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PERSPECTIVES ON THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE

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Perspectives on the Great Irish Famine

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Abstract

This overview of the Great Irish Famine is unfolded in terms of the three major phases of British government policy. The understanding of poverty underlying the paper is in terms of diet, not income per capita, housing or literacy, or any of the other more conventional measures in use by historians of the Famine. The claim is that reliance on a diet consisting almost exclusively of the cheapest foodstuff (potatoes) is both the definition of and the principal measure of poverty in pre-Famine Irish society. There is some emphasis on class conflict, both in its overt and its latent forms, as a constraint on the redistribution of income and food in the face of a massive crisis. A.K. Sen's entitlements thesis on the causes of famine is held to have limited usefulness for the study of the Irish Famine, and there is a renewed emphasis on the *absolute* shortfall in domestic food production ('food availability decline') in the later 1840s. Ever so briefly, attention is drawn to lives saved as well as lives lost.

Keywords: Great Irish Famine, poverty, entitlements, government policy.

JEL Classification: I38, N43, N53, Q18.

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The population of this parish at the commencement of last year was near 12,000, it is now reduced to 9,860 persons – 478 died of famine and its immediate consequences since the 1st of October 1846. There are at present 138 families suffering from fever. The great bulk of the people hold very little land, which is of inferior quality; it barely supplied potatoes in past years, and now that the potato crop is gone the poor are in the greatest distress. I find that 129 families were obliged to desert their little holdings and cabins. There are at present 470 families, consisting of 2,246 persons, in extreme want, living on turnips and a little Indian meal; no language can describe the miserable condition of the most of them... No private charities can meet the crisis. If the government do not give immediate and extensive employment the people will be lost.

Denis Tighe, Parish Priest, Ballaghaderreen, Nov. 1847¹

Prelude

It was the summer of 1845, the weather not very different from the usual pattern of intermittent rain, sunshine and seasonal temperatures. Thoughts were turning naturally enough towards prospects for the harvest, the vital bounty of grain and potatoes that sustained the Irish people. The signs were good and expectations high after some poor harvests earlier in the decade. Beyond the horizon but unknown to the eight and a half million inhabitants of the island, invading forces, this time in the biosphere, were gathering strength. Two years earlier a mysterious disease had ravaged potato crops in North America. From there transatlantic traffic carried the disease to Europe. Geography was no barrier. By the early summer of 1845 the infection had reached Belgium and some other parts of continental Europe. With remarkable rapidity the disease crossed the Channel. By August 1845 it was debilitating potato crops in the south of England. The following month it had reached parts of eastern Ireland. From Waterford and Wexford there were alarming newspaper reports of a pestilence, as yet unnamed, attacking the potato fields. The nauseous stench of decay marked the progress of the disease. The leaves on potato stalks were turning black and the infection was spreading in all directions. By mid-October there were authoritative voices expressing alarm from the western regions of Ireland, though the correspondent of the *Freeman's*

¹ *Death Census*, return by Revd Denis Tighe, P.P. of Ballaghaderreen (Ballaghaderreen), published 17 November 1847. This parish is in the west of Ireland, on the Mayo-Roscommon border.

Journal feared that the threat of ‘the plague’ was not yet fully appreciated by the common people:²

In fact, the labourers will dig out tubers affected by the rot in its incipient stages and not be aware of the presence of the disease. Yet in a short space of time – perhaps not over four-and-twenty hours – those potatoes, so recently healthy looking, will be found rotten to their very centre.

He was right. When the tubers were dug they were indeed found to be worthless. The people’s food was putrefying before their despairing eyes. The Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, was ‘advised of an imminent crisis’.³ A scientific commission set up by the government failed to isolate the cause. It was many more years before the terrifying affliction was identified as an air-borne fungal disease, *Phytophthora infestans*. Disease-carrying spores were carried by the prevailing winds across the countryside. Not until the 1880s was an effective antidote discovered.

Because the potato blight struck late in the growing season of 1845 the shortfall in the yield was of the order of a quarter to one-third. This was still a large loss but was manageable because potatoes were also fed to pigs and poultry and so could be diverted to human consumption. Moreover, the geography of spread meant that eastern rather than the poorer western regions of the island were most affected. Few died during the succeeding nine months. The following summer blight struck again with fearsome consequences. The bulk of the potato crop, perhaps 80-90%, was destroyed. Signs of distress that were soon to become familiar followed in quick succession. By the autumn of 1846 the workhouses were filling, a panic-stricken exodus out of Ireland was underway, while famine fevers were exacting a heavy toll on the Irish poor. Blight was absent in Black ’47 but the produce was miserably small. In desperation, many of the rural poor had already consumed their seed potatoes so the acreage sown was well below the 2.5 million acres normally sown.⁴ Moreover, typhus fever, long endemic in Ireland, struck Ireland harder than the neighbouring island. Hordes of hungry and

² *Freemans’ Journal*, 18 October 1845.

³ The dramatic, unfolding events are described in detail by Helen E. Hatton, *The Largest Amount of Good: Quaker Relief in Ireland, 1654-1921* (Kingston, ON, 1993), passim (quotation at p. 79).

⁴ P. M. A. Bourke, ‘The Use of the Potato Crop in Pre-Famine Ireland’, *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, vol.21, part 6 (1967-68), pp.72-96.

infected people roamed the countryside in search of alms, some heading for the towns and ports. Others too weak to move huddled in their one-roomed cabins, debilitated and demoralised, standards of cleanliness abandoned, living and sleeping in filthy clothing. Overcrowding, poor hygiene and weakened constitutions proved ideal for the spread of typhus and other diseases. The death toll soared, as was the case also in overcrowded and poorly-managed workhouses.⁵ Emigration, which had been an increasingly important component of pre-Famine demography, now assumed exodus proportions.⁶ The Great Famine gave rise to a Great Emigration.

Not all social groups suffered equally. In the Famine literature the tradition has been to emphasise the classic conflict between landlords and their agents on the one hand and tenant farmers on the other, rather than consider inequality and class conflict more generally.⁷ This simple dichotomy tends to neglect the many gradations of status within the farming class and to obscure also the conflict of interest between labour-employing farmers and the cottiers and labourers working on their farms. How out of touch, or how indifferent some of the propertied and professional sections of society might be can be glimpsed through the window of the general election of July-August 1847. One might have expected the crisis facing the rural poor in a largely agrarian society to dominate that election campaign, if not in Britain at least in Ireland. With a few exceptions, this was not the case.⁸ Irish politicians, in the main, adopted the class-bound assumption that the worst was past and gave prominence to other issues. This turned out to be a false hope, and a cruel one at that. Though blight was absent, the produce of potatoes was small. The blight returned the following year and there were further, though more localised failures in 1849 and 1850.

Abnormally also, the economic and demographic consequences rolled on for a century or more (Figure 1.1). Unlike pre-industrial famines or famines generally, there

⁵ Lewis Darwen, Donald M. MacRaild, Brian Gurrin and Liam Kennedy, “‘Irish fever’ in Britain during the Great Famine: immigration, disease and the legacy of Black ’47”, *Irish Historical Studies* 44, no. 166 (2020), pp. 270-294

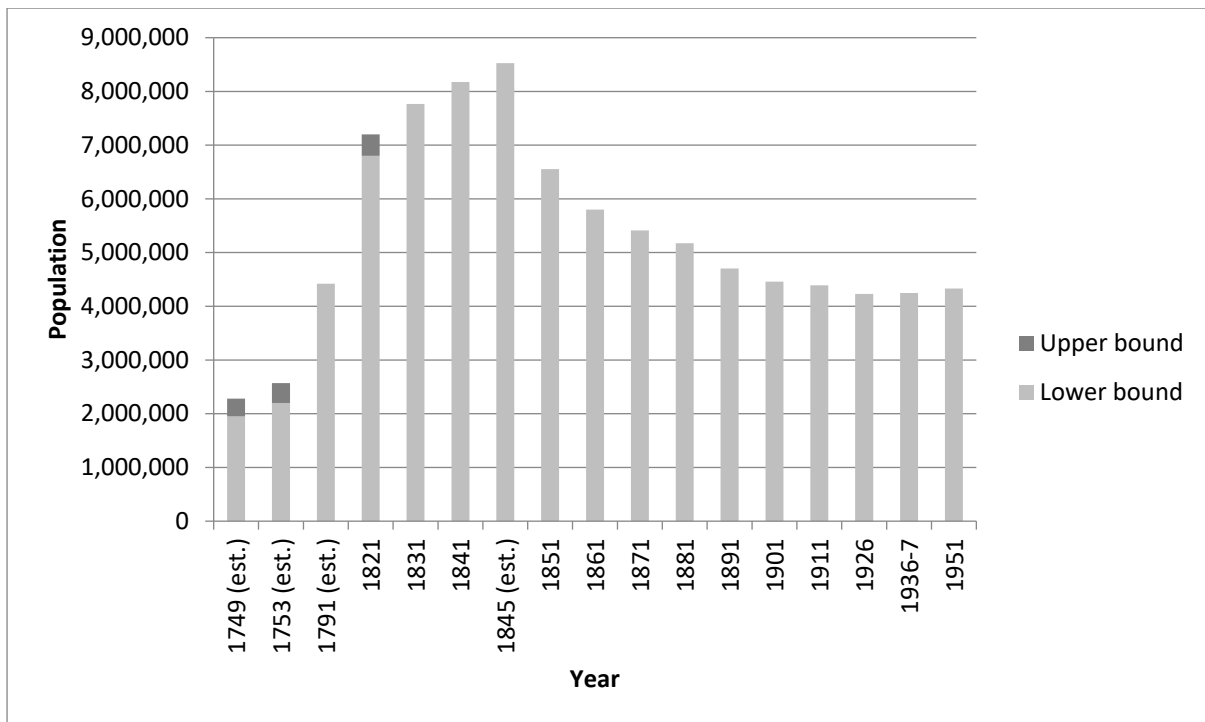
⁶ Roughly a million Irish emigrated between 1846 and 1851. See W.E. Vaughan, *Irish Historical Statistics: Population, 1821-1971* (Dublin, 1978), pp. 260-61.

