

5 The European food crisis and the relief of Irish famine, 1845–1850

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For most contemporary and subsequent commentators, the general European subsistence crisis of the 1840s appeared to play at best an 'off-stage' role in the drama of the Great Irish Famine. So extreme and sustained was the Irish experience of famine, and so focused were the political debates concerning relief and reconstruction on the British-Irish relationship, that the European dimensions of the Irish catastrophe have tended, with some exceptions (Solar, 1997; Gray, 1997), to receive relatively little attention. Nevertheless, the Irish crisis did occur within a wider European context, and to understand this dimension it is necessary to investigate rather more closely both the impact continental developments had on Ireland, and the reasons for the ultimate marginalization of the European aspects of the Irish crisis.

This paper will consider four points of focus in which the wider European context impinged most significantly on the debates over Irish relief policy in the later 1840s. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, was the competition for available food resources, especially between the autumn of 1845 and the early months of 1847. British policy regarding the import and export of foodstuffs to and from Ireland was, and remains, a highly controversial subject, not least because its actions could be contrasted with the public policy of other European governments facing subsistence crises in these seasons. Both British ministers and their nationalist critics were aware of this environment and constructed their arguments accordingly. Next to be considered are the observations of and reactions to the relief policies adopted more generally by European governments in 1845–1847. The British diplomatic service monitored these and made regular reports to London; the British and Irish press also reported on European famine-relief policies, and commented on these as models to be avoided or embraced according to varying political perspectives.

Thirdly, debates about Irish famine relief were rarely restricted to the immediate problem of preventing crisis mortality. For many commentators and political agents, questions of relief were intimately and indissolubly tied to those of reconstruction. The remaking of an Irish society 'dissolved' by the devastations of the potato blight into an entity capable of breaking free from a cycle of vulnerability and famine was, all too often, awarded a higher priority than the 'mere' relief of immediate suffering. Opinions varied very widely on the most desirable modes and blueprints for reconstruction, but European social models, variously conceptualized by their advocates and detractors, were among those most hotly debated.

Finally, the European revolutions of 1848 impacted on Ireland not only through the inspiration they offered to the separatist inclinations of the Young Ireland nationalists, but also through the examples presented (most obviously in France) of radical initiatives in social policy which attracted the attention of commentators on famine policy in Ireland.

I.

The pathways taken by *phytophthora infestans* in 1844–1845 – from North America to Ireland via the Low Countries, France and England – inevitably led Irish observers to draw continental comparisons in the autumn of 1845 (in contrast, the apparent epicentre of the blight in the west of Ireland – and the western Highlands and Islands of Scotland – from summer 1846 tended subsequently to distract attention from the European parallels). Thus, on reporting the first observations of blight in Ireland in September 1845, the *Dublin Evening Post* commented that ‘with regard to Holland, Flanders and France, we have already abundant evidence of the wide-spread existence of what we cannot help calling a calamity.’ It was in these ‘densely packed communities of Europe’ (including Ireland) that the risk of disaster was greatest (*Dublin Evening Post*, 9 September 1845).

Alarm over the food supply in the Low Countries had an immediate impact on the European food markets. By late September the *Dublin Pilot* was reporting large Dutch and Belgian purchases of rice and corn in the British and Baltic markets, encouraged by the suspension of duties on foreign grain exports (*Pilot*, 26 September 1845). While the Dutch government limited its activity to the negative step of suspending its corn law, the active interventionism of the Belgian and French administrations in discouraging exports and creating inducements to import were noted abroad (Gray, 1997: 98–99). The developing consciousness that the Irish potato crop had also been severely ravaged by blight led some commentators to demand analogous action. In early November the Dublin Mansion House Committee, behind which the nationalist leader Daniel O’Connell had thrown his still considerable political weight, warned the government explicitly of ‘the horrors (...) of the approaching famine’, and the rapidly closing window of food availability in the international markets: ‘Other foreign countries afflicted by a similar calamity, have already been before us in the market, and are daily enhancing the price of those supplies which our Government might otherwise calculate on’. Specifically, the Mansion House Committee demanded the immediate opening of Irish ports to food imports freed of duty; the prohibition of oats exports from Ireland; a severe diminution of military consumption of oats; prohibition of the distillation from grain; the raising of a loan of £1.5 million to purchase food and subsidize prices; the formation of local granaries; and the initiation of public works of national utility (Mansion House Committee, 1846: 5–6).

