Ideology and the Famine

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At the heart of recent historical controversies over the Great Famine has been the question of responsibility. In the last few years a number of historians have questioned what had come to be the orthodox view that the governments of the day did all that could reasonably be expected of them within the constraints of the time. ‘Revisionist’ historians writing since the 1950s have been accused of adopting a tone of ‘generosity and restraint’ when considering the state’s response to the crisis. Criticism has been fuelled by Brendan Bradshaw’s plea that the emotive and catastrophic aspects of the Irish past be re-incorporated into academic history-writing. These new developments in the study of the Famine have re-opened many old debates, while by no means endorsing the populist-nationalist interpretations encapsulated by Gavan Duffy’s charge that the Famine was ‘a fearful murder committed on the mass of the people’. Rather, they have sought to transcend the sterile polarity between nationalist ‘mythology’ and revisionist debunking, by taking seriously the bitter popular and folk traditions of the Famine, and by questioning the soothing platitudes which have appeared in some accounts.

The role of British government has come under renewed scrutiny as to the extent it can be held responsible for the Famine mortality of over one million in five years. This is a complex issue, as it is subject to other important considerations such as the bureaucratic capabilities of the early Victorian state. These matters are dealt with in detail elsewhere – what concerns us here are the ideological motivations and constraints on ministers, and the effects of these on the formation of policy. The focus will be on the Whig-liberal govern-

ment that presided over the worst years of the Famine from mid-1846 to mid-1849.

Ideology is understood here as the framework of ideas – the world-view – that moulded how individuals and groups perceived the problems that faced them. Ideological constructions circumscribed the interpretation of such catastrophes as the potato blight and the resultant famine. They were significant in determining what were acceptable modes and levels of response to the crisis, giving legitimacy to some and not others. Ideology must also be considered in a dynamic sense as the competition of rival ideas for supremacy in the political sphere. The political fault-lines were numerous and shifting: between Great Britain and Ireland, between class groupings in each country, between administrators and politicians, between, and more importantly within, political parties. The importance of ideologically-driven individuals in formulating policy has been recognised by previous writers; Cecil Woodham-Smith’s spirited if somewhat narrow castigation of Charles Trevelyan being the classic case. But if the role of ideology is to be properly understood, it must be linked to a detailed study of the political history of the Famine years, and of the broader public and intellectual context of British politics.

The allocation of responsibility for actions a century and half ago poses serious historical problems. Historians risk falling into gross anachronism in attempting to pass judgement on long-dead individuals. Yet, while allowing for an inevitable present-oriented bias on the historian’s part, the attempt should be made. The question then arises whether intentions or consequences should be the criteria for judgement. Any neglect of the adverse consequences of policy may be treated as culpable, if it can be shown that these were public knowledge. Yet it is the active intentions of policymakers that may be considered more reprehensible. An evaluation of responsibility thus requires an understanding of the debates of the time, and the existence of articulated and feasible alternatives to the policies actually implemented. That such choices were perceived to exist in the later 1840s, and that they were linked to ideological differences, is sug-
sission for Irish woes; there was a consensus that Ireland could not follow the English path to development without aid. Government action was thought legitimate to build a public infrastructure and provide education, and both the Irish Board of Works and National Education system had strong orthodox support. Indeed, the poor inquiry chaired by Senior’s friend, Archbishop Whately, reported in 1836 that more remunerative works, and some assisted emigration were vital for Ireland. Not surprisingly, a number of ‘improving’ Irish landowners came to put their trust in classical prescriptions.

The relief of destitution, whether endemic or due to exceptional causes, was a greater problem for orthodox thinkers. Senior and his associates resolutely opposed the extension of a compulsory poor law to Ireland, on the grounds that in such a poor country, it would drain scarce resources away from employment into ‘useless’ relief to the able-bodied. Moreover, Irish living conditions were thought so bad that no workhouse or labour test could prevent abuses. Their failure to prevent Whig governments introducing first a limited Irish poor law in 1838, and then extending this as the central plank of Famine-relief policy in 1847, demonstrates the limited influence of Senior and his allies over policy-making at pivotal times. Orthodox economics was more important in the broad appeal of its arguments for rejecting ‘visionary’ experiments affecting existing property rights, and for producing a climate of opinion that prioritised economic development over the relief of suffering, even in conditions of social catastrophe.

