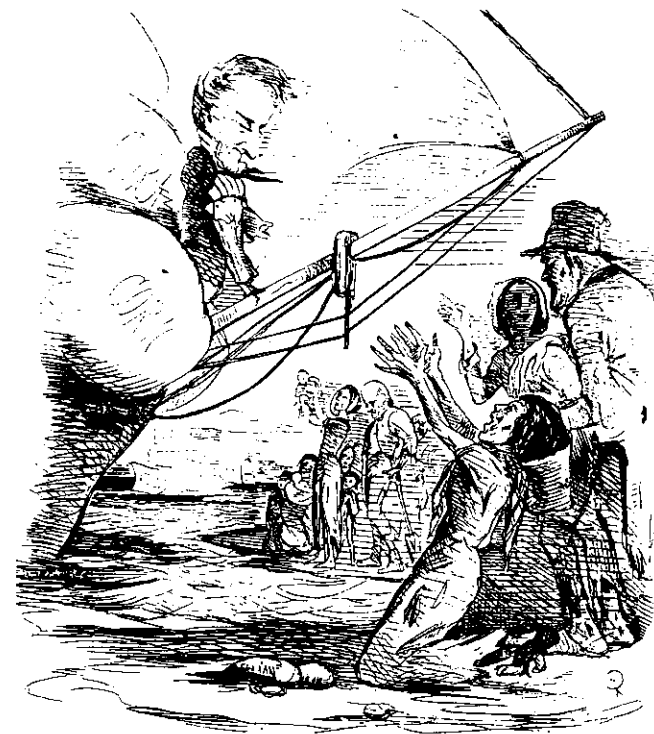


Fig. 12 - Yankee Doodle's Corn Exchange

an influx of middle class radicals elected in the general election of that year - and indeed who came to hold a balance of power. Trevelyan proclaimed the Famine over (on the grounds that there had been no potato blight) and the radicals concurred - but most thought American imports would feed the people (fig. 12).<sup>16</sup> Many were aware that the two previous years had dislocated Irish rural society, but this was regarded as an opportunity rather than as a problem - an opportunity to force Irish landlords into changing their behaviour, and if they did not, to replace them with other men. The



Fig. 13 - Irish Brigands "Lying in Wait"

continuing suffering of the Irish poor - reflecting their loss of entitlements (the ability to consume the available food) - was ignored or conveniently blamed on the landowners.

Only violence brought Ireland again to the forefront of British attention from summer 1847. A wave of agrarian 'outrages', including the murder of several landlords in late 1847 provoked British anger, and the portrayal of Irish peasants as the atavistic enemies of the 'rights of property' (fig. 13)<sup>17</sup>. Later, the abortive Young Ireland rising of July 1848 produced a mixture of contempt, outrage and a further demonisation of the Irish as a whole. The British press subsequently returned repeatedly to the theme of inveterate Irish barbarity and ingratitude. Agrarian unrest and political rebellion were rolled together and images of famine-related suffering ignored. *Punch's* rival satirical magazine in this period, *The Puppet Show*, used the same stereotypes of racial inferiority - the simian features of 'Paddy' - in the wake of the 1848 rising. In fig. 14, Lord John Russell, and Lord Clarendon are shown having sedated and straight-jacketed the violent 'Paddy' with coercion legislation.



Fig. 14 - A Marvellous Cure -

Nurse Clarendon - "All of a sudden, Sir, he broke out, rash like, all over, and went on in a shocking manner - it was quite awful to hear him. He said he'd murder me, and you, and I don't know who else; but he's been much better since I put on the Strait-Jacket, as you told me."  
 Doctor Russell - "Ah! I knew that would quiet him."

Russell was, however, no favourite of the radical British press, who vigorously attacked his aristocratic background and his slowness to deliver on retrenchment of expenditure and eradicating the privileges of landlordism. Naturally, Russell's visit to Ireland in September 1848, in a desperate attempt to revive the whig tradition of a reformist Irish policy, was lampooned in prose and cartoons. The Premier's visit was regarded as an act of weakness - almost of submission to the Irish (fig. 15). His position



Fig. 15

"—— PADDY! WILL YOU NOW,  
TAKE ME WHILE I'M IN THE HUMOUR?"



