Reimagining Ireland

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Global Legacies of the Great Irish Famine

Transnational and Interdisciplinary Perspectives
Famine history. While the lines of continuity between then and now can be, and have been, articulated in overly simplistic terms, their total refutation – and the resulting vacuum – has itself negative consequences, wherein, for example, objections to the genocide thesis can be heard as having an apolitical hollowness and proponents of the thesis as having a greater affective power. At stake in current historiographical debates are urgent issues relating to our contemporary structures of knowledge: how a historical knowledge of the Great Irish Famine is being communicated to a new 'post-commemoration' generation, in what form and in what relationship to previous generations, are questions which deserve our conscious reflection and continuing engagement.

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PETER GRAY

The Great Famine in Irish and British Historiographies, c. 1860–1914

Self-consciously ‘historical’ writing on the Great Famine began even before the catastrophe had ended. Notoriously, Charles Edward Trevelyan prefaced his semi-official *The Irish Crisis* (1848) with the claim that it was desirable ‘thus early to review, with the calm temper of a future generation, the history of the great Irish famine of 1847.’ Trevelyan’s narrative was suffused with an ideological analysis of the events, the state’s response and the anticipated outcomes that amounted to an apologia for both his own role in famine administration and the government he served. It was also clearly an early intervention attempting to shape subsequent ‘historical’ accounts. It is hardly surprising, then, that it was countered by another active participant in the events of the later 1840s, the radical nationalist John Mitchel, whose conviction and transportation in the spring of 1848 merely interrupted – rather than curtailed – his journalistic attacks on British government as the author of all Ireland’s sufferings.¹

Trevelyan’s and Mitchel’s exchanges initiated the formative period in the historicization of the Famine between the event itself and the outbreak of the First World War that forms the subject of this essay. Irish nationalist historical writing in the later nineteenth century has attracted the critical attention of a number of modern writers, most usefully that of


² For the development of Mitchel’s ‘theory’ of the Famine in 1847–8, see James Quinn, *John Mitchel* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2008), 18–22.
James S. Donnelly succinctly summarized the leading elements of the nationalist historiographical tradition that emerged in the first half-century of the famine – the emphasis on food exports, landlord clearances, following the Famine – and subjected these to critical evaluation. While indebted to Donnelly's work, I want to suggest that rather than a single historiographical tradition, distinct positions are discernible, arising in part from different stances adopted in the later 1840s and in reaction to the social and constitutional crises that followed. I also want to draw some attention to an 'Irish Catholic' historical memory of the Famine, which overlaps in many respects with the nationalist tradition but nevertheless features its own emphases and interpretive preoccupations, and is sometimes at odds with the radical nationalist interpretation associated with John Mitchel and his followers. Irish liberals also struggled with the legacy and meaning of the Famine, especially as confidence in the initially 'optimistic' readings of its consequences collapsed in the 1860s. Conservative Irish unionists might choose to ignore the Famine, or attribute it in a reductionist manner to the social and political 'backwardness' of a Catholic and Gaelic south and west, but many liberals (and later liberal unionists) in both Ireland and Britain sought to make historical sense of the catastrophe, not least because of the leading place it came to hold in the contemporary nationalist challenge to the Union.

While the 'contemporary' history of the 1840s occupied only a marginal (at best) place in the concerns of the still very limited academic or professional historiography of both Britain and Ireland in this period, the highly politicized and public controversies over Irish history between historians such as Froude, Lecky and Goldwin Smith, as well as their public critics, led to some discussion of the meaning of the Famine in these circles. To a limited extent, a Famine 'memory' was also created within the British historiographical tradition in these years, albeit without quite the same degree of emotional engagement evident in Irish discourses.