Several variant forms of economic thought were at least as significant. What became known as the ‘Manchester school’ was more radical, extreme and optimistic. It drew on general principles of orthodox thought, such as the desirability of free trade and laissez-faire, popularised them and rendered them more dogmatic. Lacking any outstanding theorists, this group was committed to campaigning for changes in state policy, and was most influential among the politicised middle classes and in the liberal press. The Anti-Corn Law League was its initial focus; after 1846 it turned
towards a more direct assault on landowners and their social privileges as obstacles to economic development.  

This class antagonism differentiated the Manchester school from orthodox thinkers, but more important was their adherence to a labour theory of value – the doctrine that capital is merely accumulated labour. From this flowed the idea that economic backwardness stemmed not from under-capitalisation, but from restrictions on the freedom of labour and the use of resources. When applied to Ireland these ideas rejected Malthusian pessimism entirely: Ireland was seen as potentially an extremely wealthy country that could support several times its current population. What was required were measures to force Irish landowners to employ the poor, and a ‘free trade in land’ to facilitate their replacement by agricultural entrepreneurs if the current owners failed.  

Manchester-school economics appealed primarily to radical politicians and their constituencies, but a number of leading Whig-liberals were also drawn towards its optimistic dynamism and faith in progress.

A second offshoot from classical economics was that associated with a smaller group of heterodox writers in the 1840s. Theoretically more sophisticated than the Manchester school, they shared much of its optimism and criticism of aristocracy. They differed most in their support for alternative models of Irish development to that of crude Anglicisation. William Thornton, John Stuart Mill and George Poulett Scoope agreed that it was the relationship of landlord and tenant that lay at the root of Irish economic backwardness: all looked positively on the alternative model of peasant proprietorship existing in other European countries and in the Channel Islands. Once predatory landlordism had been restrained and peasants secured in their holdings, they believed the ‘magic of property’ would create the necessary motivation for investment and exertion from below. Detailed suggestions as to how such a revolution in agrarian power-relationships could be brought about were more troublesome, but all these writers agreed that the Famine presented the government with an opportunity to intervene to reconstruct Irish society, preferably by confiscating waste and uncultivated lands for reclamation by the rural poor.

This heterodox argument coincided with an increasingly vociferous popular agitation in Ireland for land reforms. For a number of Whig politicians anxious to defuse the cry for Repeal by granting a measure of ‘Justice to Ireland’, such ideas were particularly attractive. Lord John Russell and his Lord Lieutenant, Lord Bessborough, had a reputation for reformist co-operation with O’Connell. They identified themselves with the populist or ‘Foxy’ tradition of Whiggery rather than with orthodox liberalism, and were anxious to introduce ‘some great scheme’ for Ireland in 1846. The intensification of the Famine was to expose both the limitations of this commitment and their political weakness, but the interventionist leanings of this group of senior Whigs should not be underestimated.

All these schools of thought interpreted the Famine disaster in the light of their own diagnoses of the ‘Irish problem’ and plans for Irish reconstruction. The very scale of the crisis tended to push each towards an inflexible insistence on their own preferred panaceas. These economic ideologies were in turn variously affected by a pervasive religious mode of thought, which tended to reinforce such rigidity. This was Providentialism, the doctrine that human affairs are regulated by a divine agency for human good. More an interpretative language than a unified body of thought, Providentialism took several forms. What concerns us here is the extent to which ideological stances on the Famine were validated and intensified by the widespread belief that the potato blight had been sent by God for an ascertainable purpose.

Ultra-Protestants predictably saw the blight as divine vengeance against Irish Catholicism and on the British state that had recently committed such ‘national sins’ as endowing the Catholic seminary at Maynooth. Yet as this faction was effectively marginalised in the national politics of the later 1840s, anti-Catholicism played little explicit part in government policy during the Famine. Many more interpreted the ‘visitation’ as a warning against personal and national pride and extravagance, and as an inducement to engage in
charitable works for Ireland. The state gave some endorse-
ment to this view by instituting a ‘national day of fast and
humiliation’ and supporting the establishment of the British
Association for relief in early 1847. For some, like the inde-
fatigable American Asenath Nicholson and numerous Quak-
er groups scattered across Ireland, the Christian duty of
charity continued to dominate their actions throughout the
Famine. But for many in Britain, charitable feelings existed
alongside a strong desire to see the fundamental changes in
Ireland they believed would prevent any need for repeating
such private generosity.

