Genocide by Liberal Economics? The British Response to the Irish Famine

> Never has such a calamity befallen our country; the whole staff of life is swept away, the emaciated multitudes are to be seen looking in vain for food, with hunger depicted in their countenances…It makes my heart bleed to witness the cry of despair, arising from famishing men, women, and children. No language can convey a true picture of the miserable condition of the poorer portion of the population…No adequate measures for relief of the starving have yet been taken.
>
> —William Baker Stoney, Rector of Castlebar, County Mayo, Ireland, November 1846[1]

The Great Famine of the 1840s is one of the most devastating demographic events in world history. *Phytophthora infestans*, or the 'blight,' rotted potatoes surprisingly fast. A field that seemed to be flourishing would be diseased and worthless only a few days later. According to an article in the *Freeman's Journal*, the stench from a blighted potato field was intolerable and "The odor from decaying flesh could not be more offensive."[2] The blight first arrived in the British Isles in 1845. The initial effects of the disease were minor because large crop yields were able to consume most losses.[3] By 1846, the blight's return early in the season destroyed most of the potato crop in Ireland and significantly damaged England and Scotland's potato crops.

Even though most European countries reported some level of potato failure, mortality rates never reached that of Ireland. The island experienced the highest mortality rates of any country affected by the blight. Ireland lost approximately twenty-five percent of the population to Famine related causes. Why did Ireland prove to be so exceptional? One reason is that while many people outside of Ireland depended on the potato for a significant portion of their diet; in Ireland, one-third of the population used the potato as practically their sole source of food.[4]

---

[1] William Baker Stoney, "The Distress in Ireland," *Morning Post*, Issue 22752, November 5, 1846, 4.
[2] "Awful Progress of the Potato Disease," *Freeman's Journal*, August 8, 1846, 4.
[3] Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 38
[4] Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 17-18

Historians and demographers estimate that one million people died from Famine related disease and starvation. In an effort to escape starvation, another million chose to leave Ireland, usually in ships bound for England or North America. Mortality rates on these ships proved to be nearly as bad the conditions in Ireland. For example, in July 1847, ten ships bound for Canada, carrying a total of 4427 passengers reported that 804 died in route.[5] Additionally, aboard the same ships, 847 passengers arrived ill to their destination.[6] The ships did not carry only Irish passengers, but strikingly, at almost twenty percent, the number of dead is very close to the percentage of the Irish population that died on land.

Many Irishmen, unable or unwilling to leave their homeland, became one of the three million people dependent on relief for subsistence. The population of Pre-Famine Ireland totaled 8.5 million residents, making almost half reliant on charity and government programs for survival.[7] Although starvation contributed to a significant number of deaths, it was not the only culprit. Instead, weakened immunity caused by a lack of food made other diseases particularly virulent. Typhus, cholera, and typhoid fever swept through the population like a scythe, killing both the poor and the wealthy. Once these diseases took hold, infection did not require a starved or weakened body; anyone involved in aid or relief efforts risked contraction.

Often, folk histories and questionable anecdotes are found in place of facts about the Famine because the devastation it wreaked on the population was thoroughly devastating, even in its own time. Therefore, it is crucial to differentiate between folk history and historical facts when examining the events of the Famine. As is often the case when dealing with traumatic events, the complexities of the situation can easily be lost. An event like the Famine cannot be

---

[5] "Unutterable Sufferings of the Irish People at Home and Abroad," *Freeman's Journal*, September 21, 1847
[6] "Unutterable Sufferings of the Irish People at Home and Abroad," *Freeman's Journal*, September 21, 1847
[7] Timothy Guinnane and Cormac Ó Gráda, "Mortality in the North Dublin Union during the Great Famine," *The Economic History Review* 55, no. 3 (2002) 487

watered down to either-or choices. Contemporary accounts recognized that the sheer immensity of the situation gave it a certain aura. The *Freeman's Journal* stated that "The facts in all their naked horror…are authenticated, although in their enormity they wear the air of fable."[8] It is this 'air of fable' that can make it difficult to distinguish between 'horrific facts' and the standard discursive tale. The widely accepted account of these events is one of an English government willfully neglecting the starving masses because of a common prejudice and disdain for the Irish. Scholars of the nineteenth century are all too familiar with depictions of the Irish as lazy, drunk, and stupid. Is this prejudice enough to warrant the genocidal accusations ascribed to the British government?

In contrast, many scholars believe that liberal laissez-faire economic policies are to blame for the poor Famine response. Historian Cormac Ó Gráda believes there is not enough evidence to support a charge of genocide. Instead, "if policy failure resulted in deaths…they were largely the by-product of a dogmatic version of political economy, not the deliberate outcome of anti-Irish racism."[9] In that same vein, historian R.F. Foster, wrote, "The Famine provided the rationale for accusing the British government of genocide, but the roots went deeper than that."[10] It is clear that the Famine demonstrated the enormous disconnect between the British government and the needs of the Irish population. An ineffectual English response, in terms of food donations and poor relief, exacerbated the scale of suffering, but why? When presented with the money spent on relief, on the surface it may seem that England responded appropriately. However, the scale of the response compared to the size of the problem proves its inadequacy.