⁷ Margu rite Corporaal and Peter Gray eds., *The Great Irish Famine and Social Class: Conflicts, Responsibilities, Representations* (Oxford, 2019), p. 7.

⁸ Brian Walker, ‘Politicians, Elections and Catastrophe: The General Election of 1847’, *Irish Political Studies*, 42, no. 1 (2007), pp. 1-34.

was no bounce back in population in the aftermath of the crisis. Some have conferred the title of the ‘last great subsistence crisis in the western world’ on the Irish Famine, perhaps overlooking the Finnish famines of the 1860s.⁹ Famines in twentieth-century Europe were largely the product of warfare, though harvest shortfalls as in the Ukraine in the 1930s might also shape the death toll.¹⁰ In a sense it was fortunate that the Irish Famine took place in times of peace. Strikingly, this did not of itself prevent an extraordinary loss of life, a fact that serves to point up the failure of famine relief policies.

Figure 1.1. Population of Ireland, 1749 – 1951



Source: Estimates for 1749-1791 from D. Dickson, C. Ó Gráda and S. Daultrey, ‘Hearth tax, household size and Irish population change, 1672-1821’, *Proceedings of Royal Irish Academy*, 82, C, p. 156 (upper and lower bound estimates given); census figures for 1821-1951 from W. E. Vaughan and A. J. Fitzpatrick, *Irish historical statistics: population, 1821-1971* (Dublin, 1978), p.3; 1821 upper bound estimate from J. Lee, ‘On the accuracy of pre-Famine Irish censuses’ in J. M. Goldstrom and L. A. Clarkson eds., *Irish population, economy, and society* (Oxford, 1981), p. 46.

⁹ Declan Curran, Lumomyr Luciuk and Andrew G. Newby (eds.) *Famines in European Economic History: The Last Great European Famines Reconsidered* (Oxford, 2015).

¹⁰ Omelian Rudnytskyi, Nataliia Levchuk, Oleh Wolowyna, Pavlo Shevchuk and Alla Kovbasiuk, ‘Demography of a Man-Made Human Catastrophe: the case of massive famine in Ukraine 1932-1933’, *Canadian Studies in Population* 42, no. 1-2 (2015), 53-80.

Population Explosion

It is difficult to understand Ireland's vulnerability to repeated harvest failure without considering population growth during the century before the Famine. The multiplication of mouths was the fastest in Europe. Between the 1740s and the end of that century the population of the country doubled, and it had nearly doubled again by the eve of the Famine.¹¹ How extraordinary this was becomes clearer when viewed in comparative perspective. The rate of population growth in the century before the Famine was 1.3 per cent per year in Ireland, 1.0 per cent in England, 0.7 per cent in Sweden, and 0.8 per cent in Scotland.¹² France was remarkably low at 0.4 per cent per annum (though even a low rate of growth operating over a hundred years builds cumulatively to a substantial growth in population).¹³ Those reproducing most rapidly were the poorer social groups. Consequently, the social structure became more unbalanced as the poor expanded relative to the middling and better-off sections of society. Population pushed out onto the bogs and up the sides of mountains. In sheltered coastal districts along the Atlantic seaboard, including the offshore islands, families reproduced seemingly without constraint.

Hand in hand with population expansion went profoundly negative dietary changes. The food of the rural poor narrowed until it was largely potatoes three times a day, with a sup of buttermilk at times. In the better-off regions of Leinster and in east Ulster bread, oatmeal, milk supplemented the ubiquitous tuber. When the potato failed, widespread destitution was inevitable. The workhouse, the emigrant ship and, in extremis, the graveyard beckoned.

It is true potato-based dietary cultures could support very high population densities. Whether the widespread adoption of the potato, in place of cereals and dairy produce as in earlier centuries in Ireland, was the cause or consequence of the rapid population increase, is still an open question. It may make more sense to see the answer as a two-way simultaneous relationship, the one reinforcing the other in an ultimately

¹¹David Dickson, Cormac Ó Gráda and Stuart Daultrey, 'Hearth tax, Household Size and Irish Population Change, 1672-1821', *Proceedings of Royal Irish Academy*, 82, C (1982), pp. 125-60, 162-81, table 6b, p.156.

¹²To give a sense of proportion, a growth rate of 1.3% per annum would produce a doubling of population every half century (or, to be precise, every 54 years).

¹³Joel Mokyr and Cormac Ó Gráda, 'New Developments in Irish Population History, 1700-1850', *Economic History Review*, 37, no.4 (1984), p. 476.

unsustainable population spiral. Modern research suggests that the prolific tuber, like rice, was a more efficient source of carbohydrates than costly alternatives such as cereals, not to mention high-protein livestock products that required large acreages of land.¹⁴ The distinguishing property of the potato was that it was an almost complete food. Taken in sufficient quantities with some skimmed milk, it satisfied virtually all of the protein, carbohydrate, vitamin and mineral needs of human life.¹⁵ Little wonder that Irish labourers were noted for their height and physical strength. Maize is deficient by comparison, something that became apparent following massive importations and consumption of that foodstuff during the Famine itself.¹⁶

For all its miracle properties, the potato had its drawbacks. While the potato was a nutritious food, its keeping quality was limited to eight or nine months of the year. Unlike cereals, it was not possible to carry over stocks from one year to the next, thereby evening out consumption or insuring against a bad harvest. Even in good years, the rural poor suffered several hungry months between the rotting of the old potatoes and the arrival of the new crop. Oatmeal, milk, fish (in coastal and riverside locations), and large-scale begging helped fill the ‘hungry gap’ between late spring and early summer. Potatoes were the cheapest food available, hence their widespread adoption. It did mean, however, that people could not trade down to a cheaper foodstuff should the potato fail. Also reflecting poverty, the type of potato that was gaining ground in the decades before the Famine was the high-yielding but less nutritious and disease-prone lumper variety. Finally, though hidden from view until disaster struck, the physio-chemical make-up of the potato plant made it susceptible to almost total wipeout from fungal attack, at least of the type represented by *phytophthora infestans*.

¹⁴ P.M.A. Bourke, *‘The Visitation of God’: The Potato and the Great Irish Famine* (Dublin, 1993); M. O. Cooper and W. J. Spillman, ‘Human food from an Acre of Staple Farm Products’, *Farmers’ Bulletin*, US Department of Agriculture, Office of the Secretary (Washington DC, 1917), p. 4.

¹⁵ K. H. Connell, *The population of Ireland, 1750-1845* (Oxford, 1950); Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁶ E. Margaret Crawford, ‘Subsistence Crises and Famines in Ireland: A Nutritionist’s View’, in E. Margaret Crawford ed., *Famine: The Irish Experience, 900-1900* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 211-14.

The paradox of poverty and potatoes

Average income on the eve of the Famine was less than half the British level.¹⁷ Poverty rather than potatoes was the Irish problem, though of course poverty was intimately associated with dependence on the potato crop. It strains credulity to believe that country people would submit willingly to the monotony of so narrow a diet, and a vegetarian one at that, *unless* under the pressure of poverty. As we know, those farther up the social scale from the rural poor commanded a more diversified diet that included tea, sugar, bread, dairy produce and, depending on circumstances, sometimes meat.¹⁸ Thus it is hard to accept the judgement of one historian of Ireland who suggests that ‘the peculiar basket of consumer goods consumed in Ireland’ may have arisen simply because the Irish preferred a different consumption pattern to people in other societies.¹⁹ If so, it is hard to explain why, when labourers’ incomes rose in the post-Famine period, they chose to spend their wage gains on a more diversified diet.²⁰ We may conclude that a consumption bundle dominated by a single foodstuff arose, not from some remarkable Irish preference for potatoes, but from poverty. Reliance on a diet consisting almost exclusively of the cheapest foodstuff available is both the definition of and the principal measure of poverty in pre-Famine Irish society.²¹

The fragile eco-system of pre-Famine Ireland was the product of a distinctive social system that had been in the making for a century or more. By the eve of the Famine about a quarter of the rural population out of a population of 8.5 million was landless and potato-dependent.²² Another quarter – cottiers, very small farmers, trades people, fishermen – were not far removed above the margin of subsistence set by the landless proletariat. This was a bottom-heavy, highly unequal social structure. Completing the social pyramid there were the middling-sized farmers employing

¹⁷ Joel Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850* (London, 1985), pp. 24-29, 274.