What gave Providentialism some degree of ideological
coherence was the existence of a Christian political economy
that had evolved alongside the classical tradition in eco-
nomics. Clerical economists such as Chalmers, Sumner and
Copleston had a profound influence over a British social elite
that was imbued with the ethos of evangelical Protestantism.
They urged governments to remove restrictions to economic
freedom less to promote economic growth, than to subject
individuals to the moral discipline of the ‘natural economic
laws’ instituted by God. ‘Direct’ acts of Providence, such as
the potato blight, could be interpreted in this tradition as
special ‘mercies’, sent to oblige men to remove artificial
obstacles to the divine order. Sir Robert Peel’s tying of the
potato blight of 1845 to the policy of removing the Corn
Laws can be read in this light. The British obsession with
free trade in food from 1846 reflected the power of this ide-
ological connection.

Many of the better-known Christian political economists
were conservative and evangelical, and were most influen-
tial over Peel and his followers. Yet as with classical eco-
nomics, popularised and radicalised forms of the doctrine
had a greater impact on the early Victorian middle classes
and their political leaders. Providentialism blended with
Manchester school economics to produce a moralistic read-
ing of the Irish crisis, that put the blame for the state of Irish
society squarely on the moral failings of Irishmen of all
classes. Consequently the Famine was welcomed as an God-
given opportunity to enforce a policy that would transform
Irish behaviour. Moralism was embraced by Whig-liberals
such as Earl Grey, Charles Wood, Sir George Grey and the
civil servant Charles Trevelyan, who sought to place them-
selves at the head of radical public opinion, and who were
deeply infused with evangelical piety. The political con-
sequences of this were summed up by Trevelyan in October
1846:

I think I see a bright light shining in the distance through the
dark cloud which at present hangs over Ireland ... The deep
and inveterate root of Social evil remain[s], and I hope I am not
guilty of irreverence in thinking that, this being altogether be-
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position."

In assessing the motivations for government action, it is always necessary to consider not only the ideological and political forces, but the nature of administrative practice and organisation. Much of what any government does in response to imperative problems is to follow procedures laid down by precedent, and this was to some extent true of reaction to the Irish Famine. The policy adopted by Peel's government in 1845-6 owed much to earlier famine-relief actions and reliance on existing structures. Yet the continuities can be overstated. Underlying Peel's response was a belief that the potato failure of 1845 heralded the beginning of a profound social transformation in Ireland, and that the repeal of the Corn Laws created a new context for Irish development. All leading politicians grasped that the Great Famine required new directions in policy.

Government officials in Ireland were no more immune to the prevailing moods of opinion than were ministers. Commissariat officers often expressed the conviction that relief measures should, as one put it, 'as far as it is possible, have a view to the future, however discouraging they may be in initio, and be mainly directed towards developing the productive and remunerative powers of the country'. Nevertheless, administrators on the ground in Ireland were also developing a particular ethos of their own, that to some extent counter-balanced the orthodox or moralist obsessions with the economy as a whole. A Benthamite concern for the efficient operations of institutions established for specified purposes - to distribute food, to organise public works and to provide relief through the poor law - stressed the immediate and the welfare aspects of state action rather than the long-term consequences. The impact of this administrative ideology was curbed by Trevelyan's dictatorial omniscience at the Treasury and frustrated by lack of resources and resistance from local notables, but it became the dominant attitude of a Dublin Castle executive increasingly at odds with London."

THE SECOND AND TOTAL potato failure fell on a new Whig-

liberal minority government led by Lord John Russell that was far from ready for the task. The ministry itself was more a coalition of 'reformers' than a unified party with a shared ideological position, and it was subject to shifting political balances in parliament and in the country at a time of widespread agitation and flux. Irish policy was a point of contention for the various factions associated with the ideologies outlined above. Virtually the government's only shared commitment was to upholding free trade against any revived Protectionist threat. The ideological power of this doctrine, when combined with the political imperative of keeping intact the government's main raison d'être, conspired to rule out anything more than marginal tinkering with the Irish food supply. The consequences of this refusal to intervene in the terrible winter of 1846-7 were fateful."