[8] "Condition of the Poor," *Freeman's Journal*, February 4, 1848
[9] Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, 10
[10] R.F. Foster, Modern Ireland 1603-1972, (London: Penguin Books, 1989) 316

This thesis explores the theory that liberal laissez-faire economic policies added to the deprivation. After a comparison of Adam Smith's economic theories, and the Whig interpretation and application of those concepts, I found that laissez-faire economy was not to blame. Rather, the problem arose from the way that Whig economic policies interacted with standing prejudices and English self-interest. In essence, government leaders used economics to justify their woefully inept relief efforts that were motivated by self-regard, resulting in neglect of their Irish neighbors.

During the 1840s, the British Whigs championed the idea of a marketplace free from regulation and protections. Nineteenth-century ideas of free trade are not akin to a modern day understanding of the term, defined as a system without protectionist tariffs and price regulations for all trading partners. Instead, the Whig philosophy was a mix of colonialist views requiring England to protect its market while relying on free trade opportunities for British merchants in subservient or colonialized countries. Following this ideology, Britain, the wealthiest nation during this period, could use its economic influence to create trade partnerships in which it always maintained the upper hand. Just as in the mercantile system, England would always be perched to reap the greatest benefits. According to modern political economist A.K. Bagchi, "The nations that were in a position to defend themselves were not fooled by the British propaganda about free trade and advocated the same kind of protectionism that had fostered British manufacturers."[11] Britain still managed to force non-white European colonies and indirect European dependencies to adopt trade policies which favored the British.[12]

The ideas in place during the 1840s can be traced back to two sources, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Josiah Tucker's *Four Tracts, on Political and Commercial Subjects.*

[11] A.K. Bagchi, "Contextual Political Economy, not Whig economics," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 38, (2014) 51
[12] A.K. Bagchi, "Contextual Political Economy, not Whig economics," Cambridge Journal of Economics 38 (2014) 51

Smith based his ideas on several key concepts that involved the division of labor and market prices. According to Smith, a nation's annual labor provides the funds used to obtain the fruits for its consumption.[13] The "abundance or scantiness" of a nation's supplies is related to the way labor is utilized and by how many are employed or unemployed in "useful labor."[14] The use of labor relates to the division of human resources to create products, both for personal use and for the market. Smith believed that labor should be divided efficiently so that a greater number of people are employed, and a large output of marketable items can be produced and purchased.

Josiah Tucker, an eighteenth-century economist, political writer, and curate also believed that labor was key in securing a favorable balance of trade.[15] According to Tucker, the number of people employed in manufacturing on each side of a trade deal would determine which partner enjoyed the best position. In Tucker's philosophy, the partner who used the most people would be in the best financial situation.[16] Because employers paid each laborer for the expense of their labor, it stood to reason that more money would go to the nation who employed the most labor.

Smith also believed that every item had its own 'natural price,' both in the market and in the cost of manufacture. Natural price is determined by the expense of the labor and materials the item required, the cost of the item's transport to market, the availability and desire for the item, and the standard profit earned from its sale in a given marketplace (it might be understood as a 'mark-up' today).[17] In part, because he believed in natural prices, he felt that the government

---

[13] Adam Smith, Robert L. Heilbroner, and Laurence J. Malone, *The Essential Adam Smith*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986)
[14] Adam Smith, Robert L. Heilbroner, and Laurence J. Malone, *The Essential Adam Smith*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986)
[15] Rory T. Cornish, 'Tucker, Josiah (1713–1799)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, May 2006)
[16] Josiah Tucker, *A brief essay on the advantages & disadvantages which respectively attend France and Great-Britain, with regard to trade*, (London: J. Stockdale, 1787) vii
[17] Adam Smith, Robert L. Heilbroner, and Laurence J. Malone, *The Essential Adam Smith*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986) 187

should have little interference within the marketplace. Here, Smith and Tucker share some of the same ideas, with Tucker's ideas about how labor affects the balance of trade mirroring some of Smith's theories on 'natural price.'