In the decades following 1850, the boundaries between political and social commentary and the writing of 'contemporary' history in Ireland were highly porous. Many of the controversial issues associated with the Famine – most prominently British governance of Ireland, landlordism and land reform, mass emigration, the tension between revolutionary and constitutional nationalisms and confessional relationships – remained live political concerns, animated by the series of political crises that dominated the political landscape up to 1914. Although alarm over Irish food security faded from the 1880s onwards (after 'near famine' scares in 1860–3 and 1879–80), the personal memory of the Famine catastrophe remained a real phenomenon for the generation that had witnessed and survived the disaster. Imposing a politically useful meaning on the Famine, and communicating this to Irish society and its diasporic extension, was a priority for many publicly active individuals in the Irish intelligentsia. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that early accounts of the Famine should have been highly instrumentalized and orientated towards enhancing a sense of national self-awareness by narrating the shared sufferings of the 'Irish people' and identifying the perpetrators of that suffering as a hostile or at best culpably indifferent British government on the one hand, and what was represented as a fundamentally alien Anglo-Irish landlord class on the other. Elements of the Famine experience that could not easily be assimilated into an instrumentalizing calculus of guilt and reparation tended to be marginalized or suppressed.

Mitchel’s 'History'

There is a strong continuity between the nationalist newspaper coverage and political commentary in pamphlets and memoirs of the 1840s and 1850s, and the first ostensibly 'historical' accounts of the Famine appearing from the early 1860s. Again, it was no surprise that the pioneers in this
process were political activists associated with the Young Ireland group of the 1840s. From its coalescence around the Nation newspaper in 1842, this circle of public intellectuals had placed particular emphasis on the role of popular patriotic history as a mode of educating and mobilizing the Irish people in national self-consciousness. The histories of the cheap Library of Ireland series, disseminated through Repeal reading rooms, had been a means to this end. Dispersed as a consequence of the abortive 1848 rebellion, a number of Young Ireland survivors, including Thomas D’Arcy McGee, turned to contemporary history in the wake of the Famine.4

However, it was John Mitchel who was to produce the archetypal radical nationalist account of the Famine, rendered accessible and comprehensible, as Patrick O’Farrell observed, in an essentially historical way.5 His text appeared initially in the form of serialized letters to Congressman Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia published in his newspaper the Southern Citizen in 1858–9, and then as The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps) in 1861. Mitchel’s book was widely circulated on both sides of the Atlantic, but retained its original character of a political tract directed principally at an American audience – an impression emphasized by its title. However, the same material appeared again in reworked form a few years later, now recategorized explicitly as a work of Irish history. In 1868, Mitchel published his History of Ireland from the Treaty of Limerick to the Present Time. Despite his disingenuous claim that ‘the reader will find in the present work very few theories or opinions put forward at all; the method and style, and indeed the purpose of the History was at one with his other works – to indict British government in Ireland as unremittingly oppressive.

4 See for instance Thomas D’Arcy McGee, A History of the Irish Settlers in North America: From the Earliest Times to the Census of 1830 (Boston, MA: Office of the American Celt, 1831), 139–41. This included a seven-page chapter on the Famine, but devoted more space to praising US charitable responses.


exortionate and ultimately murderous towards the people of Ireland. In this way, Mitchel urged the reader to support a war à l’ouragne against Britain to avenge the wrongs of the past and free Ireland from colonial thraldom, for ‘if Irishmen are ever to enjoy the rights of human beings, the British empire must first perish’.

This then, is the interpretive schema within which Mitchel located the Famine – as one manifestation, albeit the most naked and ruthless in modern history, of an irreconcilable struggle for mastery and domination of Britain and its rulers over Ireland. Mass mortality in the later 1840s, it follows, was not the accidental outcome of catastrophic crop failure or the consequence of government incompetence, weakness or even indifference in the face of difficult circumstances, but a willed campaign of extermination against the Irish people. In the three chapters he devotes to the Famine, Mitchel constantly reiterates this genocidal charge, deploying quotations drawn from sources in the public domain in a relentlessly reductionist way to drive home the political lesson. It was – perhaps not entirely without justification – in his rebuttal of what he saw as the 1841 Irish Census Commission’s attempts to massage down and explain away the Famine mortality, that the most celebrated ‘Mitchelite’ conclusion was articulated – that a ‘million and a half of men, women and children were carefully, prudently and peacefully slain by the English government. They died of hunger, in the midst of abundance which their own hands created’.

There can be little doubt of the emotional sincerity of Mitchel’s repeated accusation, but at the same time, his narrative is remarkably abstract, allowing little or no description of individual or locally specified suffering to impede his charge of government culpability. In this respect – and perhaps not accidentally – it mirrors Charles Trevelyan’s apologia.