In the aftermath of the 1846 failure it was widely believed in British political circles that Ireland could never return to its previous condition, and that a great and inevitable 'social revolution' was under way. Political debate centred on the question of how to relieve the poor threatened by starvation, in such a way as to prevent the recurrence of famine. Opinions varied according to attitudes towards Irish landlordism and widely divergent beliefs about the size of the Irish wages-fund: that is, the amount of capital it was thought possible to mobilise within Ireland for the employment of labour. Irish landlords themselves argued that this was normally at an absolute minimal level, and demanded state help to promote private as well as public development. English Conservatives and moderate liberals usually agreed that the wages-fund was low and that long-term aid through work projects and drainage loans were desirable, while remaining critical of the lax attitudes of many Irish landlords. Russell's circle were not averse to state investment in the Irish infrastructure, but they shared a tendency with moralists and radicals to see the wages-fund as high, believing that landlords and large farmers were squandering or hoarding their resources, which they had amassed by ruthlessly exploiting the peasantry. Moralists parted company with others in claiming that the destitute population
could be supported and the economy reconstructed simultaneously by measures of economic coercion. It was not enough for relief measures to provide the poor with the means of survival, they should do so in such a way as to discourage a culture of dependency and coerce the proprietors into undertaking their moral responsibilities."

If the moralists sought to control Irish policy from 1846, they did not have it all their own way. Adjustments made to the public works legislation inherited from Peel were limited and were intended to eliminate abuse and manipulation by landlords and farmers. Against strong resistance from Wood (now Chancellor of the Exchequer), Bessborough succeeded in extending the scope of the works to include some projects of private interest, but this was insufficient to stem the growing dissatisfaction with the system on all sides. By December 1846, reports of the horrors of mass starvation at Skibbereen and other places demonstrated that traditional forms of relief were failing."

The initiative behind the radical departures agreed in January 1847 came not primarily from politicians but from the professional administrators. Thomas Larcom, then a senior relief official in the Board of Works, argued that labour and relief should be kept conceptually and practically apart. Relief through public works had produced little of value at vast expense, had drained labour from agricultural cultivation, and had failed to prevent the masses of ‘helpless’ and ‘impotent’ poor from suffering high mortality. Bessborough and Russell conceded that the scale of the 1846–7 crisis demanded humanitarian aid in food, followed by the permanent extension of the poor law to give a right to relief to both the able-bodied and helpless destitute. The principle of relief by means of the poor law attracted a degree of consensus in January 1847 because it meant different things to different people and because the existing system was clearly indefensible. It was only on the implementation of the extended poor law from September 1847 that the huge gulf of interpretative differences became manifest.

The temporary relief act of February 1847, establishing government supervised and assisted soup kitchens issuing free rations to the destitute, was an unprecedented innovation, but a temporary and transitional one. The political circumstances that allowed the act to pass also constrained its acceptability to a fixed period of time. British public opinion, saturated by graphic accounts of Famine horrors in the press, and stirred by a genuine, if ill-informed and temperamental humanitarian sensibility, was prepared to accept a degree of state intervention until the next harvest (so long as Irish ratepayers would ultimately be liable). The feeling remained strong that responsibility still lay with the proprietors who had tolerated and exploited the rise of a potato-dependent ‘surplus’ population, and that they should be made to pay for the costs of social transition. This was the logic, shared by most parliamentary liberals, that lay behind the decision to throw relief on the poor law as soon as that ‘exceptional’ season ended. What was at issue in the session of 1847 was whether any concessions should be made to landlords in the working of the act, and what degree of government help for economic reconstruction should be provided.