Lastly, within Smith's work, it is clear that products being sold should only be what its producer cannot consume on his own.[18] Therefore, according to Smith, the only items that qualify for the market are surplus goods that are in demand. Buyers and sellers should meet subsistence needs before profit goals. A population that cannot purchase items beyond what is necessary for survival is not helpful to the market. For a market to exist, a surplus must also exist. Smith believed that buyers would always purchase the goods necessary for life before luxury items.[19]

Unfortunately, Whigs carried some of these points beyond Smith's intent. A close reading of *Wealth of Nations* and *Theory of Moral Sentiments* provides Smith's rationale for keeping government interventions to a minimum. Smith did not believe in a perfect market, but rather that the systems set up by men were inherently inferior. Anytime man put his hand on something, the potential for error increased. For Smith, mercantilism proved as good of an example as any as to how humankind could confuse and damage something that should grow organically.[20] Man's interference tended to be detrimental to wages, profits, and demand. His call for a free market in an open system was a cry against mercantilism. Smith seemed to understand that industrial society did not benefit everyone. He believed that governments had the actual purpose of

---

[18] Adam Smith, Robert L. Heilbroner, and Laurence J. Malone, *The Essential Adam Smith*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986) 172

[19] Adam Smith, Robert L. Heilbroner, and Laurence J. Malone, *The Essential Adam Smith*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986) 249

[20] Arthur Herman, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World: The True Story of How Western Europe's Poorest Nation Created Our World & Everything in It*, (New York: Crown Business, 2001) 206-221

capitalism backward. Instead of serving business owners, manufacturers, and merchants the market existed for the benefit of consumers.

Whig economic practices also lacked Smith's philosophy of 'fellow-feeling.' With fellow-feeling, individuals look outward and use society as a mirror to judge whether their actions are 'good or evil.'[21] By being self-aware, people increase their happiness as well as society's. Using society as a mirror allowed a person to understand how other people felt. Smith's theories are clearly more altruistic and charitable than people have been wont to notice. Smith's insistence that the market existed for the benefit of consumers and not business alongside his 'fellow-feeling' philosophy demonstrate that connection.

Tucker and Smith's theories did not always agree. Clearly, Tucker wrote with the businessman and profits in mind. Tucker believed that an entirely free trade situation would benefit the poorer countries, rather than the more prosperous. An equilibrium of wealth would eventually occur because a more impoverished nation would drag the wealthier nation down as it rose to greater prosperity.[22] Thus, the wealthier nations should protect themselves from trade partnerships that could lead to a loss of wealth; but in Whig practice, protections were not a two-way street. The British were only concerned with protecting their market, so a vestige of mercantilism remained.

Whig policies directly affected Ireland because of its proximity to Britain and the subservient state in which it found itself. Historian Vincent Harlow explains the different types of colonial possessions as those meant for settlement and those used to exploit their resources;

---

[21] Arthur Herman, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World: The True Story of How Western Europe's Poorest Nation Created Our World & Everything in It*, (New York: Crown Business, 2001) 206

[22] Josiah Tucker, *Four tracts, on political and commercial subjects, (London:* R. Raikes, 1776) 17-19

Ireland was both.[23] Based on this vision of Ireland, and the British desire to hold onto wealth and prestige, it is easy to see why there was little investment in manufacture or improvements in the region that would allow it to become more self-sufficient and prosperous. The economic dogma of the period created a system in which no real industrial improvements could be made for fear of how Irish prosperity might hurt English trade.

Many believe that British laws and restrictions imposed on Ireland reinforced the stereotypes from which society viewed the Irish. In 1704, Parliament instituted legislation in Ireland that became known as the 'Penal Laws.'[24] The English feared papal influence. Because of this state of affairs, prejudice against Irish, a mostly Catholic population, was strong. Originally, Parliament passed the Penal Laws to 'prevent the further growth of popery' through the restriction of Catholic rights.[25] The Penal Laws excluded Irish Catholics from the professions and careers in public service. Additionally, the laws also restricted a Catholic's ability to travel, to buy or lease land, or receive an inheritance. The legislation weakened the Catholic majority, and a governing class made up of Protestants, known as the 'Protestant Ascendency' took power.

Because of the Penal Laws, Catholics found it hard to keep their landholdings. The law forbid them from engaging in primogeniture inheritance practices. Consequently, landholdings continued to get smaller and smaller, eventually being so small they could no longer support a family. The greater number of tenants brought about by the constant subdivision of land proved to be more lucrative for landlords, who were usually Englishman. A larger number of tenants

---

[23] Vincent T. Harlow, *The founding of the Second British Empire, 1763-1793, vol. 1,* (London: Longmans, Greens, 1952)

[24] There is an abundance of scholarship dealing with the Penal Laws. I only touch on them briefly to underscore the conditions in Ireland before the Famine; thus, giving readers a sense of why they were so devastating. See R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1989) for a comprehensive study of Ireland, both before and after the Penal Laws.

[25] R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1989) 154

meant a larger rental income for landlords. Unable to travel more than five miles away from their homes, even to look for work or receive an education, severely limited the population's capacity to better their circumstances.[26] By the end of the eighteenth century, Parliament began to slowly walk back the Penal Laws through a series of 'Catholic Relief Acts,' but the damage was done. Consequently, an undercurrent of hostility toward British rule persisted in Ireland. This is evident in the legislative relationship between England and Ireland.