While not every subsequent nationalist historian of the Famine took on this explicitly genocidal charge, at least not in its entirety, Mitchel’s
Famine texts—first extensive accounts to appear in print as 'history'—established a number of central tropes in nationalist interpretations. Firstly, the famine was essentially 'artificial', since 'it was a famine that depoplated a rich and fertile island that produced every year abundance and superabundance to sustain all her people and many more.' It was not potato blight that caused the famine, but the forced export of that superabundance of other foodstuffs. Secondly, the famine was explicitly not an act of Providence, in either the literal or metaphorical sense, and British attempts to depict it as such were blasphemous. It is in this context that the oft-quoteditcum that '[t]he Almighty indeed sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine,' was enunciated. Thirdly, the depopulation of the country was maliciously promoted by the state through false measures of 'relief' and the deliberate impediment of overseas charity. It followed that armed resistance against this criminal conspiracy was not only justified but morally requisite.

Mitchel's argument for 'famine in the midst of plenty' drew on rhetorical positions dating back to the 1840s, and on the genuine moral outrage sparked by continuing (albeit reduced) food exports in the Famine years. Although the case for 'artificiality' lacked much in the way of statistical substance, it became (and indeed remains) an article of faith in the nationalist historical tradition. The instrumental imperative for this claim was, however, fundamental. For nationalists of whatever hue, the famine was not only a profound indictment of the failure of the Union; it was also a direct consequence of the absence of Irish self-government, for an autonomous Irish administration would not only have had the will, but (through retaining Irish taxes and food resources at home) the means to have prevented mass mortality. The republican Mitchel retrospectively blamed O'Connell for backing down at the last moment, since a pre-Famine rising could have succeeded—or so Mitchel believed—in seizing power in time to act, for the death of five or ten thousand men at Clontarf [had the bunting of the 'monster meeting' there in 1843 been met with armed resistance] might have saved Ireland the slaughter by famine of a hundred times shortly afterwards.10

O'Rourke and Catholic Famine History

While later constitutional nationalist writers tended to avoid sharing Mitchel's tone, if not his underlying interpretation, they did not approach the history, or perhaps more accurately the political appropriation, of the Famine with any greater methodological rigour or thoroughness. The only serious full history of the Famine produced in Ireland in the second half of the century shared some of the underlying assumptions of the nationalist politicians and activists, but not the relentless instrumentalization that marked these texts. Indeed, as the product of a clerical author who took care to refute certain of the more extreme allegations made by radical nationalists, his position might better be described as 'Catholic', rather than nationalist.11

Like many of his nationalist contemporaries, John O'Rourke, who was born in 1809, had direct personal experience of the horrors of the later 1840s. Following his appointment as parish priest of Maynooth in 1869, O'Rourke, who had previously written both fictional and devotional works, turned his hand to history, publishing in the same year (1875) both a sympathetic Centenary Life of O'Connell and History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847. The latter went through a number of editions (a third appeared in 1902) and was reprinted in an abridged version as late as 1989. Although very different to Mitchel's Last Conquest, its influence on Irish historical perceptions of the Famine may have been nearly as long-lasting.

10 Ibid., 191.
11 For constitutional nationalist interpretations, see Donnelly, 'Constructing the Memory'.

Ibid.
The project of writing the history appears to have been suggested to O’Rourke by Bishop Patrick Duggan of Clonfert, who gave him access to the archives of the Freeman’s Journal and supplied him with his own recollections. For his part, O’Rourke suggests that he felt the need for a comprehensive narrative of the Famine that had witnessed the Scourge. Consequently, away with the generation of official newspapers and other published sources – most of which are carefully identified in footnote references. His disappointingly limited use of these laboriously collected eye-witness accounts has drawn criticism from some modern commentators, but this may have (paradoxically) been due to his desire to be seen as a ‘bona fide’ historian using principally the ‘orthodox’ documentary source materials of the day. He did, however, make extensive use of unpublished eyewitness narrative by Dr Daniel Donovan of Skibbereen, and contemporary letters from a number of Catholic clergymen, as well as (without endorsing its conclusions), Trevelyan’s Irish Crisis.