Despite moralist pressure that assistance should be kept to a minimum to shock proprietors and people into a programme of ameliorative self-help, a Land Improvement Act was passed to give loans to proprietors. These were taken up by only a few large solvent landlords, but the legislation neutralised Peelite and moderate opposition to the extended poor law. Russell’s waste land reclamation bill, drawn up in co-operation with his Foxite colleagues Bessborough and Morpeth, was central to his personal legislative plan in 1847. The scheme was a radical one – to create peasant proprietors on Irish waste lands compulsorily purchased and reclaimed with help from the state. This bill was in line with the Foxite view of the limitations of landlords’ rights, and was similar to schemes advocated by John Stuart Mill and by Poulett Scrope. However, the measure was first trimmed in cabinet by moderates anxious for the full security of property rights, and then savaged in parliament by Peel and Lord Stanley as an unwarranted interference in the sphere of private enterprise, and Russell was forced to drop it. When considered in the light of the sympathy expressed by Russell and Bess-
borough for a form of tenant-right which was far in advance of the negative views of most British politicians, this initiative calls into question the assumption frequently made that Whigs were inherently more dogmatic and rigid in their adherence to economic orthodoxy than Conservatives.

The 1847 poor law bill was rejected in principle by orthodox thinkers; Senior had become convinced by this time that the potato-failure had left Ireland over-populated by a redundant mass of two million people, and that there were no 'safe' means of giving outdoor relief. His position was, however, compromised by its close association with the intransigent opposition of Irish landlords led by Montagle and Whately, which did nothing but confirm the government's and parliament's insistence upon the bill. The character of the measure was, however, substantially altered by amendments forced on the government by Stanley as the English Conservatives' price for allowing it through the house of lords. Chief amongst these was William Gregory's infamous quarter acre clause, which denied relief to tenants holding more than a quarter of an acre of land, and which turned the act into a charter for land clearance and consolidation. A cabinet majority of moderates and moralists supported the Gregory clause as a weapon necessary for forcing the pace of transition to an Anglicised social and economic structure, and Russell was persuaded to accept it as a spur to greater cultivation. It was bitterly resented by Edward Twiselton, the chief poor law commissioner in Ireland, as a major cause of extensive misery and death, and after an intensive struggle it was partially mitigated in the interests of tenants' dependants in May 1848.

It is generally agreed that the British government deserves most criticism for abandoning Ireland with only the inadequate poor law for support from the autumn of 1847, in effect leaving the country to the workings of 'natural causes'. Vast American imports made food readily available, and the state had proved its administrative capacity by providing up to three million daily rations in summer 1847 and at an unexpectedly low cost, yet little was done to meet the widespread destitution that continued to summer 1849 and beyond.

For at least part of the explanation we must look to the strengthening of the moralists' hand in policy-making. Two significant changes took place in August 1847 simultaneously with the running down of the soup kitchens. Firstly, a general election produced heavy Protectionist losses and a small majority of Whig-liberal M.P.s. This did not necessarily strengthen Russell's position, as many of the new M.P.s were middle-class radicals who looked to Cobden, Bright and Hume for membership, and several ministers were defeated in popular constituencies. Russell drew the conclusion that 'we have in the opinion of Great Britain done too much for Ireland and have lost elections for doing so'. As the radicals came to hold a balance of power, Wood and Grey were further empowered. The Chancellor's comment that 'the struggle in Ireland is to force them into self-government ... our song ... must be - "It is your concern, not ours"', chimed with the dominant British mood. Secondly, the potato did not fail in 1847; few were planted and few harvested, but the apparent absence of any direct sign of Divine intent allowed Trevelyan to declare that the Famine was over, and that no further extraordinary measures could be justified.

Popular feelings on this were reinforced by the British banking crisis and financial crash of October 1847, which further boosted middle-class radicalism in its obsessive drive to retrench state expenditure. Government relief in Ireland was particularly targeted. Wood was thus not overly dismayed by the defeat of the 1848 budget, which had included a substantial increase in British income tax to meet the weight of Irish and defence expenditure, and which had been introduced by Russell. The setback allowed him to use the excuse that 'the British people have made up their minds to pay no more for Irish landlords' to reject Clarendon's increasingly frantic appeals for more aid. Russell's attempts to circumvent this obstacle by means of a state loan were blocked in cabinet by an alliance of moralists threatening a revolt of 'distressed English manufacturers' and moderates rejecting any additional taxation on Irish land or incomes.