¹⁸ L.M. Cullen, *An Economic History of Ireland since 1660* (London, 1972), pp. 116-7. Note also the richly varied diet of Franciscan clergy in the ‘hungry’ 1840s as documented in Liam Kennedy and Clare Murphy eds., *The Franciscan Community at Cork, and its Account Books* (Dublin, 2012).

¹⁹ Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved*, p. 8.

²⁰ L.A. Clarkson and Margaret Crawford, *Feast and Famine: A History of Food in Ireland, 1500-1920* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 89-110.

²¹ Some historians, particularly econometric historians, use more conventional measures such as income per capita, acreage of potatoes per capita, housing quality or literacy, presumably because these are more readily quantifiable. While useful in some respects, this runs the danger of missing the big story.

²² Bourke, ‘Use of the Potato Crop in Pre-Famine Ireland’, pp.72-96.

labour, then the even less numerous large farmers, merchants and professionals, and at the apex the landlord class. The landowning elite was composed of about 10,000 families, thinly spread and rich in land, though frequently mired in debt. This landed gentry accounted for less than one per cent of the people. In summary, this was a highly unequal, largely agrarian society in which at least 40% of the people were heavily dependent on the potato for sustenance.

An escape from mass poverty required a higher productivity agriculture, modern industrialisation, and in all likelihood broader emigration in terms of social class and region. All that would take time and, as it turned out, the hour glass was almost empty by 1845. Outside of east Ulster, modern industry had made little progress. Worse still, rural industry, particularly in hand-crafted woollen and linen textiles, was in retreat under intense competitive pressure from cheaper, factory-produced goods. The age of the industrial revolution was transforming production and distribution; and in the process, destroying traditional methods of production, not just in Ireland but in rural Europe more generally. With some exaggeration, the doyen of Irish economic historians, L.M. Cullen, has written: ‘The background to the Famine, through the crisis in domestic industry, is as much an industrial as an agrarian one’.²³

Not all was gloomy in terms of longer-term forces for change. The gradual modernisation and commercialization of Irish society, particularly in the hinterland of large towns and port cities, as well as on the larger farms, was noticeable. Markets, communications, transport links, even literacy were improving. Rising food and textile exports signified an increasingly open, market-oriented society. Modern industry was putting down roots in the Lagan Valley, though at the cost of displacing the hand-spinning of linen yarn in outer Ulster and north Connacht. Of fundamental importance, this was a society struggling through emigration, and reduced fertility in some regions of eastern Ireland, to achieve a more sustainable relationship between population and its resource base. And as previous subsistence crises had shown, this was also a society capable of absorbing a ‘normal’ or more traditional harvest failure without heavy

²³ Cullen, *Economic History of Ireland*, p.121.

casualties. This argues against a simple Malthusian interpretation of the check to Irish population in the 1840s.

Shaping the Crisis

The conjuncture of short-run forces and contingent events, acting and reacting on the structural weaknesses of pre-Famine society, combined to produce a tragedy of almost unimaginable proportions. This is not the place to sketch these forces in detail, but they may be summarised as follows: In the economic sphere there were simultaneous harvest failures in other European countries in the late summer of 1846²⁴ (thereby pushing up prices and reducing flows of grain between countries), financial panics in Britain in April and October 1847 which adversely influenced Famine policy, and a recession in the British economy with rising unemployment and misery afflicting the British working classes in 1846-47. The cumulative effect was to limit financial transfers to Ireland and to reduce sympathy among the British public. In the political sphere a Whig administration, under the weak leadership of Lord John Russell, came to power at Westminster after the repeal of the Corn Laws in June 1846 and was responsible for Famine policy for the duration of the crisis. This was a minority government that found itself under pressure to reduce public expenditure on Ireland and unable to force through reforms that might alleviate the worst effects of the crisis.²⁵

The ideological climate of the time was anything but helpful. For some, the ‘laws’ of political economy were reflections of divine law and should not be interfered with, even in the face of a rapidly escalating crisis.²⁶ Providentialist notions of this kind, allied to economic doctrines that extolled the virtues of limiting the role of the state in society and relying on the market to meet people’s needs, militated against more ambitious interventions by the central state.²⁷ Such belief systems, which might be loosely placed under the heading of *laissez faire*, served for some as a useful cloak for economic and political interests. In retrospect, one can say that problems in the real

²⁴ Peter M. Solar, ‘The Potato Famine in Europe’ in Cormac Ó Gráda ed., *Famine 150* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 113-27.

²⁵ Peter Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society 1843-50* (Dublin, 1999), pp. 194-6.

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 15-16.

²⁷ Enda Delaney, *The Curse of Reason: The Great Irish Famine* (Dublin, 2012), 227-35.

economy of the UK, the delicate balance of power at Westminster, and ideological forces all helped to shape the evolution of the crisis.

Unhelpfully also, the Irish members of parliament failed to unite round a set of proposals that might have influenced government thinking in more constructive directions. The largest faction, the Repeal party of Irish MPs led by the aged and ailing Daniel O’Connell clouded the problem of the moment – a famine of Biblical proportions – by its insistence, not only on relief but on the panacea of repeal of the Act of Union and the return of an Irish parliament in College Green, Dublin. The Repealers opposition to the extension of income tax to Ireland confirmed for many in Britain the selfishness of the propertied classes in Ireland (though they might counter that property rates in Ireland were exceptionally high because of the financial burdens of the Irish poor-law system).²⁸

In the administrative sphere there were limitations from the past. In dealing with prospective famine, employment on public works was an established part of the repertoire of state intervention but never on the scale forced into operation in 1846.²⁹ Additional misfortune dogged the relief efforts. The winter of 1846-47 was one of the most severe on record, with reports of blocks of ice floating on the river Thames.³⁰ Winter gales and snow blizzards lashed the hordes of ill-clad, malnourished workers labouring on famine relief works. These pitiful scenes opened the way to the ravages of infectious diseases, principally typhus, typhoid and dysentery. These rather than outright starvation were the major killers during the Famine, but the prior cycle of hunger, filth and demoralization laid waste resistance to their lethal effects.

Government policy during the crisis: The First Phase, 1845-46

The Death Census, a source which consists of one hundred eye-witness accounts from Catholic parishes in Ireland in 1847, is especially revealing of popular attitudes to

²⁸ Charles Read, *The Great Famine in Ireland and British Financial Crisis* (Martlesham, forthcoming 2022), chapter four.

²⁹ Timothy P. O’Neill, ‘The State, Poverty and Distress in Ireland, 1815-45’ (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University College Dublin, 1971).

³⁰ *The Atlas*, 13 February 1847; *Dublin Evening Mail*, 12 February 1847.

government policy in relation to famine relief.³¹ The respondents are largely thought not exclusively critical. The initial response of the British government was remarkably swift, it has to be said. On hearing of the extent of the potato failure in the autumn of 1845, Prime Minister Robert Peel made secret provision to buy maize to the value of £100,000 from North America.³² The intention was to release this grain onto the market when local supplies of food ran low during the following spring and summer. Government grain stores were concentrated in the poor western regions of Ireland, with some serviced by coastal steamers.

Another standard policy measure to deal with harvest failure was rolling out public work schemes to employ hungry small farmers and labourers. The body responsible, the Board of Works, approved 318 different famine projects before the end of 1845 and many were in operation by the summer of 1846. The poor and the destitute were offered employment working on roads, bridges, drainage schemes and other infrastructural projects. The thinking behind this was that the poor would have to work to gain an entitlement to a wage payment, this in turn would be a test of their need for state support, and money received might then be used to purchase food for themselves and their dependents.

The most radical policy departure, however, was Peel's decision to repeal the Corn Laws. These were tariffs that protected British and indeed Irish cereal growers from imported foreign grain. In the teeth of fierce opposition from landed interests, Peel succeeded in forcing the repeal bill through the House of Commons in May 1846. This controversial move was in part a response to fear of famine in Ireland and Scotland. This reform, in principle, favoured the Irish urban and rural poor at the expense of landlords and tenant farmers by allowing cheaper grain imports into Ireland. However, poor grain harvests across Europe in the autumn of 1845, and poorer still the following autumn, meant that grain as well as potato prices soared in 1846 and 1847.³³ The most immediate impact of the repeal of the Corn Laws was in the political sphere. The

³¹ These little-known reports, which are a major source on the early impact of the Famine, are being published by the authors in 2023.

³² Robin Haines, *Charles Trevelyan and the Great Irish Famine* (Dublin, 2004), pp. viii-x.

³³ J. C. Zadoks, 'The Potato Murrain on the European Continent and the Revolutions of 1848', *Potato Research*, 51, no. 1 (2008), pp 5-45.

Conservative Party split, and Peel's government fell in June 1846. It was succeeded by a minority Whig administration, led by Lord John Russell, that maintained the Peelite policies already in place.

It was apparent by early 1847 that the main policy to combat hunger – employment on public work schemes – was failing to hold back the rising tide of mortality. Unlike earlier subsistence crises, as in 1817, 1822, 1831, 1835 and 1842, this was a national rather than a regional crisis. The difference in scale was enormous. Worse still, the failure of the potato for the second season in a row meant that the public works had to be extended into the harsh winter of 1846-47. Congregating together hordes of famished and ill-clad labourers, small farmers, paupers and others made for ideal conditions for the transmission of disease.