O’Rourke’s 532 pages of text (followed by four documentary appendices) unfortunately cover only the first two years of the Famine, ending in the autumn of 1847, when the crisis had another two to three years to run. It is unclear whether this was due to his acceptance of the truncated chronology initially laid down by Trevelyan’s Irish Crisis or because of personal or publishing constraints. After a general introduction sketching the origins of the potato, previous incidents of Famine and Irish social and political developments up to 1845, the chapters follow a generally chronological line, describing the political narrative of relief measures with digressions into depictions of local conditions, supported in both cases by extensive quotations from his sources.

He shared with the nationalists some fundamental perceptions – that Ireland’s poverty and vulnerability arose from sustained subordination to British economic interests, from the legacy of plantation and the penal exclusion of the Catholic majority and a combination of absenteeism and the avarice and tyranny of landlords. Indeed, the Irish landlord class, more than the governments of the day, were the principal targets of O’Rourke’s analysis. That there was insufficient food in Ireland for its people was a ‘miserable, transparent, insulting fallacy’ proved by export figures; like most nationalists O’Rourke declined to investigate or acknowledge the scale of food imports into Ireland in the later 1840s.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the hero of O’Rourke’s parallel biography, Daniel O’Connell, emerges positively from his narrative. O’Connell’s 1845 prescriptions for relief and retaining food in the country are depicted as visionary, in contrast to the manipulative prevarications of Robert Peel; the Liberator’s ultimately fateful return to an alliance with the Whigs in 1846 is rationalized, and the Young Irishers are excoriated both for sowing dissension when Ireland needed unified leadership and for being distracted by dreams of physical force into the ‘ridiculous failure’ of 1848. O’Connell’s death in 1847 is the occasion for a paean to the great man.

Like a number of other Catholic priests during the Famine who identified landlordism rather than British government as the principal curse of Ireland, O’Rourke was reluctant to denounce Russell’s administration as wholly malevolent: ‘the Government acted well in making the landlords understand and feel their responsibilities in such a terrible crisis. But
they should not have stopped there." Russell is even given some credit for recognizing that relief through reclamation of waste lands in Ireland would be the best mode of relief, but is then criticized for his weakness in failing to see this through and failing prey to the doctrines of political economy. In a remarkable acknowledgement, O'Rourke notes that in light of the unprecedented challenges facing government, 'great allowances must be made for [its] shortcomings', even if events proved Russell and his colleagues 'painfully unequal to the situation'; not least in their reluctance to interfere in the food trade and by failing to make the landlords meet their duties to employ the people and curb their eagerness to evict.

Not allowing himself to be distracted by the chimera of what was later labelled 'genocide' or the demonization of individual administrators (Tevelyan holds a very low profile in this account), O'Rourke got to the nub of one of the central and fatal flaws of Whig Famine policy - the 'confounding' of two things which should have been kept most jealously distinct, - (1.) What was best for the Famine crisis itself; (2.) What was best for the permanent improvement of the country. The confounding of these two questions led to conclusions of the most unwarrantable and deceptive kind. He might have added, with respect to policies such as piece-rate pay on the public works, the withdrawal from an interventionist commissariat policy in late 1846 and the introduction of the extended but unsupported poor law relief policy in the autumn of 1847, which both proved disastrous for the survival chances of the rural poor.

If O'Rourke was anxious that his account should be seen as objective - as evidenced by extensive footnoting of official and newspaper sources - it was also in places deeply affective, especially in the sections, though brief, written from a personal perspective. He relates a discussion with an eyewitness of the physicality of Famine interments at Skibbereen, and discusses the operation of the 'sliding coffin' at Bantry workhouse (of which he possessed a replica). Reflection on these horrors, which may well have evoked traumatic personal memories (which, as a 'historian', he refrained from recording in the History), nevertheless provoked a deeply felt commentary. O'Rourke concluded his account of his visit to Skibbereen with a statement of spiritual reflection that would inspire later generations of Catholic commentators, while doubtless arousing the ire of anticlerical radicals for its apparent resignation:

To trace one's steps, slowly and respectfully, among the graves of those who have reached the goal of life in the ordinary course, fills one with holy warnings; to stand beside the monument raised on the battle-field to the brave men who fell there, calls up heroic echoes in the heart, but here there is no room for sentiment: here, in humiliation and sorrow, not unmixed with indignation, one is driven to exclaim:

O God! that bread should be so dear,
And human flesh so cheap.

