

BRITISH COLONIAL POLITICS AND THE IRISH FAMINE OF 1845

by

Cynthia H. Pettigrew

A Senior Honors Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The University of Utah
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Honors Degree of Bachelor of Science

In

History

Approved:

Nadja Durbach
Thesis Supervisor

for Isabel Moreira
Chair, Department of History

Wesley Sasaki-Uemura
History Honors Advisor

Martha S. Bradley
Dean, Honors College

August 2011

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
METHODS	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
DISCUSSION	1-38
Traditional Agriculture	1
Transformations	3
Motives for English Colonization	5
Economic Ideology	7
Race Theories in Victorian England	10
Providentialism	13
English Rebellion	19
Emigration, Disease and Popular English opinion	20
The Famine of 1822	24
The English and Irish Poor Laws	25
Political Complications	29
CONCLUSION	36
REFERENCES	39

ABSTRACT

This paper will analyze the circumstances and ideologies that informed the British government's treatment of colonial subjects in the years leading up to and during the Irish Famine of 1845. Using nineteenth-century Great Britain as a case study, this paper will also attempt to draw attention to the importance of looking beyond immediate crisis situations in order to better understand the relationship between resources, ideologies, citizens, and the State in a colonial context. I conclude that Britain offered little help to Ireland during the famine years because of deeply-held economic, religious, and racial theories. A meaningful response to famine conditions in Ireland would have translated into a total rejection of the ideas and philosophies that made up the dominate English worldview in the nineteenth century. A dogmatic adherence to this worldview provided a consistent narrative of British superiority that, in turn, justified the subjugation and neglect of the Irish people.

METHODS

The research methods used for this paper consisted of gathering, reading and analyzing historical source material. In addition to secondary sources that were relevant to the topic, primary source documents from the early and mid-nineteenth century were used. These sources include: Parliamentary debates, newspaper articles from *The Times* dating from 1845 to 1847, late eighteenth century economic theories developed in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, and Charles Trevelyan's pamphlet *The Irish Crisis*.

Introduction

Famine is a complex phenomenon that is rooted in how political bodies react to a disruption in the food supply. Under British rule, repeated famine conditions claimed millions of lives in Ireland throughout the nineteenth century. The most devastating of these famines came to be known as “The Great Famine of 1845.” Rather than focusing on the British reaction to this famine, this paper will emphasize pre-famine conditions in Ireland and England and the ideologies that guided British policies in a domestic and colonial context.

Discussion

Many accounts of “The Great Famine” begin with the arrival of *phytophthora infestans*, a previously unknown fungus that was later identified as the cause of potato blight and the consequential failure of the potato crop in Ireland from 1845 to 1847.¹ While the British declared that the famine was over in 1847, the effects of famine lasted much longer. Based on a variety of British records such as the general census, workhouse enrollment, and patterns of migration, historians now believe that famine conditions persisted into the early 1850s. While the destructive powers of these spores should not be underestimated, it seems more useful to, first, address the British reorganization of Irish society that ultimately cultivated an extremely vulnerable Irish population.

Traditional Agriculture

¹ Margaret E. Crawford. “Food and Famine” in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Poirteir (Cork, Dublin: Cork and Dublin: Mercier Press, 1995), 60.

Although the potato had become the dominant crop of Ireland by 1845, traditional crops were still grown for export and included wheat, barley, carrots and turnips.² The shift towards dependence on the potato was instigated by a forced shift away from traditional, Irish agrarian culture.

For roughly 200 years prior to 1845, Irish agrarian communities, known as clachans, were organized according to a system of agriculture referred to as rundales. The word clachan indicated the collective population of a particular village which was generally established according to kinship ties.³ The rundale was a process of negotiation that divided agricultural land among the people of a clachan.⁴ This division of land did not establish property; instead, it determined temporary use of particular plots, rows, or grazing areas.

Interestingly, land use prior to cultivation of the potato emphasized pastoralism. The negotiations surrounding tillable lands were based on the carrying capacity for livestock which provided the manure necessary to sustain the tilled portions of the rundale. In order to participate in the negotiations, members had to have an intimate knowledge of the land. This knowledge would have included the ability to identify soil types in a particular region, levels of fertility, areas that received more or less sun, or plots prone to wind or saturation. In addition, the history of who had tended each section also entered the negotiations. The result was a sort of patchwork division of land: sometimes divided according to squares and sometimes by long seams or rows. As a result of this organization, families and individuals would have worked among each other

2

³ Kevin Whelan. "Pre and Post-Famine Landscape Change." *The Great Irish Famine*. ed Poirteir, Cathal (Cork, Dublin: Mercier Press. 1995), 23

⁴ Dean Braa. "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society," *Science and Society*, (Summer 1997) vol. 61, no. 2, 201, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40403619>

rather than at a distance, a circumstance which would have likely strengthened communal relationships and support networks in times of hardship. In addition, negotiation and redistribution ensured a certain amount of equality among all members which successfully prevented stratification within the community.⁵

Transformations

English influence on Irish agricultural was gradual. Although the English had established a presence in Ireland as early as the late Medieval period, Irish resistance had kept the number of British settlers low until 1652. In this year, Oliver Cromwell defeated Irish forces and established what became known as the “Cromwellian settlement.” Cromwell distributed large estates to Protestant supporters and a small number of English and Scottish emigrated to become tenant farmers on these estates; even so, the majority of the tenants remained Irish. These tenants were given ‘cabins’ and small garden plots in return for labour services, a system that became known as cottier tenancy.⁶ Most often, tenant shelters and garden plots were designated to the most marginal lands within the estate—usually mountains or bog sides.⁷ As the cottier system developed, rents were required. In many instances, particularly in Western Ireland, tenants were able to maintain traditional agricultural practices and social structures, albeit, on a smaller scale and with the new condition that rent would be provided to the landlord.⁸

⁵ Kevin Whelan. “Pre and Post-Famine Landscape Change” *The Great Irish Famine*. ed. Cathal Poirteir (Cork, Dublin: Mercier Press, 1995) 23-25

⁶ Dean Braa. “The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society,” *Science and Society*, (Summer 1997) vol. 61, no. 2, 204-205, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40403619>

⁷ Edward G. Lengel. *The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era*. (Westport, London: Praeger, 2002)

⁸ Dean Braa. “The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society,” *Science and Society*, (Summer 1997) vol. 61, no. 2, 204-205, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40403619>

As cottier tenancy pushed more and more tenants onto marginal lands, traditional Irish crops had to be replaced with crops that could survive in the wet and rocky areas that were generally available; the potato proved to be the most resilient crop under these conditions. The potato also required one quarter of the land that was needed to support the average family on grain. Since land suitable for growing grain had been usurped by the English lords, grain growing for subsistence was not an option. In effect, the cultivation of the potato spread on account of necessity but proved desirable because it was prolific enough to support an entire family on less than an acre of marginal land.

The ability to feed a family on a small plot affected much more than the Irish diet. The increased subsistence base encouraged earlier marriage which extended a couple's reproductive years and, in turn, produced more children.⁹ The overall effect was a doubling of the population from 5,000,000 in 1800 to over 8,000,000 in 1841.¹⁰ As the population grew, families subsisted on less or expanded their potato farming further into the bog lands and mountainous regions. A German traveler, passing through Ireland in the mid 1830s described the living conditions that followed as a result of the increasing pressures placed upon tenants:

thousands of cabins in which not a trace of a window is to be seen; nothing but a little square hole in front which doubles the duty of door, window and chimney and through this one aperture light, smoke, pigs and children must pass in and out.¹¹

This rapidly increasing population translated to an over-abundance of available labor which, aside from lower earnings, led to the fracturing of cottier tenancy. 'Lease holding tenancy', which was, at first, the most common form of the cottier system,

⁹ Kevin Whelan. "Pre and Post-Famine Landscape Change" in *The Great Irish Famine*. ed. Cathal Poirteir (Cork, Dublin: Mercier Press. 1995) 20, 22

¹⁰ Nicholas Mansergh. *The Irish Question* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1975) 53