The scheme was also proving to be much more expensive than anticipated. Officials worried about interfering with 'the ordinary operations of private business', feared the 'encouragement of idleness', and above all were concerned about the 'lavish expenditure' on the relief operations.³⁴ The wages paid by the Board of Works were set at local wage levels. In March 1846 the Office of Public Works (OPW) published general guidelines, recommending rates ranging from 10*d.* to 12*d.* per day. This took only partial account of rising food prices. Ever concerned to effect economies, the OPW cautioned 'where infirm persons are employed they will, of course, not be paid at the same rate as the able-bodied'. The Board itself recognised that the non-able-bodied 'poor cannot live on the wages'.³⁵ Other than reliance on charity, for these unfortunates the workhouse attached to each poor-law union was the final refuge. Wages on the public works made no allowance for family size. As against that, families were not restricted to a single representative. Contemporary sources are largely silent on the matter, but women and children were also given employment. The partial figures that survive point to women and children forming a small but significant fraction of the labour force. Moreover, their numbers increased disproportionately as the crisis took hold. In the first week in October 1846, for example, women accounted for about 1 per

³⁴ Treasury minute, 3 April 1846, *Accounts and Papers, House of Commons* (28 vols), xiii (session: 22 January-28 August 1846), p. 291.

³⁵ Instructions for the guidance of engineers, 9 March 1846, *Accounts and Papers, House of Commons* (28 vols), xiii (session: 22 January – 28 August 1846), p. 298. Reduction in wages for the infirm, *ibid.*, p. 299.

cent and ‘boys’ for about 5 per cent of the Board’s 20,000-strong work force. Four weeks later, the numbers had expanded exponentially to 150,000, in itself a remarkable achievement. Women and boys now accounted for almost one in ten of those employed. By the close of 1846, 9,000 women and 28,000 boys were working and the numbers and proportions continued to increase into the following year (Figure 1.1).³⁶

Table 1.1. Average numbers employed on Public Works by gender and age, October 1846 – January 1847

Week ending	Numbers employed (daily)				Proportion of all employed		
	Men	Women	Boys	Total	Men	Women	Boys
3 Oct. 1846	18,864	211	1,060	20,135	93.7%	1.0%	5.3%
17 Oct. 1846	45,929	514	3,466	49,909	92.0%	1.0%	6.9%
7 Nov. 1846	135,700	2,660	11,908	150,268	90.3%	1.8%	7.9%
26 Dec. 1846	329,744	9,129	28,450	367,323	89.8%	2.5%	7.7%
2 Jan. 1847	400,907	11,914	34,450	447,271	89.6%	2.7%	7.7%
9 Jan. 1847	423,643	14,819	37,428	475,890	89.0%	3.1%	7.9%
16 Jan. 1847	451,309	17,651	43,720	512,680	88.0%	3.4%	8.5%
23 Jan. 1847	496,604	22,666	49,879	569,149	87.3%	4.0%	8.8%
30 Jan. 1847	487,730	27,507	56,428	571,665	85.3%	4.8%	9.9%

Source: 1847 (764) *Correspondence, July 1846 to January 1847, relating to measures adopted for relief of distress in Ireland. Board of Works Series, BPP Command Paper, vol.50, l.1, pp 116, 143, 212, 475, 481*; 1847 (797) *Correspondence, January to March 1847 relating to measures adopted for relief of distress in Ireland. Board of Works Series. BPP, Command Papers, vol.52, lii.1, p. 48.*

³⁶ Late returns and employment on drainage schemes are not included.

The standard policy template, dating from Robert Peel's handling of subsistence crises in 1816-18, had a strong seasonal character. Public works were concentrated in the late spring and early summer during slack periods in the farming cycle, and then wound down or discontinued. The Board of Works did in fact cut back on the schemes in the late summer and early autumn of 1846. However, the second successive failure of the potato crop forced its hand. In the face of widespread destitution, and in the absence of other policies, public work schemes had to be ramped up again. More than a third of a million were back on the payroll at the end of 1846. By the first week of March 1847 a record three-quarters of a million people were employed daily on hundreds of state-sponsored schemes across the island. This is a staggering figure, unprecedented in nineteenth-century Ireland. If we take dependents into account, these schemes were aiding more than three million people at the height of the public works (figure 1.2).³⁷

The kinds of criticisms that were made include the slow start to the schemes in some localities, their hasty termination before alternative relief was made available, wage rates that did not take into account the surge in food prices, late payments of wages, and allegations of favouritism and corruption in the allocation of employment. Exceptionally bad weather in the winter of 1846-47 meant exposure to biting winds, sleet and snow. Framed against bleak landscapes, malnourished and poorly-clad gangs of workers struggled to perform manual labour. Many were on piece rates which increased the hardship and discriminated against the weak. Burning up calories through hard labour led to weakened constitutions, leaving workers and indirectly their dependents more vulnerable to infectious diseases.³⁸

The easy option for historians and others is to denounce the organisers and the organisation of the public work schemes, bell, book and candle. However, to expect a quick and timely retreat from tried-and-trusted relief measures during the first year of

³⁷ The 1841 census indicates a mean household size of 5.5. Thus, with five or six persons per household, on average, unless there was widespread employment of two persons per household, support for at least three million seems plausible.

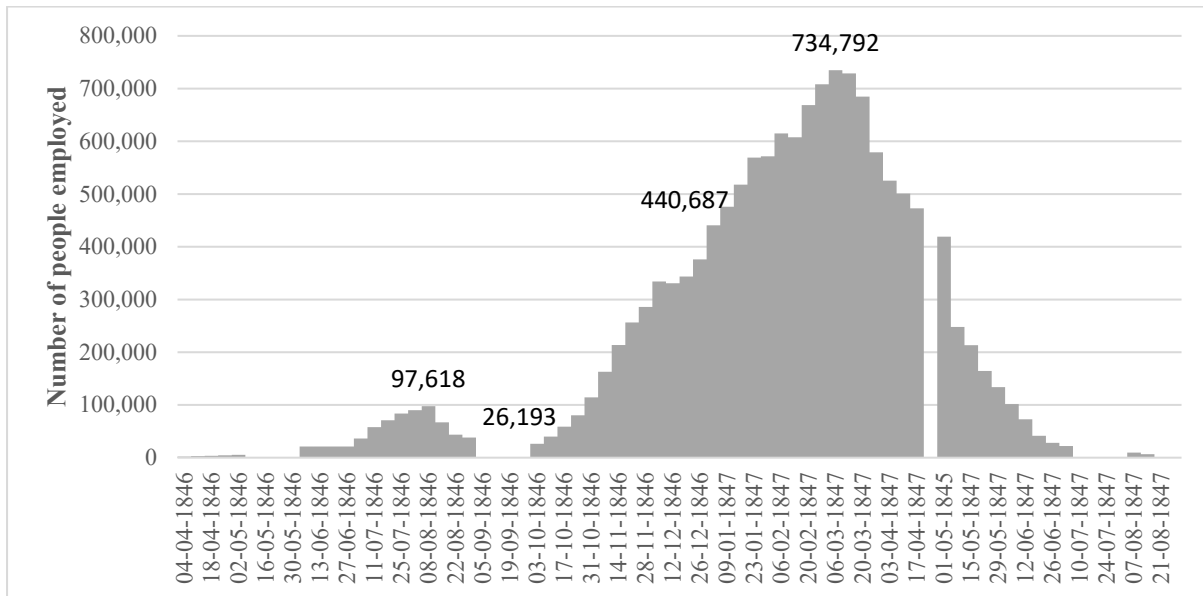
³⁸ An extreme illustration from two decades later is furnished by public works schemes in parts of Finland during the famines of the 1860s where starving men, women and children worked at temperatures of minus 25 degrees. Antti Hakkinen and Henrik Forsberg, 'Finland's Famine Years of the 1860s', in Curran *et al*, ed., *Famines in European Economic History*, p. 111.

severe famine (1846-47) is to assume a degree of responsiveness in political and bureaucratic mindsets not obviously evident in the case of public health calamities in later historical time periods.³⁹ (Famine years are best viewed in terms of farming or harvest years, so we are speaking of roughly October 1846 to the summer of 1847.) We might also recall that there was popular support for these schemes. Indeed, proposals to replace them with free soup rations (discussed in the next section) gave rise to protest and rioting *in favour of work for wages*.⁴⁰ Still, it was evident by the beginning of 1847 that the government had lost control of the crisis and that new famine relief measures were desperately needed. It is to the discredit of British policy makers, the prime-minister Lord John Russell, Charles Wood at the Treasury, Charles Trevelyan as the civil servant primarily responsible for overseeing famine relief, that implementing the switch in policy was delayed until well after the winter of 1846-47.

³⁹ Cases in point might be the flu epidemic following World War 1, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and for some countries the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic of 2020-21. (The famine year in question above is the harvest year, roughly October 1846 to September 1847.)

⁴⁰ Andrés Eriksson, 'Food Supply and Food Riots' in Cormac Ó Gráda ed., *Famine 150* (Dublin, 1997), 67-93; James S. Donnelly jr., *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Stroud, U.K., 2010), pp. 85-89.