Fig. 16 AN EASTERLY WIND BLIGHTING THE IRISH PIKE CROP.

in his own cabinet was simultaneously being undermined by ministers who disliked his and Clarendon's belated recognition that more must be spent on Ireland. Despite threats of resignation, his efforts to initiate employment and assisted emigration schemes came to nothing in the winter of 1848-9.

Vindictiveness was a recurrent theme in the treatment of Ireland by the British press in this period. When the potato failed again in the west in autumn 1848, there was little evidence of charitable sentiment. Rather the seeming contrariness of the Irish in clinging to a crop which had proven itself fickle was held responsible for the continuing crisis. This *Puppet Show* cartoon of October 1848 is indicative of this mood of facetious indifference (fig. 16). Here, it is the Irish pike crop (the emblem of popular rebellion) that is 'blighted' (in this case by an English policeman). This is an image of startling and casual cruelty so soon after the renewed potato failure that consigned so many thousands more to destitution and death. The British financial crash of October 1847, and the industrial recession that followed it, has roused middle class radicals - led by Richard Cobden and John Bright of the Financial Reform Association - into a crusade against taxation. *The Times*, which gave strong support to the movement,

expressed pleasure when a radical revolt brought down Russell's tax-raising 1848 budget, and shared their outrage at every suggestion of increased aid to Ireland. Even small aid loans to the distressed poor law unions of the western seaboard were denounced as an additional burden on England's respectable poor. The image of the respectable 'John Bull' supporting the leering and ungrateful Irishman (fig. 17), occurred in the *Puppet Show* and *Punch*, and in the prose of the *Times* in January 1849.



Fig. 17

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

It was indicative of just how deeply divided the Whig-liberal Cabinet was that such irresponsible press statements were welcomed and encouraged by some ministers. From late 1846 Chancellor of the Exchequer Charles Wood sought to undermine relief expenditure by stimulating a popular British backlash against the 'monstrous machine' of public works. He, along with Charles Trevelyan and Lord Grey, had close connections with the editor of the *Times* and exploited this to pursue their dogmatic objectives. By autumn 1848 a broad swathe of British opinion was convinced that mass starvation in Ireland was the inevitable outcome of a failure of prudent exertion, and that it was illegitimate to interfere with these 'natural causes'. The Prime Minister complained privately that it was less the 'crude Trevelyanism' of his colleagues than hostile feelings 'lying deep in the breasts of the British people' that rendered government intervention impossible.



Fig. 18

"WHILE THE CROP GROWS IRELAND STARVES."

OLD PROVERB ADAPTED TO MODERN TIMES.

This was a harsh doctrine, and one which a purportedly liberal people found it difficult to sustain while a number of philanthropists continued to bring the truth of mass mortality before their eyes. As with the *Times* and *Punch*, the *Puppet Show* looked to new panaceas in spring 1849 to lift Ireland out of the morass. Peel's 'new plantation' scheme seemed to offer



one such hope - but most of the liberal middle class press were enthusiastic only for the encumbered estates legislation aspects of the scheme, and rejected the idea of revived public works in Connacht. This idea of 'free trade in land' ultimately replacing the present Irish landowners with new entrepreneurially-minded capitalists, became a liberal obsession in 1849 - pushing actual relief to the margins. Russell's only successful measure, a rate-in-aid that would tax the recovering east and north for the relief of the west, was also welcomed by the British press. For them, Ireland was a moral entity, to be kept legislatively separate from England until it could be forcibly raised to the level of British civilisation. The self-serving cartoon from May 1849 (fig. 18) showing Ireland starving while Russell and Peel sow their respective schemes, implies strongly that suffering would be inevitable until the latter bore fruit.<sup>18</sup>



Fig. 19 THE NEW IRISH STILL.  
SHOWING HOW ALL SORTS OF GOOD THINGS MAY BE OBTAINED (BY INDUSTRY) OUT OF PEAT.