¹¹ Quoted in Nicholas Mansergh. *The Irish Question* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1975) 53-54

granted the tenant a lease that would be honored for as long as rents were paid according to initial agreements. With the exception of the town of Ulster, lease holding fell out of favor and was replaced with “tenancy at will.” Under tenancy at will, the terms between tenant and landlord were negotiated for one year. Adding to the laborers difficulties, landlords began holding auctions in which tenants would bid against each other in order to obtain these year-long leases.¹² This kept rents high, upset the unity of the Irish community and disrupted attempts to preserve tradition and equality through the modified rundale system. Subtenancy divided the land further but the extra labor was often necessary in order to meet the high rents imposed by landlords.¹³

Motives for English Colonization

Given that the British had successfully exploited Irish land and labor for hundreds of years, the question arises as to why a formal Act of Union in 1800 would have been perceived as more desirable than the mere occupation of Ireland. In light of Napoleon Bonaparte’s aggressive campaigns following the French Revolution, the most obvious assumption might be that other European powers became a potential threat to British dominance in Ireland. Upon closer examination of the circumstances in England, at the turn of the nineteenth century, a more subtle, but no less important motivation emerges. From the middle of the eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, England experienced rapid growth and increased urbanization.¹⁴ This rapid growth was directly related to changes in agricultural techniques which produced higher yields. These

¹² Dean Braa. “The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society,” *Science and Society*, (Summer 1997) vol. 61, no. 2, 205, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40403619>

¹³ Dean Braa. “The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society,” *Science and Society*, (Summer 1997) vol. 61, no. 2, 205, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40403619>

¹⁴ J.A. Chartres. “Market Integration and Agricultural Output in Seventeenth-, Eighteenth-, and Early Nineteenth-Century England” *The Agricultural History Review* vol. 43, no. 2 (1995), 132 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4027544129>

techniques included the enclosure of open fields, the planting of forage crops, the creation of artificial pasture and intensified labor inputs.¹⁵ A surplus of staple grains in the markets encouraged an increase of regional specialization and studies show that, in the late eighteenth century, tenant farmers had begun to alter breeds of sheep in response to fluctuations in the prices of wool, tallow, and meat which, in effect, would have led to increased profits.¹⁶ However, this increased food stability and wealth became threatened in the 1790s when drought dramatically decreased available food supplies and led to public rioting.¹⁷ It was against the backdrop of these turbulent shifts in population and supply that Thomas Malthus published his highly influential *Essay On the Principle of Population, as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society* in 1798.

In order to have a more complete understanding of Malthus's Essay, it must be analyzed with its precursor, Adam Smith's 1776 book titled *Wealth of Nations*. Taken together, these two publications shed light on the origins of British laissez-faire policies during times of famine and, when viewed with the agricultural turmoil that England was experiencing in the late eighteenth century, these publications suggest that the Act of Union in 1800 was largely an attempt to expand the English resource base. The wholly agricultural lands of Ireland would have been an ideal candidate during a time when the

¹⁵ Gay L. Gullickson. "Agriculture and Cottage Industry: Redefining the Causes of Proto-Industrialization"

The Journal of Economic History vol. 43, no. 4 (Dec., 1983), 833

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2121051>

¹⁶ J.A. Chartres. "Market Integration and Agricultural Output in Seventeenth-, Eighteenth-, and Early Nineteenth-Century England" *The Agricultural History Review* vol. 43, no. 2 (1995), 135

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4027544129>

¹⁷ J.A. Chartres. "Market Integration and Agricultural Output in Seventeenth-, Eighteenth-, and Early Nineteenth-Century England" *The Agricultural History Review* vol. 43, no. 2 (1995), 132

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4027544129>

cutting edge of transportation technologies was limited to the canal.¹⁸ The advent of railroads or steamboats were still twenty years away at this time, so finding a nearby source of food production would have been invaluable.

Economic Ideology

While the concepts of Smith and Malthus most likely informed British rule in general, once these concepts were applied to famine conditions in a colonial setting the consequences became particularly severe. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* promoted the principle of a market that was free from government regulation and interference. Smith began his work by addressing the "slow and gradual consequence of...human nature...the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another."¹⁹ After identifying man as a naturally economic being, Smith continually addressed questions of efficiency and order by defining human experience in terms of economic gain, loss and efficiency with an emphasis on self interest:

Man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren, and it is in vain for him to expect it from their benevolence only. He will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favor, and show them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them.²⁰

In this passage, Smith acknowledges the interdependence of individual bodies but seems to assert that there is little responsibility of one body to another beyond what will benefit the self. This concept stood in stark contrast to the traditional Irish social organization and farming methods in pre-famine years. In another passage, Smith briefly addressed the negative effects of human interference with "natural" population growth:

¹⁸ J.A. Chartres. "Market Integration and Agricultural Output in Seventeenth-, Eighteenth-, and Early Nineteenth-Century England" *The Agricultural History Review* vol. 43, no. 2 (1995),131 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4027544129>

¹⁹ Adam Smith. *The Wealth of Nations*. eds. Edwin Cannan, Max Lerner (New York: Random House, 1937) [original 1776],13

²⁰ Adam Smith. *Wealth of Nations*. eds. Edwin Cannan, Max Lerner (New York: Random House, 1937) [original 1776],14

if human institutions had never thwarted the natural inclinations [of man], the towns could nowhere have increased beyond what the improvement and cultivation of the territory in which they were situated could support.²¹

In 1798, Thomas Malthus took Smith's passing statement and expanded it into his *Essay On the Principle of Population, as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society*. As the latter part of the title suggests, Malthus not only explained population as a system of checks and balances according to the productivity of the land but emphasized what kind of population would be desirable.

Where Smith categorized people according to the tasks they performed, Malthus inserted a moral hierarchy into Smith's theory that was directly tied to class standing. For Malthus, concerns about government intervention were biological as well as economic. Malthus argued that,

the quantity of provisions consumed in the workhouses upon a part of the society that cannot, in general be considered as the most valuable part diminishes the shares that would otherwise belong to the more industrious and more worthy members...²²

Malthus believed that state relief artificially spurred excessive population growth of the less "worthy members" of society. By characterizing worthy members as more industrious, the reader is led to assume that what makes the other class unworthy is a lack of industriousness. But Malthus did not end his illustration there. He argued that,

the labouring poor seem always to live from hand to mouth. Their present wants consume their whole attention and they seldom think of the future. Even when they have an opportunity of saving they seldom exercise it...all that is beyond their present necessities goes to the ale house.²³

²¹ Adam Smith. *Wealth of Nations*. eds. Edwin Cannan, Max Lerner (New York: Random House, 1937) [original 1776], 357

²² Thomas Malthus. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, (Google Scholar: Electronic Scholarly Publishing project, [original 1798]1998, 27

²³ ²³Thomas Malthus. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, (Google Scholar: Electronic Scholarly Publishing project, 1998), [original 1798] 27

Malthus drew attention to deserving versus undeserving members of society in order to reinforce a point made earlier in his essay: “population cannot be checked without producing misery or vice.”²⁴ Malthus also explains that avoiding “natural” checks on the population also produces undesirable effects because the “more industrious” will end up losing a part of their profits to support the poor, and therefore, the extent of their ability to procure material comforts will be diminished. From here, the question for Malthus becomes who should bear this misery and he provides a ready answer

considering the state of the lower classes altogether, both in towns and country, the distresses which they suffer from the want of proper or sufficient food, from hard labour and unwholesome habitations, must operate as a constant check to incipient population.

According to Malthus, the death of the poor was part of a natural cycle; they brought this early demise upon themselves through their own habits and thus their condition did not necessitate intervention. Malthus also briefly reflected on the foreign poor in Ireland,

The details of the population of Ireland are but little known...I only observe therefore that the extended use of potatoes has allowed of a very rapid increase...joined to the ignorance and barbarism of the people, which have prompted them to follow their inclinations with no other prospect than an immediate, bare subsistence... the population is pushed much beyond the present resources of the country...The checks to the population are of course of the positive kind, and arise from the diseases occasioned by squalid poverty, by damp and wretched cabins, by bad and insufficient clothing, and by occasional want. To their positive checks have, of late years, been added...civil war and martial law.²⁵

According to Malthus, the Irish poor are not merely insensible or “unwholesome”, they are “barbaric” and thus should endure “the misery of population checks”. Malthus also argued that there had not yet been an “experiment” in which the power of population had, in fact, “been left to exert itself with perfect freedom.”²⁶ In 1800, three years after

²⁴ Thomas Malthus. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, (Google Scholar: Electronic Scholarly Publishing project, 1998), [original 1798] 11-12

²⁵ Thomas Malthus. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, (Google Scholar: Electronic Scholarly Publishing project, 1998), [original 1798] 504, 505

²⁶ Thomas Malthus. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, (Google Scholar: Electronic Scholarly Publishing project, 1998), [original 1798] 6-7

Malthus published his essay, Ireland was annexed to Britain and, arguably, this experiment in population pressure began.