In the eighteenth century, Ireland had its own Parliament, but it lacked the power to pass legislation on its own.[27] British law required the Irish Parliament to inform the English Parliament in Westminster of the subjects it planned to open for debate and any laws it wanted to vote on. Only after Westminster granted its approval could the topics be discussed. Even after the Irish Parliament passed a piece of legislation, it had to be sent to Westminster for final approval. If the English Parliament did not agree with the passage of a piece of Irish legislation, no matter how the Irish Parliament voted, it would not pass. Not only did the Irish government have to inform its English counterpart about its proceedings, but the Irish also could not vote on any legislation without the express permission of the Parliament in Westminster, and even after that Irish law was still subject to English approval.

In 1798, the British put down an Irish rebellion, which led to an increased British presence in Ireland. The aftermath of the insurrection brought military interventions that continued until 1801. In the end, the result was the Act of Union. The British government felt that the Union, which united Ireland with Scotland and England, offered an answer to the problems in Ireland. The goal of the Union was to integrate and assimilate Irish, at the expense

---

[26] Joseph L. Altholz, "Penal Law 1703," *Selected Documents in Irish History*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000) 52-57
[27] R.B. McDowell, "The Protestant Nation: 1775-1800," *The Course of Irish History*, ed. Moody, T. W., Martin, F. X., Keogh, Dermot, Kiely, Patrick, (Lanham: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 2012) 201 and Joseph L. Altholz, "Irish Parliament Act, 1719," *Selected Documents in Irish History*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000) 58-59

of Irish Gaelic—and Catholic—culture. Because Parliament had relaxed or repealed the harshest points of the Penal Laws, giving Catholics in Ireland a vote, put the Protestant Ascendency in danger. However, if Ireland became part of Great Britain, Catholic votes would not affect the British status quo. In the United Kingdom at that time, the House of Commons seated six hundred and fifty-eight MPs, but Ireland only sent one hundred of them. In Ireland, Catholics continued to be the majority, but when added to the English population, they quickly became the minority. With the help of the Act of Union, England managed to maintain control over Irish Catholics without the Penal Laws.

There were other reasons behind the state of affairs between England and Ireland. First, English leaders felt they needed to keep a close eye on their Irish neighbors because Ireland had proved to be an unwilling colonial possession. The Protestant Ascendency remained the minority in Ireland, despite the fact they held almost all of the power. Typically, Irish revolts seemed always to be in the works. In between each rebellion, the two countries experienced an uneasy peace as Irish rebels were expelled or executed. It appeared that England and Ireland were always on the brink of war. Historically, many continental powers, like France and Spain, viewed Ireland as a jumping off point for an attack on England. At a minimum, continental powers understood that providing aid to Irish rebels could keep English fleets and soldiers busy and their attention directed away from the continent. Because the Act of Union was not popular in Ireland, there was no guarantee what the future held.

Secondly, by the start of the nineteenth century, Englishmen and Protestants owned most of the land in Ireland, despite their minority. The Penal Laws had done their job and removed almost all Irish Catholics from land ownership and consigned them to insecure land holdings based on tenuous leases. Many Catholics in Ireland were not eligible for the franchise because

they did not meet the property qualifications. Irish Catholics who retained a level of prestige and wealth despite the Penal Laws, continued to be excluded from political life in Westminster although they were influential at home. It was not long before the call to repeal the Act of Union began to be heard. When full Catholic Emancipation was achieved, the call grew louder.[28] Additionally, Ireland did not have a secret ballot, placing another hindrance to changing conditions in Ireland. Often, landlords expected their tenants to vote as they instructed them. Retributions, such as evictions, for the 'wrong' vote, were not uncommon. By this time, thirty years had passed since the Union, and most Irishmen did not see any rise in their standard of living. The fact that Ireland had joined the wealthiest and strongest nation on the globe should have brought some benefit to the Irish people.

Instead, the Napoleonic Wars and French Revolution created food shortages for Britain during the war years.[29] The deficits were brought on by the drop in European grain imports. The unavailability of food caused landlords to put more land into production. At the end of the war, European imports brought the price of domestic grain down sharply. To right the British economy, the government used the Importation Act of 1815, also known as the 'Corn Laws,' to steady the market from 1815-1846.[30] The Corn Laws restricted the import of cereal grains and corn, using high tariffs to keep food prices high and encourage the sale of domestic grain. In addition to tariffs, the laws prohibited the importation of foreign grain unless the domestic market price reached 10s/bushel.[31] The Corn Laws caused conflict between urban and landed interests. Because of the high tariffs and market protections, urban populations paid more for

[28] K. Theodore Hoppen, *Ireland since 1800 Conflict and Conformity*, (London: Longman, 1999) 17-22. Footnote 23 on pages 19-20 gives a summary of electoral issues Catholics dealt with in Ireland.
[29] William B. Willcox, *The Age of Aristocracy 1688-1830*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001) 301
[30] William B. Willcox, The Age of Aristocracy 1688-1830, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001) 301
[31] William B. Willcox, The Age of Aristocracy 1688-1830, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001) 301

bread. The government also tied Poor law settlements to the price of bread, and wages also depended on bread prices. Hence, the price of grain had far-reaching implications. For the Irish, the high prices of bread and other cereal grains made them out of the reach of most peasants, creating an increasing dependence on the potato. All of these factors created an atmosphere in which the Irish were vulnerable to the slightest changes in food supply and availability.