The reaction of Sir Robert Peel’s Conservative government to the early stages of the Irish crisis, particularly its controversial decision to link it to the abolition of the British corn law, remains a topic of historical controversy. Undoubtedly the prime minister’s tactics contained elements of political calculation and expediency – although alongside the apparent concession made to the active free-trade lobby in Britain we need also to remember that the logic of his reformist Irish policy dictated some acknowledgement of the claims of a body like the Mansion House Committee (*Peel Papers*: Graham to Peel, 9 November 1845, Add. MS 40,452, fol. 5). Peel’s relatively rapid implementation of elements of the last three of the Committee’s demands – through the initiation of public works relief, the establishment of local food depots, and the issuing of grants in aid of local relief subscriptions – demonstrates this awareness of the political expediency of creating relief entitlements, while stopping short of the prohibitionist demands of nationalist opinion.

However, Peel’s responsiveness was, as I have argued elsewhere, constrained by an ideological adherence to free trade, and both were underpinned by a specific providentialist interpretation of the meaning of the potato blight (Gray, 1999: 95–141). In 1845–

1846 he attempted to square the circle of combining pragmatic intervention in Ireland with a dogmatic insistence on the adoption of free trade in food. Unlike some other regimes, the Peel government's only initiative to augment food supply for Ireland – the purchase of £100,000 worth of maize from America in November 1845 for distribution by the army commissariat – was undertaken covertly, and was justified as a purely temporary measure to tide Ireland over until the corn bill was fully implemented (unlike wheat, it would admit maize and rice at a nominal duty immediately upon enactment), and as a pump-priming exercise to stimulate private trade and create a demand for the commodity in Ireland (Peel, 1856–1857, II: 173).

It does not follow that the Peel administration, had it survived, would have engaged in any further intervention in food supply. Peel himself ruled out anything other than marginal purchases in April 1846, and the consensus in the administration by early summer was that private trade was indeed meeting Irish requirements (*Hansard*, 3rd ser: LXXXV, 722–726; Gray, 1999: 123–124). Members of the outgoing government subsequently endorsed the policy of the incoming Whig-Liberal government of strict non-interference in the food trade (Gray, 1999: 125). British ministers continued to cast an eye at the vicissitudes of the potato harvest on the continent. In October 1846 the new prime minister Lord John Russell privately expressed comfort at what he believed to be the recovery of the Belgian potato crop, ignoring – as his own government was to do respecting Ireland in 1847 – the fact that acute seed shortages in a season following one of catastrophic failure would render the output of even an untainted crop nugatory (*Russell Papers*: Russell to Bessborough, 22 October 1846, PRO30/22/5D, fols 270–271).

From Summer 1846 Britain was (along with the Netherlands) unmoved in its dogmatic adherence to free-trade orthodoxy in food supply. Aware that the French, Belgian and other government were making large purchases in the American and Mediterranean markets in the wake of the disastrous harvests of 1846, Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary (chief administrator) at the Treasury in London, resisted appeals that the UK follow suit (Parliamentary Papers, 1847: Trevelyan to Routh, 29 September 1846: 98). Issuing his subordinates with reprints of extracts from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Trevelyan insisted (with the support of his political superiors) that the market mechanism alone could prevent Irish 'scarcity' developing into 'famine' (Parliamentary Papers, 1847: Trevelyan to Hewetson, 29 September 1846: 98–99; Trevelyan Letterbooks: Trevelyan to Routh, 30 September 1846, vol. 8, fol. 118; Smith, 1846). With mass famine mortality in Ireland undeniable by January 1847 in the wake of extensive press coverage, Trevelyan continued to adhere unwaveringly to the market doctrine; high prices were, he insisted:

'The natural check upon the over rapid consumption of an insufficient stock of food, and that, greatly as we suffer now, we might suffer before long still more intensely if this check were to be removed by any artificial interference. It must also be remembered, that high prices are indispensably necessary to enable us to get our share of the supplies of grain in America, the Black Sea, &c., for the scarcity prevails in France, Belgium, and elsewhere, as much or almost as much as it does in the United Kingdom.' (Parliamentary Papers, 1847: Trevelyan to Douglas, 18 January 1847, p. 501).