Figure 1.2. Average daily employment on Public Works, Ireland, April 1846 -August 1847



Source: 1846 (735) *Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by Her Majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland*, BPP, Command Papers, vol. 37, xxxvii.41, pp. 317, 336, 351 (average daily figures, average figure for June 1846); 1847 (764) *Correspondence from July 1846 to January 1847 relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland. Board of Works Series*, BPP, Command Papers, vol. 50, L.1, pp.80, 195, 344, 486; 1847 (797) *Correspondence from January to March 1847, relating to the measures adopted for the relief of the distress in Ireland. Board of Works series. [Second part.]*, BPP, Command Papers, vol. 52, lii.1, pp 34, 189; 1847 (834, 860) *Public works - Ireland. Report of the Board of Public Works in Ireland, relating to measures adopted for the relief of distress in June, 1847*, BPP, Command Papers, vol.17, 603, xvii, pp 591, 595, 598 603; 1849 (1047) *Public works, Ireland. Final report from the Board of Public Works, Ireland, relating to measures adopted for the relief of distress in July and August, 1847, with appendices*, BPP, Command Papers, vol.23, xxiii.725, p.732.

The Second Phase, Temporary Soup Kitchens, 1847

The public works schemes proved to be not only of limited value in containing the crisis, they were also costly. Rising food prices, domestically and internationally, inflated the famine relief bill. The people of Ireland accounted for almost 30% of the population of the United Kingdom at this time, so the potential drag on the public finances and the British economy more generally was no small matter. In fact, of the £9-£10 million spent by central government on famine relief (worth about a billion sterling in current value), most of this spending was concentrated in the first half of the famine, the year

1846 and the first two-thirds of 1847. Concerns about cost and the state of the economy sparked the change in policy.⁴¹

In February 1847 a Temporary Relief (Soup Kitchen) Act was passed to provide emergency food at hundreds of feeding stations across Ireland. The aim was to phase out work schemes that were failing to arrest famine deaths and replace them with soup kitchens and the free distribution of soup and grain rations.⁴² In making this policy shift the government was mirroring the approach of the Quakers (Society of Friends) who were voluntarily providing soup rations in some of the worst affected areas in the west of Ireland. However, in response to a financial panic in April 1847, the government cut back sharply on anticipated public expenditure. For Ireland this meant the precipitate winding down of the massive public works schemes, sometimes before the new feeding stations had come on stream.

The gigantic scale of direct feeding is all the more remarkable when one considers that certain ideological reservations had to be overcome. The previous October Trevelyan had warned an official at the Office of Public Works in Dublin of the dangers of gratuitous relief, offering the almost surreal piece of advice that the official should read particular pages in Edmund Burke's *Thoughts on Scarcity* (1800).⁴³ Fortunately, such scruples buckled in the face of mounting evidence as to the reality of the crisis. Table 1.2 gives the numbers of those in receipt of relief under the Temporary Relief Act, although for all periods the totals are underestimates as some electoral divisions failed to make returns to the Commission. By the beginning of June 1847

⁴¹ Read, *The Great Famine in Ireland*, chapters four and five. Expenditure by the central government on famine relief, according to Read, was close to £10 million. He also presents the figure of £8.1 million for famine expenditure by local authorities, while philanthropic aid was on the much lower plane of £1-£2 million.

⁴² J. S. Donnelly jr., 'The Soup kitchens', in W. E. Vaughan ed., *New History of Ireland, V: Ireland under the Union, 1801-70* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 272-331.

⁴³ Mr Trevelyan to Lieutenant-Colonel Jones, 14 October 1846; 1847 (764) *Correspondence from July 1846 to January 1847 relating to the measures adopted for the relief of distress in Ireland. Board of Works Series, BPP, Command Papers*, vol. 50, L.1, p.140; Edmund Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (London, 1800), pp. 31, 40-1, 47-8. Equally curiously, at least to modern ears, at the annual meeting of the Catholic Prelates of Ireland in October 1847, the assembled bishops came out against 'gratuitous relief from the government for the numbers of able-bodied men who are without food' on the grounds that 'such gratuitous relief has a demoralising tendency ...'. See *Battersby's Registry for the Whole World, or the Complete Catholic Directory ... for 1848* (Dublin, 1848), p. 240.

more than two million full rations were being distributed daily, but even relief on such a scale was insufficient to stem the rising tide of famine mortality.

The decentralised nature of food relief is worth highlighting. In 1838, less than a decade before the Famine, a poor-law system based on the English model was introduced to Ireland. The country was divided into 130 spatial and administrative units or unions,⁴⁴ each with a workhouse and some medical facilities. The workhouse provided care, under the most austere conditions, for the destitute, the aged and the infirm, and was funded by rates paid by local landlords, tenant farmers and other propertied households.

The new system had taken shape, just about, by the eve of the Famine but it was never designed to deal with subsistence crises, still less famine. Each poor-law union was subdivided into electoral divisions, of which there were 2,049, and these furnished the geographical frame for the deployment of soup kitchens. So, by early July 1847 at least 1,823 of the 2,049 electoral divisions were supplying provisions to 2,343,000 people for free and another 80,000 were catered for at a subsidised charge. Making allowance for some missing returns, it seems a staggering total of 2.6 million full rations were being provided each day, the equivalent of free or subsidised food for 755,00 children and 2,266,000 adults – more than three million people in all, ‘exceeding one-third of the entire population of the country’.⁴⁵ By this time, only four Poor Law Unions, all in the neighbourhood of Belfast and reflecting local pride as well as superior economic circumstance, remained aloof from the Temporary Relief Act.

The soup kitchens were always intended to be temporary. Indeed, legislation limited the life of the scheme.⁴⁶ In line with laissez-faire ideology but responding also to a deterioration in the public finances, Russell’s minority government resolved to shift the balance of responsibility for the crisis from the national to the local level. A long-

⁴⁴ During the Famine some large poor-law unions were sub-divided, for example the Dingle peninsula was hived off from Tralee, to create a more manageable administrative unit. By 1851 there were 163 poor-law unions.

⁴⁵ 1847 (836), *Distress (Ireland). Third report of the Relief Commissioners*, BPP, Command Papers, vol. 17, xvii.103, p. 3; 1847-48 (876) *Distress (Ireland.) Fifth, sixth, and seventh reports of the Relief Commissioners, and correspondence connected therewith*, BPP, Command Papers, vol.29, xxix.27, p.3.

⁴⁶ The Act would remain in operation only until the 1847 harvest, and ‘no warrant shall be issued under this Act, nor shall any grant or loan be made by the Commissioners of Her Majesty’s Treasury in aid of any rate to be levied under this Act, after the First Day of October in this year [1847]’ 1847 (19), *Bill got Temporary Relief of Destitute Persons in Ireland*, BPP, Bills & Acts, I, I.243, p.8.

standing antipathy towards the Irish landlord class on the part of Whig and radical politicians, rather than towards the common people, made the policy shift even more attractive at Westminster.⁴⁷ So, Lord John Russell's government threw the burden of famine relief back on Ireland and its rate payers. With ill-founded optimism the cabinet chose to believe that a 'very abundant' harvest was in the offing in the autumn of 1847.⁴⁸ Henceforth, Irish property rather than central government would be responsible for Irish poverty.⁴⁹

Table 1.2. Numbers in receipt of relief under the Temporary Relief Act, 1847 (various periods)

Date	Electoral divisions			Rations			
	Providing Relief	Returns deficient	Not under Act	Free	Sold	Total	Cost per ration
15 May 1847	1,248	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	
5 June 1847	1,677	312	60	1,923,361	92,326	2,015,687	2 ½ d.
3 July 1847	1,823	166	60	2,342,900	79,636	2,422,536	2 d.
31 July 1847	1,707	283	59	1,845,868	45,839	1,891,707	2 d.
28 Aug. 1847	888	210	951	772,725	9,795	782,520	
11 Sept. 1847	563	60	1,426	400,100	42,639	442,739	

Note: There were 2,049 electoral divisions in Ireland in 1847.

Source: 1847 (819) *Distress (Ireland). Second report of the Relief Commissioners*, British Parliamentary Papers (BPP), Command Papers, vol. 17, xvii.75, p.3; 1847 (836) *Distress (Ireland). Third report of the Relief Commissioners*, BPP, Command Papers, vol.17, xvii.103, p.9; 1847 (859) *Distress (Ireland). Fourth report of the of Relief Commissioners*, BPP, Command Papers, vol. 17, xvii.143, p.3; 1847-48 (876) *Distress (Ireland). Fifth, sixth and seventh reports of the Relief Commissioners, and correspondence connected therewith*, BPP, Command Papers, vol.29, xxix.27, p.3-7.

⁴⁷ This point is often misunderstood by writers who view the tussles over relief policies as mainly expressions of anti-Irish racism or colonial domination. Relatedly, they tend to downplay the variety of contemporary understandings of the role of the state in society, and the constraints these implied, as well as the real-world dilemmas facing policy makers.

⁴⁸ 1847 (859) *Distress (Ireland). Fourth report of the of Relief Commissioners*, BPP, Command Papers, vol. 17, xvii.143, p.3.

⁴⁹ Daly, *Famine in Ireland*, pp. 92-93.