There is no doubt that traditional anti-Irishness played a
role in this British hostility; racial and cultural stereotypes were common in the press. An upsurge of agrarian violence in late 1847, and the nationalist activity culminating in the abortive rebellion of 1848, further convinced many of Irish ingratitude for English 'generosity' in 1847. Yet the most striking aspect of British opinion was the inclusion of Irish landowners in this moral censure. When the potato failed again in 1848, the dominant view was that Providence had again intervened to discipline all classes into the exertion and self-reliance necessary to maximise the use of undeveloped Irish resources.

This is the political context in which we should see Clarendon's outburst to Russell quoted above. On his arrival in Ireland in July 1847, the new Lord Lieutenant shared many of the assumptions of Wood and Grey. His conversion was rapid and profound; within a few months he had come under the influence of the senior Irish administrators based in Dublin Castle, and shared their view that the saving of human life was imperative (although to Clarendon perhaps more for political than humanitarian reasons). While continuing to defend the broad outlines of government policy when pressed by Irish landlords, he demanded increased grants to assist the impoverished areas where the poor law was collapsing, and to help improving landlords through assisted emigration and other remedial measures.

The correspondence between Clarendon and Russell reflected not antagonism but increasingly a shared concern. The two men collaborated in drawing up remedial proposals, with Russell travelling to Dublin in September 1848 to finalise their plans. Nevertheless, although the prime minister was prepared to threaten resignation in early 1849 if the cabinet rejected his assisted emigration proposals, this and all his other plans proved abortive. Russell had lost authority over his cabinet, and found his own position increasingly marked by confusion and indecision in the face of ideological certainty. On the failure of anything but the most modest of measures, he fell back on self-justifying rhetorical defences based on his continuing antagonism towards proprietors, and on the 'inevitability' of mass suffering. Unable to choose between the imperatives of philanthropy and economy, Russell sought to steer an untenable middle course, and in the process presided over the decimation of the Irish people.

If what Clarendon denounced as the 'extreme doctrines of the Economists' had triumphed in the cabinet, they were not unchallenged in parliament. After nearly three years of passive support for Russell's measures, Peel called in March 1849 for the abandonment of 'demoralising' outdoor relief on the poor law, the introduction of a fixed maximum rate, and a return to the principle of remunerative public works to support the poor and assist improving landlords. Prompted by Russell's failure to propose any remedial measures at the start of the 1849 session, and angered along with Clarendon at the apparent abandonment of the west to starvation, Peel was also concerned at what he took to be the total exhaustion of the wages-fund there. However, it is doubtful that this part of Peel's plan, even had it not been so repugnant to majority parliamentary opinion, would have been effective in saving many lives. The administrators of the Board of Works and poor law commission had no intention of easily accepting a return to the system discredited in winter 1846-7, and of abandoning the principle of the separation of labour and relief. Their argument was reinforced by the fact that the majority on outdoor relief in the west were in the swollen classes of widows, orphans and the infirm whose vulnerability would be increased by a further upheaval in the organisation of relief.

Two other elements were strongly stressed in Peel's 1849 plan, but in contrast to the first, these attracted a wider degree of parliamentary consensus. One of these was that Ireland must demonstrate a degree of exertion before Britain could be expected to give further aid. Preferring the extension of the income tax to Ireland (as did Russell), but thinking it inexpedient at present, Peel urged instead the imposition of a rate-in-aid levied on all the poor law unions in Ireland for the support of the western distressed unions, in return for further loans. His other recommendation was for a strong measure to force the sale of encumbered estates in the
west to new, active proprietors. The language Peel used in advocating this – suggesting a ‘new plantation’ of Connacht by British landlords and capitalist farmers – clashed with some Whiggish sensibilities, but it was this initiative that led to the major legislative enactment of 1849. Moralists like Wood had long been committed to an encumbered estates bill as the best mode of facilitating social transition in the west by sweeping away the existing irresponsible or indebted owners and replacing them with men of different values and available capital. To Wood, as to Peel, ‘free trade in land’ was the logical climax of response to the Irish crisis that had made ‘free trade in corn’ so vital in 1845–6.9