This position may have appeared justified in the wake of the massive imports principally of American grain into the UK from late Spring 1847, and the consequent collapse of prices in Ireland, but this was at a cost of an unmediated 'starvation gap' in the winter of 1846–1847.

II.

British observers were generally made aware of continental developments through the reports of the metropolitan press (e.g. *Times*, 24, 29 December 1846, 15 March 1847), but the London government also took a more direct interest in the relief measures adopted by its neighbours. Detailed memoranda on relief policies were requested by the Home Office and supplied by British diplomatic representatives abroad (*Palmerston Letterbooks*: Waller to Palmerston, 12 December 1846, Palmerston to Waller, 22 December 1846, Add. MS 48,553, fols 10–11). Much of this correspondence reflected a close monitoring of the food supply situation. In March 1847 the British ambassador in Paris (coincidentally the former Irish viceroy Lord Normanby), reported that in France there was a ‘dreadful certainty that it will not be possible to provide sufficient food for all the people between this time and the next harvest. From inquiries made at Odessa and elsewhere the government has become convinced that with every precaution and exertion to secure foreign supplies there will be a deficiency between this and the next crops of one month’s duration.’ (*Palmerston Letterbooks*: Normanby to Palmerston, 8 March 1847, Add. MS 48,556, fol. 41). The French government’s response – to opt for a temporary export prohibition after considering regulating consumption by region – was duly reported to London (*Palmerston Letterbooks*: Normanby to Palmerston, 12 March, 26 April 1847, fols. 43, 50). Other despatches provided detailed analyses of the relief infrastructure in Belgium, expenditure on public works relief (1.5 million francs in 1846–1847) and the parliamentary debates over relief policy; in May 1847, for example, the British minister in Brussels reported the Liberal opposition’s attack on the de Theux government for what it claimed was inadequate relief expenditure (*Palmerston Letterbooks*: Waller to Palmerston, 24 November 1846, 13 February 1847, 12 May 1847, Add MS 48,553, fols. 8, 17, 22).

There are a number of reasons why the British administration may have chosen to monitor these developments; France was perceived as a naval and military rival in many spheres (particular whilst Lord Palmerston was Foreign Secretary, as in 1846–1851), its ability to wage war was of particular interest to government. British observers noted with irritation and concern the tendency of the French press and Orleanist politicians to cite the sufferings of Ireland – that ‘scandal to the civilized world’ according to the *Journal des Débats* – both as proof of British hypocrisy and likely military weakness (*Times*, 3, 6 October 1846, 8 September, 22 November 1847). Belgium, on the other hand, was a state regarded in London as falling under the paternalistic care of Britain (not least because of the dynastic connection between the British and Belgian crowns), whose integrity and internal stability were of direct interest to the UK. Nevertheless, the fact that it was the Home Office – a department with partial responsibility for Irish affairs – that requested the memoranda on European relief initiatives suggests that this information was also required to inform domestic policy making.

Despite the availability of this comparative information, European parallels appear to have been remarkable by their absence in government policy-making processes in 1846–1847 (in marked contrast to the frequent comparisons drawn between the situation in Ireland and the famine in the western Highlands of Scotland). There are perhaps two reasons for this. Firstly, the London metropolitan press, the other main source of information on the continental subsistence crisis, tended towards an overt hostility to what it regarded as the counter-productive interventionism of the Belgian and French