Inevitably with a country-wide scheme, there were difficulties and delays. There was dismay in different parts of Ireland at the rapid winding down of the public works schemes from their peak in the first week of March 1847 when an army of 735,000 workers was on the pay roll. Moreover, as mentioned, in some localities the work schemes were dismantled before the alternative of the direct feeding of the poor was phased in, adding a new twist to the older notion of a hungry gap. There were also complaints about the nutritional quality of the soup and this seems to have varied between localities. The lack of fresh vegetables in the diet led to a further infliction, that of scurvy, arising from vitamin C deficiency.

The achievements of this short-lived famine relief measure should not be gainsaid. A vast network of soup kitchens was created across the country and at its peak in July 1847 some three million rations were being distributed daily. There is no doubt that many lives were saved. Broadly speaking, this distinctive episode in famine relief took centre stage from April 1847 to August of that year. It was a temporary measure and always intended to be so. That is the key criticism. After less than six months in operation, most of the soup stations were phased out in August and September 1847. Russell's minority government, heavily influenced by the apprehensions of Charles Wood, Chancellor of the Exchequer (1846-52) regarding the state of public finances, had come to the conclusion that Irish property, rather than central government, should pay for Irish poverty. The new master plan, which was consistent with Whig ideology and the interests of British taxpayers, was to phase out from mid-August onwards the direct provision of food and to throw the burden of Famine relief back on the 130 poor-law unions into which Ireland had been divided, using the workhouse in each union as the coordinating centre for indoor and outdoor relief. Executed with haste, this meant the property owners of Ireland, landlords, merchants, tenant farmers with a valuation greater than £4 became responsible for shouldering the huge burden of famine poverty. With this momentous shift in policy, famine relief entered its third phase.

The Third Phase: October 1847 onwards

In the autumn of 1847, the Irish poor faced into their third year of hunger. The principal safety net for the destitute was now the poor law, funded by local property holders. Philanthropic donations continued but on a reduced scale as donor fatigue set in. Entering the bleak world of the workhouse was the test of destitution, in effect a rationing device. Families were broken up and the sexes rigidly segregated. Institutional discipline was strict. Meals were barely sufficient. Worst of all, the crowded workhouses were centres for the dissemination of disease. Mortality soared, especially in the winter months. The workhouse was the refuge of last resort and a dangerous one at that. Some entered, or were sent by relatives in a heavily diseased and emaciated state, simply to get a coffin and a decent burial. At times, some could not even gain admission due to overcrowding. The disastrous consequences were soon evident, not only in high death rates but also in the fact that many of the poor-law administrations in the west of Ireland went bankrupt. Still, the British government persisted with the policy that Irish property should pay for Irish poverty.

The policies pursued by the poor-law guardians evolved over time. Resistance to giving relief outside the workhouse had to be relaxed during the second half of the Famine. Initially the ‘impotent poor’, defined as the aged, the sick, and widows with more than two children, were allowed to be relieved outside of the workhouse (known as ‘outdoor relief’). By early 1848 in the south and west where the workhouses were overflowing, it proved necessary to give outdoor relief to the able-bodied poor as well. The destitution test had to be foregone, at least temporarily.

Disease was of course the big killer and the poor-law system struggled to provide infirmaries and fever sheds to contain infection. Fermoy workhouse in County Cork furnishes a dire example of the kinds of problems that might be encountered: the mixing of sick and healthy led to a 24 per cent death rate in its workhouse in the first three months of 1847.⁵⁰ As if the challenges weren’t forbidding enough, in 1849 a cholera epidemic, largely unrelated to hunger, swept through the country and carried off more than 40,000 souls.

⁵⁰ Donnelly, ‘Administration of poor relief’, p. 318.

The effectiveness of the poor law system has been much debated. While the system undoubtedly saved lives, it put others at risk because of the way diseases spread in confined spaces. The major problem, to take a very different economic context, was similar to that faced by poor law unions in northern England.⁵¹ Just as workhouses were not built to deal with mass unemployment in factory towns, where thousands could be turned out of work at a moment's notice, the Irish system was not designed to cope with the mass destitution caused by famine conditions. Poor-law provision in Ireland was for 100,000, not the millions that were thrown onto public assistance. It has been largely forgotten that George Nicholls, the architect of the Irish poor-law system, had in fact anticipated this point: 'The occurrence of a famine, however, if general, seems to be a contingency altogether above the powers of a Poor Law to provide for'.⁵²

Complexities and the Great Famine

It is no easy task to grasp the complexity as well as the horror of the Great Famine. It was a catastrophe that unhinged the lower strata of society, yet left many of the better-off little affected materially.⁵³ We know little of the psychological coping mechanisms at different levels of society, though it is a sobering thought that in the Franciscan convent of Broad Lane, on the edge of a slum in the centre of Cork city, the members of this male religious community enjoyed bread, meat, vegetables, wine and whiskey all through the crisis.⁵⁴ Living like lords, we might say, and they were not alone. None of the temporal lords of the land were reported to have suffered from hunger, still less starvation.

This is but one of many paradoxes. Another is that the Irish Famine took place less than two centuries ago when serious subsistence crises had vanished from most parts of Europe. There is not only its lateness in historical time to consider, it took place

⁵¹ On issues relating to the new English poor-law see Nicholas C. Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement, 1834-44* (Manchester, 1971); Felix Driver, *Power and Pauperism: The Workhouse System, 1834-1884* (Cambridge, 1993), pp.147-163; Lewis Darwen, *Implementing and Administering the New Poor Law in the Industrial North: A Case Study of Preston Union in Regional Context, 1837-1861*, (unpublished PhD thesis, Nottingham Trent University, 2016), pp. 163-165.

⁵² *Poor Laws - Ireland: Three Reports by George Nicholls Esq* (London 1838), p. 37.

⁵³ Enda Delaney, 'There but for the Grace of God Go I': Middle-Class Catholic Responses to Ireland's Great Famine', *English Historical Review*, 135, issue 577 (December 2020), pp. 1433-1460.

⁵⁴ Kennedy and Murphy eds., *Franciscan Community at Cork, passim*.

within the context of one of the most economically and politically advanced countries in the world. By the same token, we should not ignore the existence at that time of great swathes of poverty, economic insecurity and slum housing across industrialising Britain. Still, in United Kingdom terms the Irish famine was a regional rather than a national disaster. In Ireland no such geographical distancing was possible, although the severity was much more pronounced in the western areas of the country.

Little wonder that we encounter angry voices in the Death Census (see earlier) that prefigure the more politicised interpretations of later commentators. So how might we conceptualise, interpret and judge? The ecological is a natural starting point. The potato blight originated in the world of nature. It was an unanticipated, tuber-destroying fungal disease that spread with alarming speed and thoroughness. Its power of destruction was almost total, in a way that had no parallel among harvest failures affecting cereals and other foodstuffs. It was unstoppable at the time; worse still, it kept coming back.

Irrespective of origins, the impact of a natural disaster is greatly influenced by the nature of the society it lashes and that society's international support networks. The ramshackle character of Irish economy and society in the middle of the nineteenth century is hardly in doubt, particularly in its lower reaches. Its vulnerability had much to do with the pressure of decades of runaway population growth in a largely agrarian economy, a bottom-heavy social structure and the consequent retreat to a risky, low-cost, if nutritious mono-diet. The effect of harvest failure is also influenced by the scale of the food deficit. Deaths were inevitable, as they would have been in most European societies at the time under conditions of repeated destruction of the principal foodstuff. In that sense Irish society was unlucky to have to undergo an ordeal reserved for it alone. Perhaps the closest in terms of exposure were the Highlands and Islands of Scotland but even there famine mortality was on a much lower plane due in part to the paternalism of Scottish landlords and the charitable exertions of Presbyterian churches.⁵⁵

Ireland was also unlucky in terms of the timing of the scourge. Rigid versions of political economy were in the ascendant, which would not have been the case a few

⁵⁵ T.M. Devine, *The Great Highland Famine: Hunger, Emigration and the Scottish Highlands in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1988).

decades later. More immediately, a financial panic in April 1847 and an economic recession (short-lived as it turned out) in Britain caused the Chancellor of the Exchequer to rein in public expenditure, including spending on famine relief. There is still controversy as to the relative importance of economic ideology as against over-reaction to shorter-term economic disturbances in determining policy shifts. In a recent revisionist intervention, Charles Read argues that the financial panic of April 1847, and the fears it engendered as to the stability of the public finances, led directly to less generous provision for famine relief than originally envisaged.⁵⁶ Read places particular stress on confused macro-economic policy thinking, operating largely independently of the prevailing ideologies of laissez faire and providentialism. Enda Delaney, by contrast, places the main emphasis on ideological dogma limiting state intervention.⁵⁷

There is an aspect of political economy that has received insufficient attention. The idea of local responsibility (and indeed individual responsibility) was deeply ingrained in conventional thinking and came to play the dominant part in the later years of the Irish Famine. The transfer of responsibility from the Treasury to the poor-law unions in Ireland in the autumn of 1847, while certainly self-serving was not as peculiar as might appear to later eyes. The poor-law institutions in Liverpool were almost overwhelmed by the tens of thousands of destitute, fever-carrying Irish disembarking in the city in 1846-47.⁵⁸ The city fathers and local politicians lobbied vigorously for financial support, arguing this was a national emergency. However, Westminster rebuffed these demands and insisted that the relief of poverty and destitution was a *local* and not a national responsibility.⁵⁹ Local authorities in Liverpool, Glasgow and other places in Britain in turn saw these destitute migrants as the responsibility of Irish landowners and sent many back to Ireland. In mitigation, they might well argue that Irish landowners were in receipt of a substantial rental income of £10-£12 million

⁵⁶ Charles Read, 'Laissez-Faire, the Irish Famine, and British Financial Crisis', *Economic History Review*, 69 (2016), pp. 425-29.