The abrupt termination of O'Rourke's book suggests an uncompleted text, but it is perhaps not surprising that his text should end on the topic of charity, praising those (English as well as Irish and American) who contributed generously, while censoring those (including most landlords, with a few exceptions, such as Lord Dufferin) who, he relates, either withheld assistance or offered charity with sectarian objects in view. Ultimately, then, for all its attempts to assess policy-making in context and describe the human experience of Famine suffering, O'Rourke falls back on a moralistic allocation of praise and censure.

O'Rourke was not the only 'Catholic' historian of the Great Famine, although he was certainly the most thorough. Father Edward D'Alton, later Dean of Tuam, in a multi-volume History of Ireland published in the first decade of the twentieth century, followed O'Rourke fairly closely in constructing his narrative of the Famine years. While D'Alton justified O'Connell a little less forcefully, he reminded his readers of both the difficulties that had faced him and the greatness of his achievements, noting
also that while Mitchel might have been admirable as a man of action, the priests had been right to dissuade the people from taking foolhardy action in 1848.  

The idea that the Famine manifested greater spiritual than political lessons also had a longer afterlife in Catholic historical thought, one later example drawing on O'Rourke's reflections being Canon Conry of Athleague's 1925 lectures on 'the faith of the exiles'. These talks sought to reclaim the Famine dead as martyrs to the true religion, brought low by what remained essentially a penal social system, while at the same time depicting the Famine exodus as a providential scattering of the faithful across the Anglophone world.  

Irish Liberal Interpretations

Irish liberals were less quick to turn to historical narratives of the Famine than their nationalist counterparts. This is not because liberals lacked, at least initially, a strong interpretive position on the meaning of the Famine. For at least one publically prominent liberal circle, centred on the Dublin Statistical Society and with strong ties to both Trinity College and the new Queen's Colleges, the true meaning of the catastrophe had been hammered out through the interchange of policy debates and polemics in the later 1840s and appeared valorized by the apparent economic recovery of the 1850s. Irish liberal economists held that the corrupt, unnatural and stagnant condition of pre-Famine society had been dissolved, providentially if painfully, by the potato blight and its consequences, allowing for the subsequent reconstruction of that society along rational and progressive lines.  

This sense of a new beginning gelled with the views of British liberals who had Irish interests or responsibilities, including the 'new plantation' promoter James Caird, the administrator Thomas Larcom and of course Charles Trevelyan himself. Likewise, it extended to William Wilde, the most active commissioner of the 1851 Irish census, whose voluminous reports of the mid 1850s sought to minimize the extent to which Famine mortality (rather than emigration) had been responsible for population decline, and to deflect responsibility for that which could not be denied away from human and especially government agency.  

The Irish liberal lawyer William O'Conner Morris (whose gentry family had themselves faced financial ruin in 1847) wrote in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1857 that the Famine's historic role was to 'hasten to maturity' the repeal of the corn laws and the 'social revolution in Ireland – the two economic changes of our times which have been the best securities against national scarcity'. Trevelyan's 'steadfast faith in the wise purposes of Providence' had been vindicated by events, for the last ten years had seen Ireland's 'deliverance from the bondage which had fastened a legal sterility on her fertile soil, and the apathy of pauperism on her intelligent people'.  

This liberal optimism was the product perhaps of a rather desperate belief that the mass mortality of the 1840s had at least not been a meaningless waste and that it had not invalidated the Union as an engine of progress. This was not entirely the delusion of a social elite preserved by its privileges from the harsh realities of the Famine. But liberal optimism was not to

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survive untouched the sharp economic downturn (threatening although not triggering a return to Famine conditions) that occurred between 1830 and 1865. The shock that this crisis posed to the narrative of providential progress alongside the growing alarm posed by the rise of Fenitism obliged a reconsideration and something of a parting of the ways within Irish liberal thought. In the wake of the 1860s shock, the optimism of the previous decade quickly faded, to be replaced by a Malthusian emphasis on the importance of the Famine in relieving demographic pressure by initiating mass emigration.27