In retrospect, the most realistic alternative to the moralist relief policy was presented by the Irish executive and administration under Bessborough and Clarendon. Although bound by the constraints of early Victorian administrative thinking, the Irish administration was probably the most advanced and interventionist in Europe, and was staffed by committed and conscientious men of high quality such as Larcom, Griffith, and Twisleton. These officers recognised that the crisis of relief after 1847 resolved ultimately into a question of money skilfully distributed via reformed and efficient structures to specific areas and needs. Their bitterness at the state’s unwillingness or inability to respond effectively to the ongoing crisis is demonstrated by Twisleton’s decision to resign over the termination of all direct parliamentary subsidies and the planned imposition of the rate-in-aid in spring 1849. Writing to Russell on 12 March, Clarendon explained Twisleton’s motives: ‘He thinks the destitution here is so horrible, the indifference of the House of Commons to it so manifest, that he is an unfit agent of a policy that must be one of extermination.’9

The charge of culpable neglect of the consequences of policies leading to mass starvation is indisputable. That a conscious choice to pursue moral or economic objectives at the expense of human life was made by several ministers is also demonstrable. Russell’s government can thus be held responsible for the failure to honour its own pledge to use ‘the whole credit of the Treasury and the means of the country ... as is our bounden duty to use them ... to avert famine, and to maintain the people of Ireland’.9

Yet to single out the government alone for blame is to oversimplify. Alternative policies proposed by members of the governing elite in England might have some effect in reducing mortality levels, but what ruled these out was the strength of the British public opinion manifested in parliament and particularly in the commercial and industrial constituencies. During the Famine years the British economy went through a crisis that mobilised an assertive middle-class political opinion. Amid the confusion, those most in line with this sentiment, and those (as in the cases of Wood and Trevelyan) ready to exploit it, were at a political advantage. Thus the ideas of moralism, supported by Providentialism and a Manchester-school reading of classical economics, proved the most potent of British interpretations of the Irish Famine. What these led to was not a policy of deliberate genocide, but a dogmatic refusal to recognise that measures intended ‘to encourage industry, to do battle with sloth and despair; to awake a manly feeling of inward confidence and reliance on the justice of Heaven’,9 were based on false premises, and in the Irish conditions of the later 1840s amounted to a sentence of death on many thousands.
26 O Grada, Ireland: A New Economic History, p. 185.
27 Dublin Medical Press, 3 November 1847, p. 276.
37 See, for instance, Corrigan, On Famine and Fever, p. 26; Poor Inquiry (Ireland), appendix B, part 2, supplement, pp. 1–262; Second report from the select Committee on the Contagious Fever in Ireland, British Parliamentary Papers, 1818 (559) vii, pp. 15–16.

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5 O Grada’s seminal work on the Irish famine is somewhat marred by a desire to add Nassau Senior and James Wilson to the list of demonised individuals, while seeing no way of measuring their influence. Close political analysis may serve as a suitable (if non-quantitative) method for doing so. See Cormac Ó Grada, Ireland: a New Economic History 1780–1939 (Oxford, 1994), pp. 191–4.
6 Clarendon to Russell, 10 August 1847, Clarendon Deposit Irish, Bodleian Library, Oxford, letterbook I.
13 Senior’s bitterness at his marginalisation is expressed in ‘The relief of Irish distress in 1847 and 1848’, Edinburgh Review, LXXXIX (1849), pp. 221–68.
15 See John Bright, Hansard, third series, XCV, pp. 986–8 (13 December 1847).
20 Hansard, LXXXVIII, p. 346 (5 August 1846: Russell).
21 For a more detailed account of the role of Providentialism in the Famine, see Peter Gray, Potatoes and Providence: British Government’s responses to the Great Famine, Bulfin: an Irish Studies Journal, 1/1 (Spring 1994), pp. 75–90.
22 Hugh McNelis, The Famine a Real or God: its provoking Cause, its Merciful Design (Liverpool, 1847); John Poynder, The late fast (London, 1847).


27 See, for example, [Anon], God’s Laws Versus Corn Laws: A Letter ... From a Dignitary of the English Church (London, 1846).