⁵⁷ Delaney, *Curse of Reason*, pp. 166-84.

⁵⁸ Frank Neal, *Black '47: Britain and the Famine Irish* (Basingstoke, 1997), *passim*. It may not be totally unconnected that James Joyce, in *Finnegans Wake*, made a point of referring to the city as 'Liverpool'.

⁵⁹ Lewis Darwen, Donald MacRaild, Brian Gurrin, Liam Kennedy, "'Unhappy and Wretched Creatures": Charity, Poor Relief and Pauper Removal in Britain and Ireland during the Great Famine', *English Historical Review*, 134, issue 568 (June, 2019), pp. 589-619.

annually, they did not pay income tax unlike their British counterparts, and hence might be expected to pay for the poverty arising on their estates.

Perhaps there is another sense in which Ireland was unlucky in terms of timing. For all its dark associations, the Irish poor-law system was a reforming institution that furnished a safety net for the destitute in normal times. An intriguing counterfactual is that, on balance, it might have been better if Ireland had not had a poor law system in the 1840s. Had its introduction been delayed by a decade or so, this set of institutions would not have been available to the Whig government in 1847 when responsibility was thrown back on the Irish poor law and Irish property holders. In that case, presumably the Government would have been obliged to continue with more *ad hoc* measures such as the soup kitchens, support for emigration schemes, and perhaps a renewed public works programme. Food prices were falling from their inflated famine levels as early as the summer of 1847. Between June and July alone the cost of supporting an applicant at a feeding station fell by 20% (Table 1.2), and the trend in the prices of basic foodstuffs was downwards.⁶⁰ Had the state persisted with the policy of directly feeding the impoverished millions it would have benefited from progressively reducing costs.

So, to summarise: when the luck of the Irish ran out, it ran out with a vengeance. The Famine was precipitated by an ‘ecological accident’ (the potato blight);⁶¹ its impact was shaped by long-run economic and demographic forces (rapid population growth, declining living standards and declining food security); it was both ameliorated and aggravated by political stances at Westminster (on the part of Tories, Whigs and O’Connell’s ineffectual Repeal party); and it was shaped locally by the behaviour of landlords, labour-employing farmers and poor-law guardians. The role of many Irish landlords in dispossessing or evicting tens of thousands of cottiers and smallholders played out at local level and was a potent force in producing destitution and death.⁶² Some Irish tenant farmers were equally ruthless in dispensing with the services of their agricultural labourers or gobbling up the holdings of destitute cottiers

⁶⁰ Liam Kennedy and Peter M. Solar, *Irish Agriculture: A Price History* (Dublin, 2007), pp. 140-52.

⁶¹ Cormac Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 68

⁶² James S. Donnelly, jr., *Irish Potato Famine* (2010), pp. 138-40.

Harvest failure across northern Europe in 1846 made accessing cereals from neighbouring countries both difficult and costly. But in important other respects the international environment of the 1840s was broadly favourable to those at risk of starvation. The plight of the Irish attracted world-wide attention. The British Association was especially effective in coordinating fundraising in the neighbouring island and channelling charitable relief to Ireland. Queen Victoria personally donated £2,000 and the Pope less than half that, at 800 crowns. British, American and Irish Quakers were trailblazers in developing relief initiatives. American charity and grain shipments helped, and the UK's shift towards free trade in foodstuffs after 1846 was a positive development. Especially important were the remittances of emigrants sent back to families in Ireland which helped pull hundreds of thousands of kin across the Atlantic, in many cases, to a better life in the New World. In effect, emigration turned out to be an important form of famine relief.⁶³ Helpfully, fares to North America had fallen heavily during the 1830s and 1840s.⁶⁴ An implication here is that state support for emigration could have been an effective means of famine relief but Treasury funding was pared back in 1847. The tragedy of contemporary refugees from Africa, Asia and Latin America denied entry to Europe or North America, reminds us that the labour markets of Britain and North America were open to Irish migrants in the nineteenth century. These employment lifelines saved many lives.

Explaining famine: two approaches

A distinction is drawn in the academic literature between famines caused by an absolute shortage of food and famines where the supply of food overall was adequate but for various reasons was not available to the poorer sections of society. Examples of the first are harvest shortfalls or the destruction of food stocks through warfare. The pioneering work of the Indian economist, Amartya Sen, shifted the emphasis from these traditional

⁶³ Cormac Ó Gráda and Kevin H. O'Rourke, 'Migration as Disaster Relief: Lessons from the Great Irish Famine', *European Review of Economic History*, 1, no. 1 (1997), pp. 3-25.

⁶⁴ John Killick, 'Transatlantic steerage fares, British and Irish migration, and return migration, 1815-60', *Economic History Review*, 67, no.1 (2014), pp. 170-191. The average steerage fare on transatlantic shipping from Liverpool to Philadelphia, USA, was £5 in 1831, £3.6 in 1840, £3.2 in 1846. Fares rose marginally during the later famine years but were as low as £3.2 in 1851, by which time emigration had fallen from the exalted levels of more than 200,000 per year to 150,000 for that year.

explanations of famine to an alternative possibility: the poor might starve, not because of an absolute shortage of food ('food availability decline') but because the poor no longer had the resources to acquire food.⁶⁵ In the jargon, this is referred to as a 'failure of entitlements.' Thus, hunger might ensue because wages or incomes were no longer capable of purchasing a sufficiency of food in the context of rising food prices and a constant or falling money income. An increase in unemployment or underemployment could give rise to a similar effect. Other entitlements that might ensure survival such as welfare provision by local or national authorities might or might not exist.

Does Sen's perspective cast much light on the Irish experience? Contrary to Sen's hypothesis, we can say without hesitation that there was an absolute shortage of food in the autumn, winter, and early spring of 1846-47, such was the extent of self-provisioning, dependence on the potato crop and the scale of its destruction.⁶⁶ The country could just about cope with the failure of the preceding harvest year from its own resources. Later, from mid-1847, given the volume of American grain imports, it is more difficult to speak of an absolute shortage of foodstuffs (Table 1.1). In 1847, for instance, grain imports dwarfed grain exports. As is well-known, ships were leaving Irish ports laden with food and other produce, destined mainly for the neighbouring island. But coming in the opposite direction into Irish ports were much larger volumes of shipping and cargoes of grain. So, the likelihood is there was no absolute shortage of food during the later years of the Famine (nor in the opening year). Sen's insights re-enter the picture but with a time lag. After 1847 the problem was two-fold: unequal access to food and raging disease epidemics, with the latter delivering the fatal blow to malnourished and debilitated victims.

⁶⁵ Amartya K. Sen, *Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford, 1981).

⁶⁶ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory* (Princeton, 1999), p. 83.

Table 1.3: Irish Grain Exports and Imports, 1844-48 ('000 tons of grain equivalent)

	Exports	Imports	Surplus/Deficit	Maize Imports
1844	424	30	+394	1
1845	513	28	+485	7
1846	284	197	+87	122
1847	146	889	-743	632
1848	314	439	-125	306

Source: P.M.A. Bourke, 'The Irish Grain Trade, 1839-48', *Irish Historical Studies*, 20, no. 78 (September 1976), p. 168.

Clearly there is something to be said for Sen's framework, but it does require *international* grain supplies to be brought into the picture (Table 1.3). If speaking of *domestic* food production, however, there is no doubt there was a deficit in food availability during most of the famine years.⁶⁷ In view of the fact that the rural poor were normally self-provisioning – growing food for their own consumption and relying heavily on the devastated potato crop – that is what really counts. Viewing the calamity through the prism of social class or geographical region brings the harsh realities more clearly into focus. Food availability, or rather its opposite, afflicted the rural poor more acutely and for longer periods than society as a whole. In other words, an aggregate approach that focuses on national per capita figures on food stocks, and includes imports, fails to tell the relevant story. It might be added, the poorer, less accessible western and southern districts of the island, where self-provisioning had long been the norm, suffered longer intervals of absolute food shortage than other regions.

Compounding the problem, there was no legal entitlement to support under the Irish poor-law system. Once the workhouses were full or over-full, the doors could be shut and relief refused.⁶⁸ Depending on the resources of the union and the sentiments of the poor-law guardians who administered the system, there might be recourse to

⁶⁷ Solar, 'No Ordinary Subsistence Crisis', pp. 123. Solar finds a deficiency in calories for the whole period 1846-50, even allowing for grain imports. The case is a tight one. If population decline and animal foodstuffs are taken into account, the gap or deficit would likely disappear. But placing all farm animals into any food availability calculus is an abstract exercise as there was little chance of this happening in real life.