governments. Attempted state management of the food supply in Belgium was regarded as anathema by the ascendant free-trade lobby. Its mouthpiece, the *Economist*, condemned the policy as ‘absurd’ and blamed Flemish famine mortality in 1847 on the Belgian government’s vacillation over the renewal of its suspension of agricultural protection in 1846 (*Economist*, 13 February, 3 July 1847). The journal went on to denounce the greater interventionism of Charles Rogier’s Liberal government elected in 1847 – not least because of its marked departure from the *laissez-faire* trade and social policies adopted by other liberal regimes facing continuing famine crises, such as Lord John Russell’s government in Britain and F.A. van Hall’s in the Netherlands (Gray, 1997: 101–103). While acknowledging that extensive expenditure had diminished the political impact of hunger in France, and protesting that an official contrast had been drawn in Paris with the estimated 600,000 Irish starvation deaths by March 1847, the *Times* predicted that heavy French state spending would have negative consequences for the country’s economy (*Times*, 11 March 1847). The combination of similarly doctrinaire opinions within the UK government, especially on the part of senior ministers such as Charles Wood and Earl Grey, with the assertiveness of free-trade radicals in parliament – greatly enhanced by their success in attaining a pivotal position in the election of July 1847 – rendered emulation of alternative relief policies difficult.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the dominant paradigm within which Irish relief policy was constructed was one fixated with the British-Irish relationship and which tended to pathologize Irish difference from British social, economic and cultural ‘norms’ and attribute the underlying causes of Irish famine to that country’s ‘backwardness’. While there were heterodox thinkers prepared to challenge these assumptions, and divisions over the most suitable modes of ‘normalizing’ Ireland (and over whether it could or should be obliged to develop without external assistance), the dominant voice in the relief debates in Britain, that associated with the Treasury and its allies in the ‘moralist’ metropolitan press, had little interest in engaging in any comparative analysis that might detract from the British model. ‘Moralist’ voices, such as the *Times*, sought to turn continental criticisms of Britain’s record on Ireland back on their own social inadequacies. Upbraiding the French government for its silence on French and Belgian suffering whilst it harped upon Ireland’s miseries, the *Times* implied that Great Britain alone had escaped the general calamity due to its superior state of social evolution (*Times*, 31 December 1846).

For their part, Irish nationalists, particularly those of radical inclinations, tended to adopt a mirror-image preoccupation with British rule as the ultimate (and indeed the proximate) cause of famine. For nationalist critics of British policy, the policy of some continental states offered a useful contrast to the failure (or to some the malign agency) of British policy. Both the leading writers of the radical *Nation* newspaper in 1846–1848 subsequently appealed to European counter-cases. John Mitchel contrasted the stoppage of export of provisions during the crisis by both the Belgian and Portuguese governments with the free-trade dogmatism of Britain (Mitchel, 1860: 98). Charles Gavan Duffy later took up the same point, adding Hungary, Switzerland and Wurttemberg to the list of export-withholding states, and arguing that famine could have been avoided if Ireland, like Belgium, had been free to manage its own affairs (Duffy, 1883: 45–48). While the radical nationalist case that self-government would have permitted a more effective relief policy could thus be supported by reference to European cases, it was in fact restricted by its preoccupation with only one aspect of policy – the regulation of the

export of locally-grown provisions. The Young Ireland writers' dogmatic insistence that, even in the wake of the devastating potato failures of 1845–1848, Ireland produced sufficient foodstuffs to feed its population, made the question of exports paramount and rendered other areas where European parallels might usefully have been drawn – on imports, public works, creating food entitlements and medical relief – marginal to their case (Donnelly, 1996: 26–61).

In contrast, Daniel O'Connell's more moderate and pragmatic style of nationalism was less fixated with exports, and prepared to draw wider connections with continental policy. In a speech made to the Repeal Association on 1 December 1846, O'Connell offered a rather more sophisticated interpretation: in Belgium, 'a free country with its own parliament', the people had been able to apply their own resources to their wants, and the government had got through scarcity with minimal loss through quickly opening the ports and anticipating the wants of the people (the UK government had done the first but failed to do the latter in Ireland – the limitations of the Board of Works in particular were singled out for criticism). If O'Connell somewhat exaggerated for effect the success of Belgian policy, he was more pessimistic about the prospects for Ireland even in the unlikely event of its attaining immediate autonomy – Ireland lacked the reproductive powers of Belgium, and hence the means of immediately supporting itself (*Cork Examiner*, 2 December 1846). It followed that Ireland in the first instance must rely on the surplus resources of Britain, resources it had a moral claim to in reparation for the legacy of British 'misgovernment' of Ireland. O'Connell's tactics in the last year of his life revolved around attempts to cajole and influence the administration into greater expenditure and flexibility, with little discernable effect (O'Connell, 1972–1980: VII, 83, 108, O'Connell to Pigot, 13 August 1846, O'Connell to Labouchere, 4 October 1846; *Hansard*, 3rd ser.: LXXXIX, 942–945). As his health deteriorated in the months preceding his death in May 1847, and as his mass political movement disintegrated under the impact of social dislocation and government patronage of leading Repealers, this voice was lost, and with it the potential to influence official policy.