*Punch's* image of Irish prosperity arising simply from self-exertion - (fig. 19) - was illusory.<sup>19</sup> Yet such was the depth of early Victorian liberal optimism that it refused to abandon the image of creating plenty through the application of industry to peat. This fantasy, and the moralistic outrage against the Irish of all classes when it was not realised, underlay the response of the dominant strand of British public opinion to the Great Famine. The specific political circumstances of the later 1840s entailed that this opinion played a considerable part in limiting the options available to a weak and deeply divided government. The present debate among historians over whether and where moral responsibility for the Famine can be attributed would be illuminated if these aspects are taken into account.

In sketching out what I believe to have been the predominant patterns of British public opinion in the Famine years, I have emphasised those aspects which were harsh, rigidly dogmatic and hostile towards the Irish. These I believe to have had the greatest political weight and to have been fatal in their consequences. It would be unfair not to note that there were numerous exceptions, of individuals and groups, whose motives were resolutely humanitarian. One name that readily comes to mind is that of the Rev. Sidney Godolphin Osborne, whose exposé of the abuses of the Irish poor law, and of the clearances and the mass sufferings of the dispossessed and demoralised western masses in 1849-50 did something to revive English sympathies. Yet even this was bitterly attacked by Anthony Trollope, an Irish Post Office employee at Clonmel during the Famine, who wrote to the English papers defending the government's policy in an orthodox Trevelyanite manner.<sup>20</sup>

To a certain extent, the *Illustrated London News* was more free from dogma than some of its contemporaries, calling for more aid from late 1847, and in late 1849 it gave space to revealing the horrors of clearances and continuing famine in Clare. This was running against the grain, but it is important for the demonstration that policy options were indeed available - and that these were shared by some ministers.

#### FOOTNOTES :

- 1 See, for example, Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland before and after the Famine* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 78-82; James S. Donnelly, 'The Great Famine : its interpreters old and new', *History Ireland* (Autumn 1993), pp. 27-33.
- 2 Cormac Ó Gráda, 'Making History' in Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s: the sage of *The Great Famine*', *The Irish Review*, 12, (1992), pp. 90-1.
- 3 Some of the flavour of the provincial radical press's yet more virulent hostility towards Irish landlords is to be found in the letters from Ireland printed in the *Manchester Examiner* in 1847 and republished recently as Alexander Somerville, *Letters from Ireland during the Famine of 1847* (ed. K. D. M. Snell, Blackrock, 1994).
- 4 *The Times*, 27 August 1845, *Morning Chronicle*, 22 February 1845.
- 5 *Economist*, 28 October 1843.

- 6 *The Times*, 28 August, 1845.
- 7 *Pictorial Times*, 24, 31 January 1846.
- 8 *Pictorial Times*, 22 November 1845. Peel is disturbed by 'crowds of ghastly ragged figures - men, women, and children, famished and dying, while turbulence, violence and rapine were looking on, and wildly gnashing their cruel jaws. Among the multitude stood O'Connell . . . and as the wretched beings tendered him their last farthing, he told them that repale would be to them "meat, drink, and physic," while he hallooed on crowds armed with shillelaghs . . . the brandishing of which, accompanied by furious yells, caused the Premier to turn suddenly from his side to lie on his back.'
- 9 *Punch*, 25 November 1845.
- 10 *Punch*, 17 October, 12 December 1846. For a fuller account of *Punch's* imagery of the Irish Famine, see Peter Gray. 'Punch and the Great Famine'. *History Ireland* (Summer 1993), pp. 26-33.
- 11 Margaret Crawford, 'The Great Irish Famine 1845-9: image versus reality', in Raymond Gillespie and Brian P. Kennedy (eds), *Ireland: art into history* (Dublin, 1994), pp. 75-88.
- 12 *Illustrated London News*. 21 January, 27 March 1847.
- 13 *Times* 13 March 1847.
- 14 *The Nonconformist*, 13 January, 3 February 1847.
- 15 *The Times*, 26 August 1847; Charles Wood to Lord Clarendon, 23 July 1847. Hickleton Papers A4185/2.
- 16 This American cartoon, published in *Yankee Doodle* on 21 November 1846, reflected the complacency shared on both sides of the Atlantic about the ability of the international free market to supply sufficient imported food to the starving poor.
- 17 This imaginary sketch of 'Irish brigands Lying in wait' appeared in the *Illustrated Historic Times* on 1 June 1849.
- 18 This series of *Puppet Show* cartoons date from 12 August, 9 September, 14 October 1848, 6 January and 13 May 1849.
- 19 *Punch*, August 1849.
- 20 S. Godolphin Osborne, *Gleanings in the west of Ireland* (London, 1850); Anthony Trollope, *The Irish famine: six letters to the Examiner 1849-50*; (ed. L. O. Tingay, London, 1987).