British colonialism in Ireland—and elsewhere—was a process of physical force and psychological demoralization. Subject populations were initially subdued through military measures and denied access to the cultural, social, and religious outlets that produced a strong sense of identity. The aims of these measures were to weaken native resistance to change and remold the population in ways which suited British needs and sensibilities. Although these actions took place in foreign lands, British colonialism was also a domestic process. In order to garner support from the British citizenry for colonial ambitions, the government adopted a narrative of imperial progress which borrowed language from popular Victorian theories of race and Providence and thus encouraged perceptions of the Irish as wholly “other” and inferior.

Race Theories in Victorian England

Ideas about race went through major transformations in Victorian England. In the first three decades of the nineteenth century, monogenesis was the most widely accepted theory concerning human development. James Cowles Prichard, a physician and Evangelical Anglican, was credited with producing what was referred to as “the first scientific explanation” of monogenesis. Even so, Prichard’s explanation followed a biblical narrative. All men, according to Prichard, had a single point of origin from which they dispersed and populated the earth. After this initial separation, some of these groups degenerated while others advanced. Variations were explained as “selective expressions of innate potentials common to humankind and determined by

circumstance.”²⁷ Interestingly, Prichard noted that all encounters with “exotic people” “led to the disappearance of indigenes distinctive characteristics either through extermination or Christian conversion.”²⁸ It is important to point out that degeneration and advancement would have, at this time, been associated with the curse or favor of God but the fact that all men had been brought forth from a single origin meant that all had the same potential for uplift. This is reflected in early nineteenth century views of the Irish. The Irish were clearly viewed as degenerate but it was believed that the moral example of the English, over time, would improve the Irish and bring them culturally on par with their superiors and back into the favor of God. This language of uplift projected the belief of a higher cause within the process of British colonization which made the exploitation of colonial peoples seem justifiable on the grounds that improved cultural habits and salvation would follow.

Interestingly, the British often treated the English poor as a colony of degenerates and the meanings behind the terms “race” and “class” were often blurred in the nineteenth century. Even so, the government used the argument of inherent superiority to position all British citizens, regardless of class, above colonial subjects. These contradictory actions were necessary in order to maintain control over of the English working classes while simultaneously building a sense of cohesion at home that would translate to a national identity and allegiance to British rule.²⁹

As the mid-century approached, monogenesis was challenged by polygenesis. Polygenesim identified human types as distinct species, created separately, each group

²⁷ Thomas F. Glick. “The Anthropology of Race across the Darwinian Revolution.” ed. by Henrika Kuklick. *A New history of Anthropology* (Blackwell Publishing, MA: 2008). 52

²⁸ Thomas F. Glick. “The Anthropology of Race across the Darwinian Revolution.” ed. by Henrika Kuklick. *A New history of Anthropology* (Blackwell Publishing: MA. 2008). 54

²⁹ E. P. Thompson. *The Making of the Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 106.

exhibiting traits that were indicative of particular stages of development.³⁰ Arising in conjunction with polygenesism, Dying Race Theory suggested that the least suited “races” would die off and those that were best suited would survive.³¹ Evidence to support this theory could be seen in the decline of Native American populations after European contact which suggests that groups who were wiped out in the process of colonization were simply considered “less suited” to survival. Dying Race Theory lined up neatly with Malthusian views of biological worth and the characterization of the Irish as something degenerative or “ill suited” for survival seems to have been a precondition for the Irish famine which resulted in the unnecessary death of over one million people.

Interestingly, the Irish Famine of 1845 seems to be a turning point in shifting perceptions of the Irish. At that time, the English had dealt with a series of famines since the Act of Union in 1800. Each one of these events disrupted the sense of security in England and it seems as though the Irish had come to be perceived as a burden that continually compromised English comfort and stability. A letter to the editor of *The Times* in 1846, the second and more intense year of Irish famine, conveys this growing sense of hostility toward the Irish: “there is no reason except their willful mismanagement that they should not grow the crops of wheat and after feeding themselves, export the surplus to our shores...yet they idly and stupidly stake their existence on the potato.”³² This opinion underlined a popular misconception about Irish agriculture: Ireland, in fact, did produce a great deal of wheat, unfortunately, the bulk of

³⁰ Thomas F. Glick. “The Anthropology of Race across the Darwinian Revolution.” ed. by Henrika Kuklick. *A New history of Anthropology* (Blackwell Publishing: MA. 2008). 54

³¹ Nadja Durbach. *Spectacle of Deformity* (University of California Press: Berkeley CA: 2010). 130

³² *The Times*. Letter to the Editor, “Efforts Of Dependence Upon The Potato Crop,” 1 September 1846, in, *The Great Irish Famine of 1845-1846. A collection of leading articles, letters, and parliamentary and other public statements, reprinted from The Times.* 14

that wheat was exported for a profit. This is a testament to the enormous social and cultural gap that was widening between the English and the Irish as the mid nineteenth century approached.

Providentialism

Providentialism was another nineteenth-century worldview that held significant sway in economic, social, and cultural constructions. The Concept of Divine Providence was a fundamental characteristic of religion in seventeenth-century England,³³ but the appeal and influence of this ideology remained strong in the nineteenth century and would be put to good use in a colonial context. Those who subscribed to Providentialism believed that God's intentions were present in all aspects of life. This applied to the external events in an individual's life as well as to the events and outcomes of History. The belief that Providence was present in warfare, natural disasters, and the favor or disfavor of individuals or groups of people, had long been excepted ways of thinking in the nineteenth century; however, from 1833 to 1836, a series called the *Bridgewater Treatises*, commissioned by Reverend Francis Henry Egerton, the Earl of Bridgewater, articulated the belief that political economy was also divinely guided. The text further suggested that Malthus and Smith had simply been chosen to reveal God's will.³⁴ In effect, as Richard D. Altick has suggested, "the cosmos, living creation, and the affairs of men, including their buying and selling of goods in the marketplace, were subject to laws emanating from the same source." Since the economy was thought to be governed by the immovable will of the "Supreme Being", the only sensible course was to avoid

³³ Michael P. Winship. *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Enlightenment*. (John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1996). 1-2

³⁴ Richard D. Altick. *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1973), 127

interference. Under this framework, if the government chose to interfere with the economic relationships between individuals, it would, in turn, be challenging the will of God.³⁵ It was from this way of thinking that the use of the term “natural” became synonymous with the will of the “Supreme Being” and non-interference took on the force of a religious tenant. Similarly, It was divine Providence, that produced situations that would lead to famine and mass starvation, events, that in any case could be interpreted as a lesson, or a message from God. As I will argue later, during the Great Famine of 1845 in Ireland, Prime Minister, Robert Peel would continuously evoke the language of Providentialism to support policies of non-interference.

Providentialism, as applied to the famine conditions of 1845, was flexible and could be molded to support the idea that the “workings of the market were divinely guided” or that the “demoralizing”³⁶ Catholic religion of the Irish was responsible for the sufferings that were brought upon them; in this light, the misfortune of the Irish could be summed up as God’s wrath. Others believed that the curse was due solely to erroneous Catholic beliefs and, therefore, could be remedied by English Protestant influence and uplift.