This 'European' critique of official dogmatism was not restricted to Irish nationalists, but was also adopted, if somewhat fitfully, by some Irish landowners and British opposition politicians. Lord Mornington asked rhetorically in December 1846, 'Is it not singular that in a kingdom miserable in point of extent, under a poor and feeble government, like that of Belgium, immediate steps were taken upon the first suspicion of want of food, and the catastrophe, such as it now afflicts Ireland, was at once averted; as, indeed, it has been stayed in many other parts of Europe?' (*Times*, 25 December 1846). For his part, Lord George Bentinck, leader of the opposition Protectionist Conservatives in the House of Commons and advocate of an extensive scheme of railway construction to provide relief employment in Ireland, was also quick to contrast state interventionism on the continent with British policy:

'I deeply regret to find that whilst the kings of Belgium and Holland, of France and of Prussia, with the Emperor of Austria, and the state of the American Union all combine in the opinion that it is for the advantage of their respective countries to bring the aid of public resources to stimulate private enterprise, and even of themselves to construct works of public utility, the British Government, reined, curbed and ridden by political economists, stands alone in its unnatural, unwise, impolitic and disastrous resolves, rather to grant lavishly for useless and unproductive works, and for Soyer's soup kitchens, than to make loans, on an efficient scale and on ample security, to stimulate private enterprise and great works of well-tried efficacy in opening out the natural

resources – in stimulating commerce – in improving and creating ready markets for agriculture, in exiting general prosperity, and last, but not least, in giving honest, honourable and independent employment at high money wages to hundreds of thousands of ablebodied labourers and their families, now pining and dying, and wasting their energies in spoiling the existing roads in Ireland.’ (*Times*, 23 March 1847: Lord George Bentinck to William Monsell, 15 March 1847).

To a moralistic bourgeois public opinion in Britain, and its representatives in government, however, such appeals simply demonstrated the self-serving bankruptcy of the class deemed most responsible for the Irish catastrophe – the landowners. Damning landed obstruction to the extension of the Irish poor law, a measure that would transfer responsibility for the relief of Irish famine to ‘Irish property’, the *Times* denied that Ireland required external assistance from the British taxpayer or from European or American charity:

‘There is not the smallest occasion for these world-wide appeals. Ireland is as well able to help herself as France or any other country. Nay, there are parts of France and Belgium probably still poorer. The only difference arises from the inhumanity of the landowners. The whole earth is doing duty for them. Meanwhile, however, England – that England which is paying 10,000,000*l.* for the relief of Ireland, figures nevertheless before the whole earth, partly as a tyrant, and partly as a beggar ... So long as we weakly suffer the Irish proprietors to be inhuman, we must share the odium of their inhumanity.’ (*Times*, 10 May 1847).

For such observers the conclusion was clear: remove the artificial crutch of external aid, allow the ‘just measure of pain’ of famine to operate naturally, and the inhabitants of Ireland – landlords and peasants alike – would be faced with the moral choice of reforming their behaviour so as to save themselves by productively mobilising the island’s resources, or of taking responsibility for their own demise.

III.

In the later 1840s the relief of famine in Ireland was frequently regarded as inseparable from the ‘reconstruction’ of Irish society. The high priority accorded to reconstruction arose partly from a concern that famine was endemic in Ireland and that relief policies adopted on previous occasions (in 1816–1817, 1822, 1831, and indeed in 1845–1846) had aggravated the underlying susceptibility of the country and discouraged remedial action. As importantly, the emphasis on the primacy of reconstruction also reflected the predominance of providentialist readings of the catastrophe – the assignation of higher meaning to the arrival of the blight and its continuing devastation of Irish society. Although providentialist interpretations varied – with toleration of Irish Catholicism and the existence of the corn laws featuring in early debates as probable causes of divine anger – the prolongation of the Irish crisis (and its echo in the mostly Protestant but ‘Celtic’ society of the western Scottish Highlands) tended to promote a reading which highlighted the ‘unnatural’ state of Irish agrarian society as the target of divine intervention, and its rapid transformation as the benign purpose intended (Gray, 2000).