The British government knew about the poor living conditions of many of Ireland's peasants. It sponsored several different government studies to try to find an answer to the poor state of the country.[32] Before the Famine, Parliament also discussed Ireland's Poor Law Unions. But with each successive government report, Parliament chose inaction over the recommendations spelled out by the different commissions because they would affect wealthy landowner's interests, some of whom sat in Parliament.

Contributing to the lack of action, in the nineteenth-century providentialism led many Victorians to believe that events, whether good or bad, had a place in God's divine plan. This relieved humankind of blame or a duty to intervene on another's behalf. This belief system also became a common justification for British imperialism and colonial expansion. The British believed they occupied the apex of the social order, whereas the Irish ranked only slightly about the nation's overseas subjects. Nothing exemplified this social disparity more than the conditions under which the Irish lived.

Alexis de Tocqueville traveled to Ireland in 1835 and recorded the severe living conditions he witnessed in his diary. De Tocqueville commented on the 'wretched dwellings,' and 'wretched population,' which wore "clothes with holes or much patched. Most of them

[32] Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, 24-25

bareheaded and barefoot."[33] The large population kept wages low and rents high, which exacerbated conditions and forced the poorest Irish families, usually rural, to be highly dependent on the potato as a source of food. The potato was especially suited to the task because it yielded more usable produce per acre than other food staples. The crop could be cultivated cheaply with relative ease and provided the necessary nutrition for survival. However, the poor's dependence on the potato baffled outsiders.

Politicians and others could not fathom why the Irish remained dependent on the potato as a significant source of their food. Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary at the Treasury during the Famine crisis, serves as a prime example of British and Irish disconnect. He published *The Irish Crisis* in 1848, which discussed the Famine and the folly of Ireland's affinity for the potato. Trevelyan's disdain for the masses—who were reduced to relying on a single food source—and his lack of understanding of the issue is apparent. He is clear that "thinking persons" have long understood that such a reliance was problematic for those who employed it.[34] Trevelyan's book is a rich source for the attitudes of the British toward their Irish neighbors, as well as an understanding of the importance of the potato. A letter to the *Times*, written by Sir John Burgoyne, is quoted by Trevelyan to prove that the potato "led to the encouragement of early marriages, large families, and a rapidly-increasing population, and at the same time afforded the proprietor very good return of profit for his land."[35] Trevelyan believed that the Irish could, if so inclined, exert more energy and time into their well-being, writing:

> A fortnight for planting, a week or ten days for digging, and another fortnight for turf-cutting, suffice for his subsistence; and during the rest of the year, he is at leisure to follow his own inclinations, without even the safeguard of those intellectual tastes and

[33] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Alexis de Tocqueville's Journey in Ireland July-August, 1835*, tr. and ed. Emmet Larkin (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1990) 39
[34] C.E. Trevelyan, Esq., *The Irish Crisis*, (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1848) 2-3
[35] Sir John Burgoyne letter to the *Times*, quoted in C.E. Trevelyan, Esq., *The Irish Crisis*, (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1848) 5

> legitimate objects of ambition which only imperfectly obviate the evils of leisure in the higher ranks of society.[36]

In other words, choosing the potato as a food source demonstrated the Irish tendency toward laziness, and their lack of ambition and intellect. The particular type of potato eaten by the Irish also spoke volumes about the peasantry. As Trevelyan puts it, the type sustaining the Irish "were of the coarsest and most prolific kind, called 'Lumpers'…and they were, for the most part, cultivated, not in furrows, but in the slovenly mode…'lazy beds;' so that the principle of seeking the cheapest description of food at the smallest expense of labour, was maintained…"[37]

An analysis of the rhetoric in this publication offers greater insight into how providentialism got mixed up with Famine relief. The writing is not only demeaning to the Irish, but it also places blame for their starvation squarely on the peasants. Because they lived exclusively off the potato, "an entire ignorance of every other food and means of preparing it" existed, with bread "scarcely ever seen, and an oven… unknown."[38] This lowly state was due to the fact that these peasants had no impetus to be productive and create a better life for themselves and not because of the terrible financial conditions they faced. However, Trevelyan made one point that is easy to agree with, Irish peasants had descended to the lowest depths, with nothing else lower except "starvation and beggary."[39]