Irish Response

This colonial experiment did not take place without resistance and the Irish maintained a strong sense of nationality that is evidenced in the rebellions of 1798 and 1803. Not surprisingly, these uprisings occurred just before and after the Act of Union of 1800 which brought Ireland under the rule of the United Kingdom. In the years that followed, splinter groups arose in Ireland, among these were the Orange society, the

³⁵ Richard D. Altick. *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1973), 127

³⁶ Trevelyan, Charles. *The Irish Crisis* (London: Reprinted from the Edinburgh Review, 1848), 22

Whitefeet, and the Whiteboys. While the overthrow of the British government was often the desired goal of these associations, more often, they united to prevent eviction or rise up against a specific landlord or middleman. The Bishop of Carlow relayed interactions between a priest and the leader of a “gang of Whitefeet”. The priest had harshly criticized the association for their actions and the leader responded,

The law does nothing for us. We must save ourselves. We have a little land which we need for ourselves and our families to live on, and they drive us out of it. To whom should we address ourselves? Emancipation has done nothing for us...the rich catholics go to parliament. We die of starvation just the same.³⁷

This statement gives the reader one example of the struggles that the Irish were up against but the language that these Irish groups used to describe themselves is also revealing. By choosing to use the terms “societies” and “associations”, words that connote partnership and a shared cause, these groups implicitly expressed purpose that went beyond intimidation. If intimidation had been the only ends that they were seeking, it would have made more sense for these groups to refer to themselves as the English did, as “gangs”. The term “Gang”, as opposed to “society” or “association”, conjures up thoughts of group violence and it is not indicative of a respectable organization. By employing the term “gang”, the English more easily characterized these Irish groups as violent, a trait that was used consistently in order to highlight what they believed to be inherent, Irish flaws and to justify colonial violence in the name of pacification. In addition, this single word could serve to trivialize and misrepresent the goals of these groups. The overall effect of this language was the justification of ill treatment which took the form of neglect, abuse and the disenfranchisement of the Irish.

³⁷ Nicholas Mansergh. *The Irish Question* (George Allen & Unwin Ltd.: London. 1975) 56-57

The shared sense of purpose that was imbedded in the terms “society” and “association” came to the surface in 1817 when a significant number of Irish people petitioned the British government for a reinstatement of the Irish Parliament which had existed before the Act of Union. While it is impossible to know to what extent this public outcry was inspired by the actions of splinter groups, it is likely that they were regarded as the agricultural worker’s only advocate. These petitioners asserted that, “a parliament convened as the British parliament now is, instead of being capable of defending the just rights and privileges of the subject, was no more or less than a corrupt usurpation of those rights and privileges...” In contrast, many members of the British Parliament viewed the Irish Parliament as an institution that had been central to the degradation of the Irish people; a degradation which was thought to be caused, partly, by the influence of Catholicism and by the retention of traditional forms of agriculture. The petitioners claimed that the results of this usurpation had created, “A degraded nobility, an impoverished gentry, an almost extinguished commerce, traders, in a general state of bankruptcy, and a beggared people...” As interpreted by the British, the results would have been seen differently. It is worth noting that “commerce had been extinguished” in the sense that it was no longer the domain of the Irish. Just as the Irish nobility had been replaced with English and Scottish Lords, purportedly for the sake of the improvement of Irish society, commerce became the domain of English merchants. In 1808 Irish agriculture and English merchants generated 10,000,000 in revenue from exports for the British Empire.³⁸ The English government attributed this increase in profits to the deemphasis of cattle exportation in favor of increased tillage which had taken place under

³⁸ Hansard Parliamentary Debates. H.C. Deb 20 May 1811 vol 20 cc 223-33

English rule. However, this profit fluctuated wildly and never translated to improvements or benefits for the Irish people: a fact which the Irish did not fail to notice.

I have often heard, Sir, of the Bill of Rights, the glory, the boast, of Britons —that they never would be induced or terrified to make a base and cowardly surrender of their birth-rights, as Britons. What are the concessions of to-day but a surrender of those liberties?... May not the best and most worthy member of this assembly, after an expression of his sentiments for the public good, this night be apprehended on his way home, dragged from his family, and incarcerated in a dungeon at the will of a minister? and even in that state of degradation will he not be denied the common right of Britons a jury of his peers?³⁹

This excerpt from the petition points to the fact that becoming British subjects did not translate to gaining the rights and privileges of a British citizen: “free expression...a jury of peers”. However, the fact that the writers are asserting their rights as British citizens suggests that they have been addressed as British citizens. Furthermore, the passage shows a willingness to accept British citizenship rather than rebellion if they are given the same treatment and representation. Finally, it highlights the fact that the Irish viewed local representation as one more resource that had been stripped away by the British reorganization of Irish society. British rule of Ireland is often taken for granted but the threat of possible insurrection in Ireland is evident in the last statement of the petitioners, “Nothing will avail, to quiet the popular apprehension, but a radical and speedy reform...Remember the words of that great statesman, who predicted, that if the House did not reform itself from within, it would be reformed from without with a vengeance.”⁴⁰ In addition to conveying the extent of Irish discontent, the petition demonstrates that the Irish were keeping track of every injustice that was heaped upon them, which in turn, created an increasingly tense relationship between the two Islands.

³⁹ Hansard Parliamentary Debates. H.C. Deb 20 May 1817 vol 36 cc 701-4

⁴⁰ Hansard Parliamentary Debates. H.C. Deb 20 May 1817 vol 36 cc701-4

It is worth noting that this motion for a reinstated Irish Parliament was, to an extent, defended in Parliament and that defense proved equally interesting:

Formerly, it was said, when motions on the subject of parliamentary reform were made in this House, "The people do not desire reform. Where are your petitions [?]...There are petitions...from every part of the country, bearing not less than a million of signatures.

The response to this request to honor the petitions was then countered by the argument that,

the constitution as it present exists is productive of great blessings...very few indeed, will be found to deny the fact. before you put these inestimable blessings to the risk by any change, you should be satisfied that grievances exist of such magnitude as to counterbalance the danger of the experiment.

Although this motion was voted down by a significant majority (77 to 265),⁴¹ the debate concerning the creation of an Irish Parliament is important because the knowledge that nearly "one million people" had signed a petition in protest provides a clearer picture of popular Irish resistance. A second point of interest is the language used by the opponent of Irish self-governance. When he speaks of the blessings of the constitution while simultaneously speaking against broadening the access of the Irish to government, he is implicitly arguing that the blessings of the constitution are reserved for Englishmen. Secondly, when he referred cryptically to existing grievances as they compare with the "danger of the experiment", this MP was arguing that Irish self-government would be a "dangerous experiment" despite that fact that the Irish Parliament had been operating prior to British rule. This shows the extent of English disinterest in Irish affairs prior to the Act of Union and how central and accepted the concept of English colonial governance was at this time.

⁴¹ Hansard Parliamentary debates. H.C. Deb 20 May 1817 vol 36 cc704-812

English Rebellion

While these conditions would seem to create a situation that would incite constant rebellion, the fear of insurrection in Ireland came second to the fear of rebellion in England. In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, directly following the end of the French Revolution, riots were not uncommon in England. The “labor aristocracy” and the lower middle class emerged and became more visible through the formation of political and social organizations such as the Society for Constitutional Information (SCI), the London Corresponding Society (LCS), and the Society of Friends of the People. These groups were largely comprised of artisans, shopkeepers and tradesmen, all of whom promoted “political self-education” and Parliamentary reform.⁴² The fear that these organizations, meetings, and riots would gain ground and threaten the privileges of the elite is evident in the Parliamentary debates that led to the implementation of the Seditious Meeting Bill of 1817 which was intended to prevent any meetings in which the topic of discussion sought “to alter matters of the state” and to ban meetings by which more than fifty people were gathered.⁴³ The belief that these organizations were tied to the influence of the French Revolution is clear in a statement by Mr. William Smith who expressed concern about pamphlets found on a group of rioters

A few days before the meeting of the society a handbill was distributed, containing a blasphemous parody of the Nicene Creed—which was sent up to lord Sidmouth, as a specimen of the sentiments here, I understand it came out about 20 or 25 years ago, amongst the Jacobins with whom [he] then associated.⁴⁴

The debates and actions concerning English unrest are relevant to the treatment of the Irish because the actions imposed or allowed for one group, at times, seem as though

⁴² E. P. Thompson. *The Making of the Working class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 106, 155

⁴³ Hansard Parliamentary Debates. H.C. Deb 03 March 1817 vol 35 cc850-9

⁴⁴ Hansard Parliamentary Debates.H.C. Deb 14 March 1817 vol 35 cc1083-132

they would have been useful tools for producing a desired feeling or action in another. Interestingly, The Seditious Acts, also referred to as the “Gagging Acts”, were not extended to Ireland even though it was in this same year that Parliament received an incensed request, alongside petitions, calling for the creation of an Irish Parliament and threatening rebellion. Although the prospect of extending the Act to Ireland was discussed, many argued that it would push the Irish population closer to revolt. It seems as though, by pressing the Seditious Acts upon the people of England, the government was also sending a message to the Irish that they risked having the same measures imposed upon them.