⁶⁸ Michelle O'Mahony, *Famine in Cork City: Famine Life at Cork Union Workhouse* (Cork, 2005), pp. 47-58; William J. Smyth, 'Classify, Confine, Discipline and Punish – the Roscrea Union: A Microgeography of the Workhouse System during the Famine' in John Crowley, William J. Smyth and Mike Murphy, eds., *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine, 1845-52* (Cork, 2012), pp. 135-39.

giving relief outside the workhouse, as indeed happened in some unions. However, rate payers tended to resist this. The poorer unions in the west and south struggled and many went bankrupt. The consequences were calamitous for those lacking either food or the money necessary to purchase food. At the level of the destitute household, typically a nuclear family, the two explanatory sketches introduced earlier prove to be salient. But in the end, in terms of understanding the Irish famine of the 1840s, it is the food availability deficit that is the more illuminating of the two approaches.

Finally, there are the age and gender dimensions. As might be expected, the very young and the very old were especially vulnerable.⁶⁹ It is not obvious at first sight whether males or females might suffer disproportionately. The outcome depended on conditions of work, intra-household bargaining and physiology. Exposure to hard work and the elements on public works schemes, for instance, disadvantaged men (see Table 1.1). On the other hand, breadwinners might be expected to receive larger portions of food. In any case, the differences in outcomes turn out to be slight. Excess mortality was marginally lower for Irish women, which is in line with findings from other famines.⁷⁰

Failures

Hallowed as are the rights of property, those of life are still more sacred ...
Catholic Prelates of Ireland, October 1847⁷¹

There were different levels of failure during the Great Famine, though these are clearer in retrospect. The Whig administration persisted with the energy-sapping public works schemes for too long. Direct feeding of the poor and the destitute might have been initiated earlier and maintained for longer. State-assisted emigration might have been implemented on a large scale, though limits to shipping space need to be borne in mind. A short-lived prohibition on cereal exports between the harvest of 1846 and the spring of 1847 (by which time massive American grain imports were reaching Ireland),

⁶⁹ 'Introduction' by Christine Kinealy, Jason King, Gerard Moran eds., *Children and the Great Hunger in Ireland* (Hamden, CT, 2018), pp. xxi-xxx.

⁷⁰ Jonathan Healey, 'Famine and the Female Mortality Advantage: Sex, Gender and Mortality in Northwest England, c. 1590-1630', *Continuity and Change*, 30, no. 2 (2015), 153-92, and the studies cited therein.

⁷¹ *Battersby's Registry*, p. 239.

probably would have helped.⁷² An outright ban on grain and other food exports from Ireland, however, would have been counterproductive.

This is a much-misunderstood point. A ban would have damaged the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of tenant farmers who produced marketable surpluses; it would have reduced their ability to pay rates to finance the poor-law system; and it would have aggravated social tensions between the landless and those with some stake in the land. Still, the sight of carts laden with grain leaving famine districts, sometimes under military or police escort, or of ships departing the Irish ports with grain, butter and livestock on board, naturally excited popular anger. And such images would later be fashioned into potent ideological weapons in the cause of Irish separatism.⁷³ But in welfare terms and viewed nationally, there was net benefit in exporting high-value foods and importing a low-cost American substitute food.

There was failure at the level of politics. The Tory government led by Sir Robert Peel performed well during the first year of scarcity, using well-established measures to handle the usual kind of Irish subsistence crisis. The trouble, as Peter Solar emphasises, this was ‘no ordinary subsistence crisis’. The second and subsequent years of famine were presided over by Lord John Russell and the Whigs, generally with the support of the Peelites in parliament. There was government failure through bureaucratic rigidities, inappropriate relief measures, and an abdication of central-government responsibility when it transferred the burden of famine relief onto local authorities. Its failure to curb evictions, though it made some efforts to do so, was also destructive of lives and livelihoods.⁷⁴ Evictions and emigration reassured some moralising government officials that here was an opportunity to reconstruct a backward and unsustainable agrarian economy along modern lines.⁷⁵ This made sense in the longer term but not in the midst of a crisis. Most of all there was little learning. Policies were if anything worse during the second half of the Famine. An indication is the large (excess) mortality still being recorded as late as 1849.

⁷² As argued by Bourke, ‘Irish Grain Trade’, pp. 165-6.

⁷³ John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (Dublin, 1873).

⁷⁴ Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, pp. 191-4.

⁷⁵ See the discussion in Delaney, *The Curse of Reason*, pp. 227-33.

Ireland's political representatives, including the O'Connellite Repeal party, didn't have a 'good famine' either.⁷⁶ Beating the drum of repeal in the face of an existential threat was of doubtful value to a starving Mayo peasant and served to weaken British sympathy both inside and outside of parliament. The Repeal party contained 34 of the 105 Irish MPs at Westminster in 1847 and thus could have been a significant force in a deeply divided parliament.⁷⁷ It supported, albeit reluctantly, the switch in policy to reliance on the poor-law. It was an Irish MP, William Gregory, with the support of most Irish MPs at Westminster, who introduced the infamous Gregory clause, that is, anyone with more than a quarter acre of land had to surrender land above that limit in order to qualify for relief from the local poor-law guardians. In this way, hundreds of thousands were separated from their cabins and potato patches, some voluntarily, others under pressure or forcibly evicted. The gesture of rebellion by Young Irelanders in 1848 – little more than a skirmish at the Widow McCormack's cottage in Ballingarry, County Tipperary – was ill-judged and only served to alienate British public opinion.

The most difficult question of all is whether Irish society failed. Some landlords actively helped, others remained indifferent, some took advantage of the crisis to rid themselves of unwanted tenants. We do not know the proportions in each category. The role of the Irish middle classes, Catholic and Protestant, is even more opaque, though the current understanding is not particularly favourable.⁷⁸ We might remember, though, that the middle-class strata of society were especially thin in the worst affected, western districts of the country. Often it might only be the priest or parson, hence the importance of their testimonies.

Pre-famine peasant society had a strong ethic of sharing which was congruent with survival strategies, religious values, and superstitious beliefs.⁷⁹ But prolonged hunger ripped apart traditional norms. Irish folklore speaks of instances of exemplary

⁷⁶ Mary E. Daly, *The Famine in Ireland* (Dundalk, 1994), p. 115.

⁷⁷ The complete Irish representation after the 1847 general elections was 34 Repealers (up from 18 in 1841), 2 Confederates, 29 Liberals and 40 Conservatives. See Brian Walker, 'Politicians, Elections and Catastrophe: The General Election of 1847', *Irish Political Studies*, 22, no. 1 (2007), p. 31.

⁷⁸ Enda Delaney, "'There but the for the Grace of God go I': Middle-Class Catholic Responses to Ireland's Great Famine', *English Historical Review*, 135, no. 577 (2020), pp. 1433-1460.

⁷⁹ Niall Ó Ciosáin, *Ireland in Official Print Culture, 1800-1850: A New Reading of the Poor Inquiry* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 82-90.

charity during the Famine, but these accounts are often wrapped in miraculous clothing, thereby raising the suspicion that they were less common than supposed.⁸⁰ The social divide between farmers and labourers almost certainly widened. Some tenant farmers shot, assaulted or prosecuted food-stealing labourers. The land holdings of cottiers and labourers were amalgamated into larger farms, their occupiers driven to the workhouse, the grave or beyond the seas. Corpses lay by the roadside or in cabins, as neighbours passed by. Even within families there were individual acts of savagery and abandonment. Famine conditions gave rise to abnormal times and, unsurprisingly, abnormal behaviour. Unlike famines in some other countries or in earlier Irish history, reports of cannibalism were rare.⁸¹ As the threat of starvation drew closer, feelings of empathy narrowed to the family and kindred. Instances of family cruelty notwithstanding, the norm was shared suffering and kin solidarity. One of the astonishing achievements of the Famine generation was financing mass emigration. In excess of one million were helped overseas by family and extended family in Ireland, Britain and North America. Though not recorded in any systematic way, it is clear that family and kin networks undertook large sacrifices to save lives. Unlike so many other agencies, the Irish family, by and large, did not fail.

The historical record indicates that in the region of one million died. It is an appalling death toll. Another million looked for refuge outside of Ireland. We are reminded also, even with a calamity as devastating as the Irish Famine, that the degree of destitution varied, socially, geographically and by religious congregation and denomination. In those respects it mirrored famines elsewhere in the world. Against a backdrop of absolute food shortages, as emphasised here, famine mortality could have been much higher. That it was not owes much to the relief measures, however inadequate relative to need, implemented by the British government and local authorities in Ireland, and supplemented by charitable and private initiative. Many contemporary observers would have found it hard to grasp the reality of ‘lives saved’ as well as acknowledging the more visible ‘lives lost’. Overwhelmed by the misery

⁸⁰ Cathal Póirtéir, ‘Folk Memory and the Famine’ in Póirtéir ed. *The Irish Famine*, pp. 219-231.

⁸¹ Cormac Ó Gráda, *Eating People is Wrong, and Other Essays on Famine, Its Past, and its Future* (Princeton, 2015), pp. 30-37. But, as he warns, these silences may not necessarily reflect the actuality.

before their eyes, as repeated day in and day out, and traumatised by scenes of sickness and death, it is not hard to see why the tone of contemporary commentary is so critical of state failure. It is also the case that many, many lives were saved by state intervention.