With multiple ways to shelter themselves from blame, namely, providentialism, and economics, the English chose to resort to the basest forms of relief and then required the Irish to shoulder the burden. In 1845, Sir Robert Peel's administration attempted to mitigate the suffering in Ireland by purchasing 'Indian corn' from the United States. The conditions in 1845 did not

---

[36] C.E. Trevelyan, Esq., *The Irish Crisis*, (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1848) 5
[37] C.E. Trevelyan, Esq., *The Irish Crisis*, (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1848) 6
[38] C.E. Trevelyan, Esq., *The Irish Crisis*, (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1848) 7-8
[39] C.E. Trevelyan, Esq., *The Irish Crisis*, (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1848) 9

warrant much outside relief because the blight arrived later in the season and only about one-fourth of the year's crop was lost. When Peel's administration fell in 1846, Lord John Russell picked up the reins of Prime Minister. Russell would soon the face the worst years of the Famine.

At the start of the 1846 planting season, many hoped that the blight would not return. Initially, things looked promising and crops did well. However, by August, it became apparent that the blight had returned, and this time it would be devastating. Newspapers printed warnings and called for provisions to be made for the poor. The Irish public understood that a potato crop failure spelled doom for the poorer parts of the population.[40] Because newspapers and word of mouth spread reports of the potato crop's failure in early August, it may have been possible for the government to intervene before the population suffered from starvation. Instead, in the absence of government action, publications offered recipes and alternatives to the potato for readers. Recipes appeared in papers all over Ireland, England, and Scotland but the absence of potatoes was not the only problem. People who were most dependent on the potato lacked the means to purchase another source of food. Therefore, relief efforts were crucial to their survival.

The government never intended to distribute free food, or sell food at price to those most affected. [41] Instead, the government donated funds "to local committees in aid of subscriptions collected for the purchase of food."[42] Earlier in the year, Parliament debated a public works system that would provide employment, thereby giving the poor a means of earning money to buy food. According to historian James Donnelly Jr., the projects that Peel hoped the Board of Works would undertake, such as developing piers and harbors, as well as making drainage and

[40] Henry Hudson Jun, "The Potato Blight," *Berrows Worcester Journal*, August 6, 1846
[41] James S. Donnelly, Jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, (Thrupp: Sutton Publishing, 2001) 49
[42] Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 49

other improvements never really materialized.[43] Instead, most employment offered by the Board of Works focused on road improvements. While employment was the preferred method of relief, the government intended the cost of these ventures to be borne by the county.[44] In some cases the government provided the monies to initiate Board of Works' or county grand juries' projects, but only as a loan.[45]

Unfortunately, the Board of Works offered many of its employment projects during the depths of winter. Putting starving and emaciated people to work in the stark conditions of winter proved fatal for many.[46] Ó Gráda recounts a letter from Captain Henry O'Brien, an inspecting officer for east Clare County, to Charles Trevelyan after a tour of the southeast. In this letter, O'Brien tells Trevelyan that

> small farmer being reduced to destitution…flock to the public works, and their land remain[s] untilled…Beyond fencing, draining, and turf-cutting, I do not see what is to employ manual labour in this country for nine months in the year, and in winter there will be very little, indeed, to give the spade man work.[47]

It is apparent that the Board of Works was unable to offer employment assistance in a meaningful way, particularly when it had to shoulder most of the financial burden itself. The government, however, remained dedicated to work projects in spite of the lack of viable projects. Providentialism and public opinion contributed to the insistence that the Irish poor work for assistance.

Newspapers charged the government with neglect. The *Freeman's Journal* wrote, "The worst horrors of that slave trade which it is the boast or the ambition of this empire to suppress,

---

[43] Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 54
[44] Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 54
[45] Donnelly, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, 54
[46] Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond,* 36
[47] Captain Henry O'Brien, quoted in Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999) 65

at any cost, have been re-enacted in the flight of British subjects from their native shores…"[48] referencing the British crusade against slavery. In fact, from some corners, the British government response to Irish suffering received an even less than stellar grade when compared to the British decision to outlaw slavery. The comparison was significant because when the Slavery Abolition Act passed Parliament in 1833, slave owners were compensated by the British government. The amount spent on compensating ex-slave owners totaled twenty million pounds.[49] In contrast, Famine relief efforts amounted to nine and half million pounds, "including more than four million pounds spent on public works, [which] had been originally earmarked as a loan."[50]

The fact that the government spent more money compensating slave owners than alleviating Irish suffering proves that self-interest guided many of their actions. Just as a number of MPs owned large estates in Ireland, they also had ties to slave related business ventures. By compensating slave owners, MPs were putting money into their own pockets. In contrast, Irish Famine relief did not result in any monetary reward for MPs. Relief efforts that were structured as loans (which the bulk of them were) ended up costing MPs. For those who owned land in Ireland, Poor Law Union taxes would be used to pay back relief loans. This meant that landowners would end up paying for a portion of the relief passed by Parliament.