Emigration, Disease, and Popular English Opinion

Perhaps a more powerful example of the manipulation of public sentiment can be found in an analysis of the emigration that took place from Ireland to England between 1831 and 1841. The fact that this emigration coincided with the cholera epidemic of 1831 is significant. At the time, the origin of cholera was unknown but many observed that the poor were far more susceptible to the disease. While this was often attributed to overcrowding and unsanitary living conditions, most writers of the time did not acknowledge that these conditions were the result of extreme poverty.⁴⁵ Instead, the majority viewed the conditions of the poor as proof that they were morally inferior. Based on the ideologies of the time, it could be reasoned that the poor were simply being punished for their degenerate state or, in Malthus’s terms, they were simply subject to “natural” checks on population. The inferiority of the Irish in Ireland was also partly tied to their visible, domestic conditions, however, Irish emigrants in Britain were not only

⁴⁵ Richard J. Evans. “Epidemics and Revolutions: Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Europe” *Past & Present* no.128 (Aug., 1988),132 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650924>

seen as morally inferior, they also brought alien customs and threatened the livelihood of the English worker—particularly the working poor. In addition, many believed that the cholera epidemic could be traced to their arrival. Between 1831 and 1841, 400,000 Irish peasants arrived in England which greatly increased the strain on urban infrastructure.⁴⁶ In addition, The early 1830s brought several years of drought which would have likely created tensions concerning access to diminished crop yields.⁴⁷ Those members of Parliament who were against emigration, explained their position in terms of how it affected the English working class

there could be no doubt that the want of a provision for the poor of Ireland, in their native country, tended greatly to produce distress amongst the labouring population in England. In that part of the borough in which Cholera was said to prevail, twenty out of every twenty-five were Irish.⁴⁸

While these sentiments identify “the want of provisions for the poor of Ireland” as the root cause of the distressed “labouring English” it also highlights the popular conception of the Irish as carriers of disease.

The overall affect of Irish emigration to England was an increase in English resentment of the Irish. In addition to the fear of being infected by the Irish, English workers had to compete with Irish emigrants and migrant workers who were willing to work for much less. The mobile Irish were generally preferred by English landlords because seasonal workers were not eligible for relief under the existing poor law, a fact which reduced the amount that the employer would be expected to pay to the local poor

⁴⁶ Dean Braa. “The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society,” *Science and Society*, (Summer 1997) vol. 61, no. 2, 205, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40403619>

⁴⁷ Richard J. Evans. “Epidemics and Revolutions: Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Europe” *Past & Present* no.120 (Aug., 1988),132 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650924>

⁴⁸ Hansard Parliamentary Debates. H.C. Deb 14 March 1832 vol 11 cc 205-6

rate.⁴⁹ Essentially, the influx of Irish workers increased competition, lowered wages, and led to larger profits for English landholders. Most importantly, any benefits that were gained applied only to England.

Given the government's intention to preserve aristocratic privilege in Parliament, resentment towards the Irish would have most likely been desirable to some extent. By creating a circumstance by which the Irish were a direct threat to English workers, the stage was set for harmful Irish stereotypes to flourish. In turn, the creation of a common enemy would have served to unify a restless English society and distract attention away from the prospects of revolution or increased suffrage. In Frederick Engel's publication, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, he argued that the Irish were "forced to emigrate to avoid starvation" and that "the retention of the Union enslaved the Irish peasant in a semi feudal existence....while it checked the progress of a united working class in England."⁵⁰

While it can be argued that this emphasis on a free market system was detrimental to the English working class because they could always be undersold by "foreign" labor, laissez-faire economics went beyond a desire for increased wealth or efficiency. It established a hierarchy of man based on existing power structures that assumed that culturally created suffering and unchecked ambition was all part of God's plan.

The Famine of 1822

From the Act of Union in 1800 to the 1820s, the British government's main concerns about Ireland, as expressed in parliamentary records, were centered around

⁴⁹ Dean Braa. "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society," *Science and Society*, (Summer 1997) vol. 61, no. 2, 205, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40403619>

⁵⁰ Quoted in Ellen Hazelkorn. "'Capital' and the Irish Question." *Science & Society* vol. 44, no. 3 (Fall, 1980), 328
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4040226>

trade, religion, and prevention of rebellion. Matters concerning the well being of the Irish people or the relationship between landlord and tenant rarely arose until famine struck Ireland in 1822. While this famine was confined to the south west region of Ireland, the lives lost were significant and the arguments that took place in Parliament were very similar to the discussions that would take place twenty two years later. Among the most repeated opinions was the fear that free aid would “strike at the root of all industry for years to come”.⁵¹ This continuous declaration led to the provision of wages in return for public works.

As the death toll from starvation and disease began to climb, members of Parliament expressed their concerns. MP, Earl Grey confronted Parliament with accounts of the importation of grain from Ireland during a time of famine and a lack of adequate government response

They had authentic accounts, the truth of which could not be disputed, that the population of Ireland, from whence large supplies of grain were drawn to England, were, a great part of them at least, in state of distress bordering upon famine, and yet there was no trace of any aid furnished by government for the mitigation of this dreadful calamity. What a picture of a government! Hundreds and thousands of the population of Ireland dying in the streets and highways for want of food, in the midst of plenty.⁵²

MP, John Smith also forcefully voiced his expectations of the British government

the first duty of any government that was worth one farthing, was to protect its subjects from starvation. Enough had not been done, and therefore government ought to take more decisive measures.⁵³

In response to these protests, other members of parliament assured each man that “seed had been sent” and that engineers were facilitating public works; however, they could not provide the dates that aid was sent or the names of those who were distributing aid which

⁵¹ Hansard Parliamentary Debates. H.C. Deb 17 June 1822 vol 7 cc1123-6

⁵² Hansard Parliamentary Debates. H.C. Deb 17 June 1822 vol 7 cc1123-

⁵³ Hansard Parliamentary Debates. H.C. Deb 17 June 1822 vol 7 cc1123-

raised suspicion among several members of parliament. This suspicion was reinforced when the Earl of Blesington reported the deaths of 28,507 in county Clare.⁵⁴ Despite the impassioned positions of the minority, principles of free trade proved stronger than the need for relief. This position was expressed by the Earl of Liverpool. He argued that,

no subject could be more delicate than that of the interference of government with the subsistence of the country. He would only wish them for a moment to consider, what might be the consequence of such a principle—how much it might operate in counteracting the exertions of private benevolence, and to what mischievous results such a meddling with the natural means of supplying the market might lead.⁵⁵

Much like the explanations of aid, the Earl of Liverpool did not specify what might occur if the government decided to “meddle with the natural means of supplying the market” but by using the term “natural”, which, as mentioned before, was synonymous with the “will of God” he reiterated the belief that God’s intentions were present in all human events and implicitly suggested that “to meddle” is to invite God’s wrath.

Despite the failure of the government to provide adequate relief in the form of food or financial assistance during the famine of 1822, the British government began to see Irish poverty as a problem that required further investigation. In 1833 The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Conditions of the Poorer Classes of Ireland was established in order to give recommendations about what course of action should be taken by the British government. Richard Whately, the Archbishop of Dublin and former professor of economy at Oxford, had been selected as the chairman of the commission and Whately took it upon himself to direct the investigation in terms of identifying root causes rather than reporting merely on present conditions.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Hansard Parliamentary Debates. H.C. Deb 17 June 1822 vol 7 cc1123-

⁵⁵ Hansard Parliamentary Debates.H.C. Deb 17 June 1822 vol 7 cc1123-

⁵⁶ Helen Burke. *The People and the Poor Law in 19th Century Ireland* (West Sussex, EN: Women’s Education Bureau, 1987), 18-19

The English and Irish Poor Laws

Simultaneously, debates in Parliament were attempting to deal with the issue of the poor at home by renegotiating the Elizabethan poor law which provided outdoor relief for the poor locally, according to parish designations. Under the Elizabethan system, a priest determined the need of each individual and money was distributed accordingly. Parishes were small and amounted to over 15,000 distribution centers in England.⁵⁷ This system had become extremely costly and the British government feared that the system of Parish relief was profitable enough to encourage unemployment by choice. In order to address these issues, a commission, headed by Edmund Chadwick, was formed in 1832 to investigate alternatives.