If a reconstructivist agenda co-existed with Peel’s relief policy in 1845–1846 – in the shape of a concern to replace the discredited potato with imported maize and rice as the subsistence of the Irish poor – this became much more pronounced under the succeeding

Whig-Liberal government. The Russell administration combined a much more acute critique of Irish landlordism as the locus of guilt, and a greater concern with the moral 'backwardness' of all classes in Irish society and their apparent proneness to dependency and inertia. Accompanying this was a generally more 'optimistic' political economy shared with significant sections of the liberal press and public opinion in Britain – a belief (again underpinned by the application of theodicy to the Irish situation) that Ireland was not inherently overpopulated, that there was no real shortage of investment opportunity or capital (or none that could not be easily created through the application of labour power on the underdeveloped soil), and that only the stimulation provided by stern necessity (directed but not unnecessarily relieved by the agency of the state) was required to unleash this. This doctrine, which found its clearest articulation in Charles Trevelyan's *The Irish Crisis*, heavily influenced policy in 1846–1847; from the autumn of 1847 it attained ascendancy (although not universal adherence) within the government (Trevelyan, 1848).

If there was general agreement that the famine had revealed the rottenness of pre-existing Irish social relationships and the need for a 'social revolution' to transform these, there was less consensus on the optimum form that a reconstructed Irish society should take. For the purposes of this contribution I want to give some attention to the advocacy of a 'European' model (in strong and weak forms) in contestation with the more orthodox English (or, more accurately, the Anglo-Caledonian) model for Irish agrarian development.

The 'strong' case for the European model for Irish development was made during the famine years by the heterodox economists W.T. Thornton and J.S. Mill, along with the radical politician Poulett Scrope and social commentators such as Samuel Laing. Thornton and Mill have been credited as the 'rehabilitators' of the idea of peasant proprietary in British economic thought, but both were also active promoters of the application of their theories to Ireland in the later 1840s (Dewey, 1974). Thornton's case, expressed in 1846 and given more explicit application to Ireland in 1848, was that the socio-economic characteristics of most western European peasantries had rendered them relatively prosperous and industrious and encouraged voluntary restraints on the birth rate. Irish misery, in contrast, was due to the social consequences of a system of land tenure which encouraged the opposite (Thornton, 1846: 251–266, 413–439). Thornton was conscious that his advocacy of the superiority of peasant proprietary as model for Ireland had been countered by reference to the European subsistence crisis, and in his 1848 *A Plea for Peasant Proprietors* addressed the subject directly. The distress of 1845–1847, he asserted, had not been confined to small-farm peasant societies – and had led to equal suffering in the estate-based economies of the Baltic and Portugal; the commercial agriculture of Britain had escaped solely due to the accident of its untainted wheat harvests. Heavy reliance on the poor law in England and the sufferings of Ireland pointed to the inadequacies of both social systems in the face of scarcity. In contrast:

'The French peasantry (...) are in general self-dependent; and the interference of the government last year, in order to secure for them additional supplies of food, was a step almost without precedent. What amount of money may have been expended for this purpose, is not very generally known, but it was certainly nothing like ten millions sterling, to which sum it must nevertheless have reached in order to correspond with the amount annually expended on the relief of the poor of the much smaller population of England.'

Besides, it was the urban rather than the rural population which had required food aid in France. In the case of Belgian Flanders, Thornton acknowledged, the very small landowners had and continued to suffer, but these were not husbandmen *per se*, but rural artisans thrown into crisis by manufacturing rather than agricultural distress. Nevertheless, 'their connexion with the land may, and no doubt does, alleviate their misery, but cannot, in any conceivable manner, have helped to produce it ... As it is, they are saved from utter destitution by the possession of their plots of land.' (Thornton, 1848: 160–166).