Parliament's handling of Famine relief clearly demonstrates that several factors had a hand the way the British government approached the crisis. Requiring that Poor Law Unions and county Board of Works projects initially be earmarked as loans shows that the serious disconnect between the conditions on the ground and the government. A British lack of concern for their

[48] "Unutterable Sufferings of the Irish People at Home and Abroad," *Freeman's Journal*, September 21, 1847
[49] "Slavery Abolition Act 1833; Section XXIV," August 28, 1833.
[50] O Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, 77

Irish neighbors is also apparent. Although some MPs rallied to defend the Irish, public opinion of the Irish was so low in England that it would not have been politically expedient to push the issue. By doling out loans instead of ‘aid,’ the English could show their constituents that fiscal responsibility mattered to them. Charles Trevelyan, an individual who controlled much of the government funded relief, exemplifies the inherent prejudices that affected relief efforts. As the drama of the Famine played out, it is evident that prejudice, self-interest, and economics converged in such a way that Famine sufferers were left without the help they desperately needed.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

House of Commons

Expenses Incurred in Ireland. House of Commons Debate. February 15, 1847. Vol. 89 cc1356-8 http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1847/feb/15/expenses-incurred-in-ireland

Laboring Poor (Ireland) Bill. House of Commons Debate. February 1, 1847. vol. 89 cc615-90 http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1847/feb/01/labouring-poor-ireland-bill#S3V0089P0_18470201_HOC_11

Laboring Poor (Ireland) Bill—Adjourned Debate. House of Commons Debate. February 2, 1847. Vol. 89 cc699-764 http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1847/feb/02/labouring-poor-ireland-bill-adjourned#S3V0089P0_18470202_HOC_17

Poor Laws (Ireland) House of Commons Debate. February 27, 1844. vol. 73 cc325-6. http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1844/feb/27/poor-laws-ireland#S3V0073P0_18440227_HOC_6

Books

Altholz, Joseph L. *Selected Documents in Irish History*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000

Mitchel, John. *The Last Conquest of Ireland (perhaps).* Glasgow: R & T Washbourne, 1862.

Rogers, Jasper W. *Facts for the Kind-Hearted of England as to the Wretchedness of the Irish Peasantry.* London: James Ridgway, 1847.

Russell, Lord John. *The Later Correspondence of Lord John Russell 1840-1878, Volume II*. Edited by G.P. Gooch. London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1925.

Scrope, G. Poulett. *Letters to the Right Hon. Lord John Russell, on the expediency of enlarging the Irish poor-law to the full extent of the poor-law of England*. London: J. Ridgway, 1846

Smith, Adam, Heilbroner, Robert L, and Malone, Laurence J. *The Essential Adam Smith*. 1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 1986.

Smith, Adam, Mossner, Ernest Campbell, and Ross, Ian Simpson. *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*. Smith, Adam, 1723-1790. Works. 1981; vol. 6. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987.

De Tocqueville, Alexis. *Alexis de Tocqueville's Journey in Ireland July-August, 1835*. Translated and Edited by Emmet Larkin, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1990.

Trevelyan, Sir Charles. *The Irish Crisis: being a narrative of the measures for the relief of the distress caused by the great Irish famine of 1846-7.* London: Macmillan, 1880.

Trevelyan, Sir Charles. *On the education of the people of India.* London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1838.

Tucker, Josiah. *A brief essay on the advantages & disadvantages which respectively attend France and Great-Britain, with regard to trade*. London: J. Stockdale, 1787

Tucker, Josiah. *Four tracts, on political and commercial subjects.* 3rd ed. Glocester, 1776. *The Making Of The Modern World*. Web.

Pamphlets and Other Publications

Awful Progress of the Potato Disease," *Freeman's Journal*, August 8, 1846

Bull, George Stringer. *Horrors of the Whig poor laws: the Somerset House poor-starvers versus a clergyman of the Church of England*. London: W. Strange, 1837.

Central Relief Committee of the Society of Friends. *Distress in Ireland: Extracts from Correspondence.* Dublin: Webb and Chapman, 1847

"Condition of the Poor," *Freeman's Journal*, February 4, 1848

De Tocqueville, Alexis. *Alexis de Tocqueville's Journey in Ireland July-August, 1835*, tr. and ed. Emmet Larkin. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1990

Ex-member of the British Parliament. *Irish improvidence encouraged by English bounty being a remonstrance against the government projects for Irish relief, and suggestions of measures by which the Irish poor can be speedily and effectually fed, relieved, employed, and elevated above their present degraded position, without taxing English industry for this purpose*. London: J. Ridgway, 1847.