The solutions adopted in regard to the problem of the poor at home would ultimately affect how the Irish Royal Commission's data was received and responded to; therefore, an explanation of the Poor Law in England is necessary in order to understand how the British decided to approach the issue of poverty in Ireland and to grasp how that decision would have lasting effects during and after famine.

Whately and Chadwick addressed the issue of the poor in dramatically different ways. Whately, maintained an interest in social reform, whereas Chadwick saw the maintenance of a productive workforce as the primary motivation for change. The solution that was adopted under the direction of Chadwick and his commission in 1834, became known as the "New Poor Law."⁵⁸ This system for dealing with the able bodied poor required the construction of workhouses placed in the center of newly defined

⁵⁷ Helen Burke. *The People and the Poor Law in 19th Century Ireland* (West Sussex, EN: Women's Education Bureau, 1987), 23

⁵⁸Helen Burke. *The People and the Poor Law in 19th Century Ireland* (West Sussex, EN: Women's Education Bureau, 1987), 22

community boundaries called unions. Each workhouse was usually maintained by a couple who then reported to a locally elected Board of Guardians for each region.

As part of the effort to deter people from entering the workhouse, the buildings were designed to mirror the look and feel of a prison. Upon entry, men, women and children were separated, their hair was cut, and uniforms were provided. The tasks of the workhouse were generally arduous and rarely useful. Rock breaking, picking oakum, and, for women, laundry work were among the most common assignments. Meals excluded all luxury items such as sugar, butter and caffeine.

Entry into the workhouse was granted under the condition of two main principles that its authors believed would keep abuses in check and deter people from choosing unemployment. The first was the “all or nothing principle” which stated that an able-bodied person had the option to receive aid under workhouse conditions or they would receive nothing. The second, was the principle of “less-eligibility”, which essentially meant that entry into the workhouse would need to be less desirable than the prospect of finding a job.⁵⁹ This was accomplished by enforcing strenuous and monotonous tasks and by providing unappealing food with a low nutritional value. In addition, finding work once somebody entered a workhouse was made more difficult due to a stigma of laziness that was attached to anyone seeking employment in a workhouse uniform. In affect, the workhouse, more often, became a holding place for the poor rather than a tool for reform.

When the “New Poor Law” was adopted in 1834 in England, suggestions to extend the poor law to Ireland arose almost immediately. Whately and the Irish Royal

⁵⁹ Helen Burke. *The People and the Poor Law in 19th Century Ireland* (West Sussex, EN: Women's Education Bureau, 1987), 21

Commission continued their investigation “under greater pressure from the British government”⁶⁰ and presented a series of three reports in 1835 and 1836. The Commissions final evaluations rejected the extension of the Poor law to Ireland based on the recognition that unique circumstances had led to extreme Irish poverty.

The Irish Commission’s report presented ample evidence that the root of Irish unemployment and poverty was not lack of initiative but a sheer lack of work to be found. They also rejected the Poor Law based on calculations that suggested that “if the workhouse system were adopted for Ireland, accommodations would be required for 2,385,000 people, if all who require relief were to be relieved.”⁶¹ The over-abundant population coupled with an absence of industry and capital investment were, according to the commission, the central problems that needed to be addressed. In the third volume of their report, the Irish Royal Commission laid out a three part plan that emphasized economic development as the primary relief measure.

The first step in the proposed program involved the creation of a Board of Improvement. The Board would assess areas classified as wasteland or bogs and carry out drainage and fencing projects as they saw fit. The commission believed that the tasks of drainage and fencing would provide employment while larger improvements were being made and would increase the amount of productive land. Since many of the poorest people had been forced to settle on the fringes of bogland, the board would also take on the task of relocating these families, with the cost of relocations being partly paid for by the landlords.

⁶⁰ Helen Burke. *The People and the Poor Law in 19th Century Ireland* (West Sussex, EN: Women’s Education Bureau, 1987), 23

⁶¹ Helen Burke. *The People and the Poor Law in 19th Century Ireland* (West Sussex, EN: Women’s Education Bureau, 1987), 30

The commission also drew attention to the harm that resulted from short and insecure leases under the conacre system of tenancy, the same system that led to auctioning off short term tenant contracts which was summed up by John Revons, the Secretary of the Poor Law Commission in 1835: a chief cause of extreme poverty stems from a “system by which the landlords take advantage of the intense competition between the laborers to demand excessive rents for their farmlands.”⁶² In order to address the problem of conacre tenancy or “tenancy at will”, the Commission proposed implementing a thirty-one year lease and ensuring fair compensation for improvements that the farmer made. The final proposed responsibility of the Board of Improvement would be the organization of public works such as building roads and bridges or deepening rivers.

Although the commission believed that a Board of Improvement could make significant and lasting changes, they did not believe those changes would occur without emigration. In order to take pressure off of nearly eight million people, the commission proposed a temporary strategy of assisting the Irish with emigration efforts; ideally, this assistance would include free passage and sufficient provisions for resettlement in a British colony.

The first volume of Whately’s report was comprised almost entirely from observations of extreme poverty and opinions from all classes about the perceived causes of such extreme devastation. Reported in 1835, ten years before the Great Famine, these descriptions portray a dire need for aid and reform; however, Whately’s version of reform was costly and ultimately rejected in favor of an extension of the New Poor Law to Ireland with a few significant alterations. The first, was that outdoor relief would not be given at all. The second was that the workhouses were supported completely by local

⁶² Nicholas Mansergh, *The Irish Question* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1975)

taxes which meant that the districts that experienced the greatest hardships would struggle the most to feed, clothe, and house the poor in times of crisis.⁶³

The application of the New Poor Law to Ireland, despite overwhelming evidence that it would not make significant improvements in the levels of poverty found there, is evidence of how deeply entrenched utilitarian principles had become in English society in a relatively short period of time. The debates in Parliament suggest that many took the matter of Irish poverty and injustice seriously but the majority consistently voted for principles of efficiency over humanitarian aid. In addition, complications arose from factions within the British government who were not only divided by party but divided amongst themselves within those parties.

Political Complications

Struggles in nineteenth century British government have often been simplified in terms of the differences between the Tory and Whig parties. In reality, divisions that existed *within each party* made parliamentary debates more complex and often slowed the decision making process. This hinderance had severe consequences during times of famine but these fractured parties can also be seen as indicative of a time when a great deal of ideological change was taking place. The responsibilities of Britain to colonial Ireland proved an especially difficult topic because conversations inevitably brought forth issues that could not be divided sharply along party lines: the responsibilities of the state to colonial subjects, the relationship between religion and the state, and economic ideology. Peter Grey, in his book *Famine, Land, and Politics: British Government and Irish Society 1843-50*, created categories within each party that serve to make the

⁶³ Christine Kinealy. "The Role of the Poor Law during the Famine" in *The Great Irish Famine* ed. Cathal Poirteir (Cork, Dublin: Mercier Press, 1995) 115- 116

political factions that were present during the famine years more comprehensive. Those categories will be largely reproduced in this paper.

When the famine struck in 1845 Prime Minister Robert Peel acted according to his own brand of “Toryism” that resulted in a following known as the “Peelites.” Peel believed in the “moral superiority of laissez-fair economics”, the obligations of landlords and local charity as the mainstays of relief, and, evoking Providentialist sentiments, that “the political bond was the only hope for Irish advancement... the result of the natural law ordained by God”.⁶⁴ While the Peelites made up the bulk of the Tory party during the famine years, Tory landlords did not fit into a particular category but generally voted in the interest of their class positions. In addition, Tories were frequently associated with the “Protectionist” agenda in Ireland which used paternal language to suggest that the Irish were unfit for a parliament of their own and required an English example if hopes of cultural uplift were to be attained.⁶⁵ However, this view was not completely absent from the Whig party.