28 The Times, 8, 22 September 1846.

29 Trevelyan to Montague, 9 October 1846, Montague Papers MS 13,397/11, National Library of Ireland, Dublin.


35 Sir R. Routh to Trevelyan, 13 August 1846, Deputy Commissary-General Dobree to Trevelyan, 14 September 1846, Correspondence, from July 1846 to January 1847, Relating to the Measures Adopted for the Relief of Distress in Ireland (Commissariat series), British Parliamentary Papers 1847 [761], LI, pp. 7–8, 73–4.


37 Bessborough and Russell were aware that public works would prove futile if the market failed to provide food at prices in line with wages, but both failed to challenge the Treasury dogma that parliament could not regulate the price of grain, Bessborough to Russell, 13 September 1846, Wood to Russell, 23 September 1846, Russell Papers, Public Record Office, London 30/22/SC, fos 144–8, 326–7; Russell to Bessborough, 15 October, C.P. Gooch (ed.), The Later Correspondence of Lord John Russell, 1840–78 (2 vols, London, 1925), I, p. 154.


39 Robert Collins, Two Letters Addressed to the Rt. Hon. Henry Labouchere ... on the Extreme Distress of the Poor (Dublin, 1846).


45 Larcom memo, January 1847, Larcom papers, National Library of Ireland, Dublin, MS 7745.


47 The Times, 26 January 1847; Morning Chronicle, 26, 28 January 1847; [Anon], Irish Improvisation Encouraged by English Bounty; Being a Remonstrance against the Government Projects for Irish Relief (London, 1847).


51 Senior to (Whately), 20 April 1847, Montague Papers, MS 13,397/10.


53 This seems to have been Gregory’s intention, see Hansard, XXI, pp. 585–7 (29 March 1847).


55 Copies of the Correspondence ... as to the Construction of the 10th Section of the Act 10 Vict. c. 31, British Parliamentary Papers 1847–8 (442), LI, pp. 519–23; Clarendon to Claricarde, 7 June 1848, Claricarde Papers, bundle 48, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Leeds.


57 Russell to Clarendon, 2 August 1847, Clarendon Deposit Irish box 43.


60 Russell to Clarendon, 17 November 1847, Clarendon Deposit Irish box 43.

61 Clarendon to Wood, 30 March 1848, ibid, letterbook II; Wood to Clarendon, 3 April, Hickleton Papers, A4/185/2.
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2 Third Report of His Majesty’s Commissioners for Inquiry into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland 1836 (35), xxx.

3 George Nichols, undertook a nine week tour in 1837, but returned for a further brief visit following the death of William IV. Report by George Nichols to his Majesty’s Secretary of State for the Home Department, 69, 1837, L.L. Letter from Nichols to Lord John Russell, Report by George Nichols ... on Poor Laws, Ireland, pp. 9–11.

5 1 and 2 Vic. c. 56. An Act for the more Effectual Relief of the Destitute Poor in Ireland (31 July 1838); M. E. Rose, The Relief of Poverty, 1834–1914 (Second ed. 1986).


8 Poor Law Commissioners to D. Phelan, Assistant Poor Law Commissioner (APLC) (Letter Books of J. Burke, NAD) 18 October 1842; Minute Books of Dunfanaghy Workhouse, 1843; Eleventh and Twelfth Annual Reports of Poor Law Commissioners, 1845 and 1846.

9 George Nichols, A History of the English Poor Law (London, 1898 edn.).


12 Report to Chief Secretary, Chief Secretary’s Office Registered Papers, 73/4145 (Chief Secretary’s Office, Registral Papers, National Archive, Dublin) 7 January 1839; ibid., R. Hall, APLC, 1907, 20 June 1842; Nichols, Irish Poor Law, p. 258; Minute of Poor Law Commissioners, Commission on Poor Relief, 1905, p. 15; Eighth Annual Report of Poor Law Commissioners, 1842, p. 50.


17 Routh to Trevelyan, 14 February 1847, 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, 1847 (735), pp. 33–7.


21 Summary of weekly returns of paupers in the workhouses in Ireland, Appendix to Twelfth Annual Report, p. 168.

22 Minute Books of Louthwestorng (Irvinestown) Guardians, 29 October 1845, 12 November 1845, 7 January 1846.

23 Minute Book of Inishowen union, 16 November 1845; Minute Book of Belfast union, 11 November 1845; Twelfth Annual Report, 1846, p. 51.