J.S. Mill combined Thornton's theories with his own researches on continental peasant societies to produce a programme for Irish reconstruction published in instalments in the *Morning Chronicle* newspaper in winter 1846–1847. His call was for the creation of a mixed agrarian system in Ireland (the so-called 'Prussian model') incorporating partial peasant proprietary with capitalist farming. This involved the total rejection of what Mill regarded as the orthodox fallacy that Ireland could and should be anglicised:

'We are not sure that it would be doing the Irish a service to make them Englishmen; but we are sure that they are not Englishmen, and cannot, by any device of ours, be made so. To make them work, they must have what makes their Celtic bretheren, the French peasantry, work, and those of Tuscany, of the self-indulgent and luxurious south. They must work, not for employers, but for themselves. Their labour must be for wages only, it must be a labour of love – the love which the peasant feels for the spot of land from which no man's pleasure can expel him, which makes him a free and independent citizen of the world, and which every improvement, which his labour can effect brings to his family as their permanent inheritance.' (Mill, 1846: 913–916).

Mill's rather less idealised mechanism for producing this end (shared by Thornton and Scrope), was the state appropriation of Ireland's waste lands for internal colonization by reclaiming peasant proprietors.

This 'strong' advocacy of the European model was, perhaps surprisingly, echoed by a 'weak' counterpart within the Whig-Liberal administration. Orthodox economists and their government allies were alarmed by signs in 1846–1849 that the prime minister himself was sympathetic towards 'remedial schemes' for Ireland, interfering with Irish land tenures or taking up the initiatives proposed by Mill and Scrope as a means of reviving the 'Justice to Ireland' political strategy of the later 1830s. Russell's personal initiatives (all abortive in the face of strong cabinet and treasury opposition) included an 1847 draft bill for the establishment of peasant proprietors on waste lands, a plan for the universal extension of 'tenant right' in late 1847, and schemes for the promotion of owner-occupation through the agencies of a farmers estate society and 'Prussian land banks' in 1848–1849. All reflected Russell's personal perception that peasant agriculture 'such (...) as exists in Tuscany' had its merits, and his sense that 'the Irish are fashioned more like our continental neighbours than ourselves – that instead of detesting government control they cannot do without it – and we cannot change the nature of the nation in this respect.' (*Hansard*, 3rd ser.: C, 237–254; *Clarendon Deposit Irish*: Russell to Clarendon, 21 May 1848, box 43).

The failure of Russell's remedial schemes owed something to their speculative and potentially expensive nature – but more to the challenge they were seen to pose to the concern for the anglicization of Ireland expressed by the majority of his cabinet colleagues and most of British liberal opinion. Ministerial correspondence and press commentary bears this out, but its most succinct statement can be found in Trevelyan's

Irish Crisis. Extensive state intervention of the sort envisaged by the advocates of internal colonization on reclaimed waste lands, Trevelyan asserted, would not only infringe just property rights but discourage Irish self-exertion; peasant proprietorship was delusional and inapplicable to the Irish situation, while the promotion of English social models should be the aim of all sound policy (Trevelyan, 1848: 172–178). In the place of peasant proprietary, the reconstructive policy most favoured by the treasury moralists in the government, their liberal allies in the press, and by the bulk of British radicals, was ‘free trade in land’ – a liberalization of the Irish land market which, if supported by continued financial pressure on the existing ‘irresponsible’ class of Irish landowners, would lead to the replacement of the latter by entrepreneurial British purchasers and large tenant farmers (Gray, 1999: 196–200). If accompanied by the proletarianization of the cottier peasantry through the medium of the extended poor law, this would, in Trevelyan’s phrase, serve as ‘a master-key to unlock the field of industry in Ireland.’ (Trevelyan, 1848: 22–36).

Without an understanding of the preoccupation of key ministers and administrators with this anglicising reconstructive agenda, the Irish relief policy decisions of the government, especially from autumn 1847, make little sense.