The Whig party was even more divided. While there is a tendency to oversimplify the Whigs as integrationists who believed that Irish unrest would subside if they were offered the same rights as the British citizen,⁶⁶ Grey divides the Whigs into “Foxites, Moralists and Moderates.” Foxites, Grey explains, are Whigs who have modeled themselves on the “career of Charles James Fox.” This faction of the Whig party was opposed to “royal despotism and riotous democracy” and saw themselves as

⁶⁴ Peter Grey. *Famine Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society 1843-50* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), 38

⁶⁵ Edward G. Lengel. “The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era.” (Westport, London: Praeger, 2002) 10-11

⁶⁶ Edward G. Lengel. “The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era.” (Westport, London: Praeger, 2002) 10-12

representatives of the popular interest.⁶⁷ John Russell, who succeeded Robert Peel as Prime Minister, identified himself as a Foxite. During John Russell's term, English public opinion about the Irish shifted dramatically. Prior to Peel, many saw Ireland as a degenerate nation that needed English guidance but as the famine escalated and the Irish required more resources, public opinions about the Irish became more hostile. As a representative of the popular interest, Russell's actions reflected this shift as he began to scale back on relief efforts.

Moderate-liberalism was another faction within the Whig party. Moderates emphasized free market economics and believed that problematic areas of Ireland should be brought under social control. Not surprisingly, they rejected the concept of extending full rights of English citizenship to the Irish. Many Irish landowners associated themselves with the moderates, and although most moderates pushed bipartisan solutions, their fearful view of Irish slowed the decision making process during times of crisis.

The last distinct group within the Whig party was the Moralists. The moralists maintained a stubborn insistence that the existing capital in Ireland was capable of creating rapid growth under the tutelage of the moral English. Moralist also believed in free trade but the concept was often wrapped in the rhetoric of a divine or "natural law". In conjunction with this concept, they believed that "moral imperatives would compel individuals to act in their own and other's interests"⁶⁸ Under these precepts, the moralists clung to non-interference during times of crisis as if it were a fundamental part of their religion. When failure of the potato crop occurred in 1845, many members of

⁶⁷ Peter Grey. *Famine Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society 1843-50* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), 18

⁶⁸ Peter Grey. *Famine Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society 1843-50* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), 24-25

Parliament were unwilling to believe that the affects were particularly severe. Prime minister Robert Peel reflected this sentiment and set the pace for response when he said “there is such a tendency to exaggeration and inaccuracy in Irish reports that delay in acting on them is always desirable.”⁶⁹ Since Peel had taken office in 1841, he had focused on integrating the Irish into government positions; however, when it came to aid, Peel made it clear that he believed that it was the responsibilities of Irish landlords, rather than the English people, to support the Irish peasantry.⁷⁰ Traditionally, the responsibilities of the landlords had been fulfilled by paying a poor-rate. This poor-rate was managed by a Board of Guardians and used to fund the operations of the workhouse. By 1843, 130 workhouses had been erected in Ireland which were capable of giving accommodation to 20,000 paupers.⁷¹ During the widespread Famine of 1845, 20,000 people represented a tiny fraction of the suffering population. Peel’s reluctance to help feed a population, which could claim a place within the British empire, provides a strong example of how becoming a colonial subject did not necessarily translate to obtaining the rights of the British citizenry.

Despite his reluctance to provide aid, Peel moved toward relief measures as the devastation of the famine increased. The first semblance of assistance took the form of imported “Indian corn” from America but not nearly enough was purchased to replace the lost potato crop. Furthermore, the British government insisted on payment at a wholesale rate rather than distributing the corn for free. Other complications included the intensive processing that was required in order to make the corn edible. The corn had to be ground,

⁶⁹ Edward G. Lengel. “The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era.” (Westport, London: Praeger, 2002) 61

⁷⁰ Edward G. Lengel. “The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era.” (Westport, London: Praeger, 2002) 62

⁷¹ Hansard Parliamentary Debates. H.L. Deb 26 May 1843 vol 69 cc 923-38 923

soaked, and boiled for hours before it was suitable for consumption. This was an unrealistic expectation for a starving population, many of whom ate ill-prepared corn and became sick as a result.⁷² More importantly, while some Irish did benefit from the importation of Indian corn, it was only those who had the means to pay for it and not nearly enough had been imported to satisfy the need.

The second measure implemented under the Peel administration was a public works project. This measure was adopted in March of 1846 and was intended to provide employment to the Irish in the form of road, canal and bridge building. In theory this would provide a wage which would allow for the purchase of food from Irish merchants. Once again, the government refused to shoulder the full costs of this project and insisted that it would be paid for, in part, by local taxation.⁷³ This was an unrealistic request on several accounts. Although there are written records that attest to the Irish people's willingness to work, it seems reasonable to assume that few Irish bodies would have been strong enough to do hard physical labor after surviving months without a reliable source of food. Secondly, there was little or no money to be collected at a local level in the aftermath of the crop failure and aid from treasury grants was insufficient. By the end of the summer of 1846, the public works initiative had nearly failed.

The last relief initiative that Peel supported was the repeal of the Corn Laws. The Corn Laws had been enacted in 1815 as a tax on British domestic grain to protect British landowners—particularly those who grew grain—from the sudden influx of cheap imported grain from other European countries that had become available due to the end of the

⁷² Margaret E. Crawford. "Food and Famine" *The Great Irish Famine* ed. Cathal Poirteir (Cork, Dublin: Mercier Press, 1995) 63, 64

⁷³ Edward G. Lengel. "The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era." (Westport, London: Praeger, 2002) 62

Napoleonic wars in 1815 which had previously prevented the influx of many European imports.⁷⁴ The repeal of the Corn Laws divided the Tory party and found far more support from the Whigs who were united in their faith in the free market. While the repeal of the Corn laws, which Peel had promoted for three years prior to the famine, was more desirable than their continuation, it hardly provided aid; instead, the repeal simply lowered the price of British grain for a starving population that had no purchasing power.

When the Whig administration of John Russell succeeded Peel in the second year of the famine, he did so with the aim to “Bind the Irish people to the Union through conciliatory legislation while at the same time reducing the social gulf by making landlords responsible for the relief an employment of their own poor.”⁷⁵ The end result of the legislation that passed while Russell was in office was a public works bill, in the style of the 1822 famine relief, that required starving bodies to do hard physical labor in return for wages rather than food. It is important to note that the recipient of wages was not necessarily guaranteed access to food because, keeping with the principle of non-interference, prices continued to rise at such a rate that the government found it impossible to keep up.⁷⁶

The second attempt at relief under Russell’s administration, came from the repeal of the Navigation Acts which had prevented foreign ships that brought aid from docking on British shores. Instead, goods had to be transferred onto a British vessel which could then dock and unload goods, in effect, slowing the process of delivery dramatically. By

⁷⁴ Stuart Macdonald, “Agricultural Response to a Changing Market during the Napoleonic Wars” *The Economic History Review* vol. 33, no. 1 (Feb., 1980), pp. 59-60

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2595544>

⁷⁵ Edward G. Lengel. “The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era.” (Westport, London: Praeger, 2002) 67

⁷⁶ Edward G. Lengel. “The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era.” (Westport, London: Praeger, 2002) 73

repealing the Navigation Acts, foreign ships were able to deliver relief goods to famine victims more quickly.

Perhaps the most effective, although still inadequate, measure that was adopted was the Relief of Destitute Persons (Ireland) Act. Under this act, the government advanced money to landlords who then built soup kitchens, the cost of which they would be required to pay back to the government. This act was set to expire as soon as the final measure passed which was the Extension Act of the Poor Law.