Fitzgerald, James Edward, Esq. *A Letter to the Noblemen, Gentlemen, and Merchants of England*. London: G.F & J. Rivington, 1846.

Jun, Henry Hudson. "The Potato Blight," *Berrows Worcester Journal*, August 6, 1846

"Slavery Abolition Act 1833; Section XXIV," August 28, 1833.

Stoney, William Baker. "The Distress in Ireland," *Morning Post*, Issue 22752, November 5, 1846,

Third Report of the London Committee. *Distress in Ireland*. London: Edward Newman, 1847.

"Unutterable Sufferings of the Irish People at Home and Abroad," *Freeman's Journal*, September 21, 1847

Secondary Sources

Bagchi, A.K. "Contextual political economy, not Whig economics," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 38, (2014): 545-562. Doi:10.1093/cje/bet041

Braa, Dean M. "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society." *Science & Society* 61, no. 2 (1997): 193-215. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40403619.

Britannica Academic. s.v. "Peter Lalor," accessed November 5, 2016. http://academic.eb.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/levels/collegiate/article/46913.

Cornish, Rory T. 'Tucker, Josiah (1713–1799)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, May 2006

Curran, Declan and Fröling, Maria. "Large-scale mortality shocks and the Great Irish Famine 1845-1852." *Economic Modelling* 27, no. 5 (2010): 1302-1314.

Donnelly, Jr., James S. *The Great Irish Potato Famine*. Thrupp: Sutton Publishing, 2001

Foster, R.F. *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*. London: Penguin Books, 1989.

Gray, Peter. "Irish Social Thought and the Relief of Poverty, 1847-1880." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, 20 (2010): 141-56. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41432390.

Griffiths, A. R. G. "The Irish Board of Works in the Famine Years." *The Historical Journal* 13, no. 4 (1970): 634-52. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2637709.

Guinnane, Timothy, and Cormac Ó Gráda. "Mortality in the North Dublin Union during the Great Famine." *The Economic History Review* 55, no. 3 (2002): 487-506.

Haines, Robin. *Charles Trevelyan and the Great Irish Famine*. Portland: Four Courts Press, 2004.

Harlow, Vincent T. *The founding of the Second British Empire, 1763-1793, vol. 1*. London: Longmans, Greens, 1952

Hart, Jenifer. "Sir Charles Trevelyan at the Treasury." *The English Historical Review* 75, no. 294 (1960): 92-110. http://www.jstor.org/stable/558803.

Hatton, Helen E. "Friends' Famine Relief in Ireland 1846-1849." *Quaker History* 76, no. 1 (1987): 18-32. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41947075.

Herman, Arthur. *How the Scots Invented the Modern World: The True Story of How Western Europe's Poorest Nation Created Our World & Everything in It*. 1st ed. New York: Crown Business, 2001.

Hoppen, K. Theodore. *Ireland since 1800 Conflict and Conformity*. London: Longman, 1999.

Kerr, Donal A. *A Nation of Beggars*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

Kerr, Donal A. *Peel, Priests, and Politics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.

Lacey, Colin. "150 Years of Finger-Pointing: Laissez-Faire Economics? Or Forced Hunger?" *Irish Voice*. June 13, 1995.

Minor, J. M. (1997). *Moral and political economies in conflict: British working-class activism and the government, c. 1830-1860* (Order No. 9823299). http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/docview/304369023?accountid=12964

Moody, T. W., Martin, F. X., Keogh, Dermot, Kiely, Patrick, *The Course of Irish History*. Lanham: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 2012

Morrow, John. "Thomas Carlyle, 'Young Ireland' and the 'Condition of Ireland Question'." *The Historical Journal* 51, no. 3 (2008): 643–67.

Ó Gráda, Cormac. *Black '47 and Beyond*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Ó Gráda, Cormac. *Ireland: a new economic history, 1780-1939.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

O'Malley, Michael James. "Local Relief during the Great Irish Famine, 1845-1850: The Case of County Mayo." Order No. 9955403, Loyola University Chicago, 2000. http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/docview/304607739?accountid=12964.

O'Reagan, Philip. "'A dense mass of petty accountability': Accounting in the service of cultural imperialism during the Irish Famine, 1846-1847." *Accounting, Organization and Society* 35, no. 4, (2010): 416-430.

Read, Charles. "Laissez-Faire, the Irish Famine, and British financial crisis." *The Economic History Review* 69, no. 2, (2016): 411-434

Shrout, Anelise Hanson. "Distressing News from Ireland: The Famine, the News and International Philanthropy." Order No. 3591348, New York University, 2013. http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/docview/1433827117?accountid=12964

Vaggi, Gianni. "Adam Smith and the Economic Policy of Laissez-Faire." *History of Economic Ideas* 4, no. 1/2 (1996): 107-47.

Willcox, William and Walter Arnstein. *The Age of Aristocracy 1688-1830*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.