Trevelyan received support for his conclusions from orthodox commentary on the Flemish crisis. In a *Times* article entitled ‘Flanders and Ireland – a parallel’, one author urged the fractious Irish to emulate the Flemings in acknowledging that their analogous problems were mostly beyond the cause or cure of government, but were the general outcome of European economic change which punished adherence to outdated modes of production. Resistance to the advance of capitalized agriculture was the root common to both societies:

‘Flanders, like Ireland, suffers from an excess of pauper occupancy; its small farmers are labourers instead of being employers; but the Fleming clings to his plot of ground with the same desperate obstinacy as the cottier tenant in Ireland, and is equally unable or unwilling to perceive that his condition can only be ameliorated by his becoming a paid labourer, and ceasing to be a pauper proprietor.’

The free-traders and economists of Belgium were, the article continued, urging the government to revitalise Flanders by promoting capitalist enterprise, facilitating land consolidation and discontinuing food relief. Ireland’s hope lay in the adoption of similar policies rather than regressing into peasant proprietary or ‘tenant right’ (*Times*, 29 November 1847).

IV.

The 1848 revolutions in Europe posed a series of challenges to British rule in Ireland, not least through the new lease of life they gave to the radical nationalism of Young Ireland and its political offshoot the Irish Confederation (Nowlan, 1965; Kerr, 1994). Alongside the introduction of coercion directed at both political and agrarian activity, the revolutionary moment stimulated further abortive concessionary initiatives on the part of Lord John Russell and led the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Clarendon, to urge greater relief expenditure. The miserable failure of the Irish insurrection of summer 1848 tended, however, to convince most British observers of the ‘ingratitude’ of the

Irish and the necessity of accelerating the process of forced anglicization. To the *Times* the time for conciliation had passed, and all classes in Ireland needed for their own sake to be subjected to strict moral and physical discipline (*Times*, 4 October 1848).

For some observers, the threat posed by continental revolution lay as much in the social example set by revolutionary regimes as in the stimulus provided to nationalism. Lord Clarendon was particularly concerned that news from France had created an expectation of a 'revolutionary millennium' among the masses, and feared that the 'economic fallacies' adopted by the French government would excite false expectations (*Clarendon Deposit Irish: Clarendon to Oranmore*, 4 October 1848, Letterbook III; *Palmerston Papers: Clarendon to Palmerston*, 7 March 1848, GC/CL/483/1). The orthodox liberal economist and political commentator Nassau Senior was equally concerned about the 'socialist' doctrines inherent in the French *ateliers nationaux* (Senior, 1871, I: 1–8).

Advocates of the 'European peasantry' model for Ireland continued to bring their ideas before the British public in the later '40s, and were successful in influencing moderate Irish Catholic opinion (MacMahon, 1848: 331–332). However, despite Samuel Laing's insistence in 1850 that Flanders still offered the best model for Ireland, the negative impression of peasant proprietors created by the European agrarian crises and the 1848 revolutions made this argument difficult to sustain (Laing, 1850: 18–92). To the *Illustrated London News* in September 1849, the densely settled French countryside was as miserable a society as Ireland – proletarianization was the solution for both:

'In both countries a social revolution is needed which shall exalt agriculture as an art, and cause an increase in national wealth and the elevation of the people. We think that Ireland at length is on the right track, and that the stringent operation of the poor law will ultimately turn the small, potato-feeding, near naked farmers, into the meat-eating well-clad labourers of men of capital, skill and industry.' (*Illustrated London News*, 8 September 1849).

Ultimately, an aggressively anglicizing reconstructive agenda took the upper hand in Irish policy-making, and remained dominant in Britain until the historicist turn in economic thought of the 1860s (Gray, 2002).

Although easily defeated and dispersed in 1848, it was the revolutionary Young Ireland cadre, much more than the dispirited and (after 1847) leaderless O'Connellites who were the mould the dominant Irish nationalist memory of the Great Famine. In the formation of this narrative adverse contrasts between the response of the British and European governments to their respective food crises remained useful, but were ultimately marginal to the dominant reading of the Famine as a premeditated assault by a colonial power on the lives of a subject people (Mitchel, 1860: 98). This tradition, if read alongside a mainstream British (and Irish Unionist) recollection of the Famine was an inevitable Malthusian catastrophe falling on a uniquely backward society, may explain the sidelining of the catastrophe's significant European dimensions.

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