The Extension Act, more than anything, was an acceptance of mass starvation and, perhaps, an attempt to consolidate the land that was becoming available. The bill temporarily allowed for the distribution of outdoor relief but, once again, the relief was expected to be provided from local taxes. In light of the utter devastation, the taxes collected were few if any. The most controversial section of the Act was the Quarter Acre clause which stated that anyone who occupied a quarter acre of land or more was ineligible to receive relief inside or outside of the workhouse. As a result, many “surrendered” their land.⁷⁷ This act signaled the winding down of British aid altogether. By the summer of 1847, the government declared that the famine had ended, though it was clear that widespread suffering remained.⁷⁸

Edward G Lengel has argued that the influence of laissez faire economics has been continually over-emphasized; however, this “over emphasis” may reflect the frequency with which this economic perspective is touted in parliamentary debates, Newspaper articles, and publications that arose in the years before and during the Irish

⁷⁷ Christine Kinealy. “The Role of the Poor Law During the Famine” in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Poirteir (Cork and Dublin: Mercier Press, 1995), 115-116

⁷⁸ Edward G. Lengel. “The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era.” (Westport, London: Praeger, 2002) 73, 78, 82

famine of 1845. From these publications, the most prominent themes that emerge are laissez-faire economics and Providentialism. Assistant to the Secretary of Treasury, Charles Trevelyan, distributed one of the most prolific and widely accepted publications in the form of a pamphlet titled *The Irish Crisis*, which begins with the declaration

Unless we are much deceived, posterity will trace up to that famine the commencement of a salutary revolution in the habits of a nation, long singularly unfortunate, and will acknowledge that on this, as on many other occasions, supreme Wisdom has educed permanent good out of transient evil.⁷⁹

Trevelyan goes on to highlight the small victories that were realized during the famine, namely the aversion of market interference. In relation to the importation of Indian corn he comments “The highest praise to which these great operations are entitled, is that they were carried through without any sensible disturbance of trade and even gave new life and development to it.”⁸⁰ The rest of the book can be seen as a repeated synthesis of these two ideas in different historical and cultural settings. While Trevelyan’s book wasn’t published until 1848, the affects of famine and the process of recovery were still creating significant hardships in Ireland. The positive reception of Trevelyan’s rhetoric can be better understood after reading the statement of a parliamentary member in 1848 who complained that

The ministers were acting on the politics–economic theories–of others and not exerting their own minds on the subject. He had reason to believe they were acting on the theories of Mr. Trevelyan, which were inimical to Irish interests⁸¹

Conclusion

⁷⁹ Charles Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis* (London: Reprinted from the Edinburgh Review, 1848), 1

⁸⁰ Charles Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis* (London: Reprinted from the Edinburgh Review, 1848), 77

⁸¹ Edward G. Lengel. “The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era.” (Westport, London: Praeger, 2002) 69

When the famine of 1845 struck, disease spread quickly among hunger weakened bodies living in overcrowded and unsanitary spaces. The British state fully recognized the devastation wrought by blight but approached the threat of famine passively in accordance with Malthus's notion that famine was a natural check on population that would primarily affect the least desirable bodies in society. While it is absolutely evident that there were dissenters in parliament who pleaded for greater assistance and fractured opinions within each party, the majority vote most often placed the economic model of non-interference above the importance of relief. Nicholas Mansergh suggested that "The British government was passive simply because...the peasant was viewed by the philosophy of that time as an incubus on society, his survival as a barrier to social and economic progress."⁸²

The potential for Britain to gain in the aftermath of the mass starvation that killed and displaced over 2 million people, should not be overlooked and the realization of those gains through removal of land and through "the 'drawing off' of unproductive life and redundant labor"⁸³ can be seen as a policy that Geographer David Harvey has called "accumulation by dispossession."⁸⁴ Consolidation of land became possible due to death, emigration, and entrance into the Irish workhouses which required the forfeiture of land holdings. In this long process, the Irish, like other colonial subjects, lost all control over their bodies, the space that they lived in, their means of production, the ability to provide themselves with food. It was in this context that the Irish became easier to criticize as

⁸² Nicholas Mansergh, *The Irish Question* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1975), 62

⁸³ David Nally. "That Coming Storm': The Irish Poor Law, Colonial Biopolitics, and the Great Famine" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 98, no. 3 (September 2008), 733

⁸⁴ Quoted in David Nally. "That Coming Storm': The Irish Poor Law, Colonial Biopolitics, and the Great Famine" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 98, no. 3 (September 2008), 733

racially inferior and predestined for extinction which, in the minds of the British, further justified the process of dispossession as a way of capitalizing on new opportunities for a growing English population.

The near inevitability that the British would fail to provide meaningful assistance to the Irish during the famine of 1845 becomes clear when the economic, religious, and race theories of the nineteenth century are understood. A meaningful response to famine conditions in Ireland would have translated into a total rejection of the of the ideas and philosophies that made up the dominate English worldview in the nineteenth century. A dogmatic adherence to this worldview provided a consistent narrative of British superiority that, in turn, justified the subjugation and neglect of the Irish.

References

- Altick, Richard D. *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1973).
- Borch, Karl "Economics and Game Theory" *The Swedish Journal of Economics* vol. 69, no. 4 (Dec. 1967) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3439376>.
- Braa, Dean "The Great Potato Famine and the Transformation of Irish Peasant Society," *Science and Society*, vol. 61, no. 2, (Summer 1997). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40403619>.
- Burke, Helen. *The People and the Poor Law in 19th Century Ireland* (West Sussex, EN: Women's Education Bureau, 1987)
- Chartres, J.A. "Market Integration and Agricultural Output in Seventeenth-, Eighteenth-, and Early Nineteenth-Century England" *The Agricultural History Review* vol. 43, no. 2 (1995) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4027544129>
- Crawford, Margaret E. "Food and Famine" in *The Great Irish Famine* ed. Cathal Poirteir (Cork, Dublin: Mercier Press. 1995)
- Durbach, Nadja. *Spectacle of Deformity* (University of California Press: Berkeley CA, 2010).
- Evans, Richard J. "Epidemics and Revolutions: Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Europe" *Past & Present* no.120 (Aug., 1988). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650924>.
- Glick, Thomas F. "The Anthropology of Race across the Darwinian Revolution." ed. by Henrika Kuklick. *A New history of Anthropology* (Blackwell Publishing: MA, 2008).
- Grey, Peter. *Famine Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society 1843-50* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999).
- Gullickson, Gay L. "Agriculture and Cottage Industry: Redefining the Causes of Proto-Industrialization" *The Journal of Economic History* vol. 43, no. 4 (Dec., 1983). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2121051>
- Hansard Parliamentary Debates.
- Hazelkorn, Ellen "'Capital' and the Irish Question." *Science & Society* vol. 44, no. 3 (Fall, 1980). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4040226>.
- Kinealy, Christine. "The Role of the Poor Law During the Famine" in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Poirteir (Cork and Dublin: Mercier Press, 1995).
- Lengel, Edward G. "The Irish Through British Eyes: Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era." (Westport, London: Praeger. 2002).
- Macdonald, Stuart. "Agricultural Response to a Changing Market during the Napoleonic Wars" *The Economic History Review* vol. 33, no. 1 (Feb., 1980). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2595544>.

Malthus, Thomas. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, (Google Scholar: Electronic Scholarly Publishing project, 1998) [original 1798].

Mansergh, Nicholas *The Irish Question* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1975.)

Nally, David "That Coming Storm: The Irish Poor Law, Colonial Biopolitics, and the Great Famine" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 98, no. 3 (September 2008).

Smith, Adam. *The Wealth of Nations* eds. Edwin Cannan, Max Lerner (New York: Random House, 1937). [original 1776].

The Times. Letter to the Editor, "Efforts Of Dependence Upon The Potato Crop," 1 September 1846, *The Great Irish Famine of 1845-1846. A collection of leading articles, letters, and parliamentary and other public statements, reprinted from The Times.* (British Library: 2011), [original 1880] 14

Thompson, E. P. *The Making of the Working class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963).

Trevelyan, Charles "The Irish Crisis" (London: Reprinted from the *Edinburgh Review*, 1848)

Whelan, Kevin "Pre and Post-Famine Landscape Change" in *The Great Irish Famine.* ed. Cathal Poirteir (Cork, Dublin: Mercier Press. 1995).

Winship, Michael P. *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Enlightenment.* (John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore. 1996.)

AS | SOUTHWORTH

100% Cotton Fiber

Name of Candidate: Cynthia Pettigrew

Birth date: October 15, 1982

Birth place: Douglasville, Georgia

Address: 2848 Corrigan Drive
Deltona, FL 32738