## Seanchas faoin Drochshaol i dtimpeallacht Cho. Ros Comáin

Cathal Póirtéir

D'aon duine a bhíonn sa tóir ar ghlórtha na cosmhuintire in aimsir an Drochshaoil, is léir nár fhág siad mórán ina ndiaidh i bhfoirm scríofa agus go bhfuil ár léargas ar an tréimhse uafásach sin bearnach dá bharr. Ach tá deis amháin ar a laghad againn cluas a thabhairt do mhacallai ghlórtha na mbochtán mar atá siad le fáil againn sa tseanchas.

Ag brath ar an cheantar atá faoi chaibidil, thig linn foinsí éagsúla a chuartú fa choinne an bhéalaidis. I Ros Comáin, mar shampla, bhí Dubhghlas de hÍde ann ag bailiú béaloidis sular cuireadh tús le bailiúchán ar leibhéal náisiúnta.

Chomh fada agus a bhaineann sé le mo thaighde féin go dtí seo, bhí trí phríomhfhoinsí do bhéaloidias an Ghorta ar fáil gan dua. Baineann siad go léir le Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann.

Tosaigh an Coimisiún ag bailiú béaloideas na hÉireann i 1935 agus leanann an obair thábhachtach sin go dtí an lá inniu tré Roinn Bhéaloidias Éireann i gColáiste na hOllscoile i mBaile Átha Cliath. Chomh maith le saothar na mbailitheoirí lánaimseartha agus páirtaimseartha de chuid an Choimisiúin, atá ar fáil sa ghnáth-bhailiúchán, baineadh úsáid as córas an Cheistneora i 1945 le tuilleadh eolais faoi sheanchas an Drochshaoil a bhailiú ar fud na tíre. Ba as na mílte leathanach a cuireadh i dtoll a chéile sa dá bhealach sin a d'éirigh liom an léargas gairid seo ar sheanchas na Gaeilge faoin Ghorta a chur le chéile.<sup>1</sup> Tá na mílte tagairtí eile ar fáil sa bhailiúchán cuimsitheach a rinne an Coimisiún i mórán de scoileanna na tíre i 1937-38.

Tá buntáistí agus mibhuntaistí ag baint leis an bhéaloidias mar fhoinsí staire ann féin. Níl sé iomlán nó ainliúeach nó oibiachtúil, ach tá sé préamhaithe i meon an phobail ar bhealach nach bhfuil aon tuairisc eile. Is i gcuideachta a chéile a b'fhearr an fhianaise béil agus scríofa a mheas. Níl romhat anseo sna cuntais ón bhéaloidias ach cuid den phictiúr iomlán, a thugann léargas léanmhar dúinn ar an tubaist shóisialta is mó a tharla i stair na hÉireann.

Thug Seán Mac Mathúna (r. 1876), Lucach Dubhlinn, an Clár, an réamhrá seo dúinn:

Ní féidir a dhéanamh anois ach pictiúr briste den am uafásach sin a dtugann na seandaoine an Droch-shaol air. An méid a mhair tríd an Drochshaol, i nós eicint, ní raibh mórán fonn orthu iomairce a rá ina thaobh. Is le alltacht agus le uafás do thráchtadh a lán den dream sin ar na rudaí do chonaiceadar.<sup>2</sup>