If liberals responded to the legacy of the Famine principally through social and economic commentary, the one historian of European standing who emerged from their ranks in this period, W. E. H. Lecky, did touch on the subject as history. Like many of the liberal intelligentsia of his generation, such as his Trinity colleague John Kells Ingram, Lecky moved from a youthful romantic patriotism influenced by early Young Ireland through an optimistic and progressive rationalism to a much more defensive and pessimistic liberal-unionism in the 1880s.28 While he did not write at length on the Great Famine as such, as an Irishman who had lived through the catastrophe as a child (he was born in 1838, the son of a small landowner in Carlow and Queen’s County) and who was deeply committed to historical veracity, he could not entirely refrain from addressing it. In his early Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland, he had elevated O’Connell to heroic status alongside the Protestant patriots, but lamented the decline of the national spirit with the rise of sectarianism and the collapse of moral-force constitutionalism. The Famine had, Lecky observed, not only broken O’Connell’s spirit, but that of the Irish people.29

27 Gray, ‘The Making of Mid-Victorian Ireland.’
Lecky was not alone in his rejection of state or landed responsibility for the mortality of the 1840s. Writing at greater length on the subject in his *Ireland 1758-1858*, a response to nationalist centenary histories of the rising of 1798, his fellow liberal-unionist O’Connor Morris now concluded that ‘History’s verdict’ on government was that they were right in relying mainly on the action of commerce and of private enterprise for bringing the necessities of life to the Irish poor; those who condemn them for this only expose their ignorance [...] They manfully resolved [...] to save Ireland from the full grasp of famine; and in this gigantic task they, on the whole, succeeded; thousands perished, but millions were saved.23

To rub home what was essentially a polemical point, Morris contrasted this ‘success’ with the failure of the Irish Parliament to address effectively the famine of 1739–41.24

Froude, Goldwin Smith and the British View

In Great Britain, historical reflection on the Irish Famine from the 1860s, such as it was, took two divergent paths in approach, although they tended to converge in interpretation. One was towards a technical economic-history discussion. This was to an extent pioneered by Cornelius Walford

Hearing 'horrid stories in detail of the famine' from his local informants, he was thankful that 'these were becoming historical now' and that certain specifics tended to be omitted, as 'if it were not so we should all go mad or shoot ourselves.'

Returning to this difficult subject in his journal articles and American lectures of the 1860s and 1870s, Froude made no effort to obscure the terrible calamities experienced in the Famine, while at the same time identifying what he saw as unintended benefits for the survivors in the form of the sweeping away of the corrupt potato economy, and a profound change in the character of the peasantry in favour of self-reliance and industriousness. The cost of such progress had been the exodus of a mass of deeply embittered migrants to America, who were now being excited to political frenzy by the intransigent nationalism of agitators such as Mitchel and the agents of Ultramontane Catholicism, thus politically threatening Britain and its empire. At the same time, his continuing condemnation of the Irish landed class for what he regarded as their inhumane behaviour both during the Famine and in the History extending back to the seventeenth century, provoked angry refutations from spokesmen for the Irish landlords, such as the Knight of Kerry.

It was, Brady suggests, Froude's intense alarm over the global 'Romanian' threat manifest in the Irish Catholic diaspora that spurred the anti-Catholic and anti-nationalist polemics of his The English in Ireland. But equally striking to its apparently vituperative anti-Irishness (which spurred ripostes not only from nationalists but also from Irish liberals such as Lecky and J. E. Cairnes), was his sustained critique of the record of corrupt and incompetently British misgovernment of Ireland over many centuries—a damning indictment that could be extended (pace Trevelyan) in part to the administrations of the 1840s. Comparing nineteenth-century to previous migrations to America, he observed that '[t]he famine sent the Celtic peasantry thither in ten times larger numbers. They [...] supposed that they had to thank England for their banishment. So scandalously had Ireland been treated, that the people not unnaturally set down whatever they suffered at England's door.'

Although Froude may have shared with Mitchel this sense of British responsibility for the Famine, they had little else in common. Indeed, Froude's 'calumnies against the Irish nation' provoked Mitchel, shortly before his death, to bring out a final version of The Last Conquest as an antidote to 'the shape of the exact historical truth, to counteract [the] malign influence. Mitchel's original text was now prefaced with an essay 'On the Crusade of the Period', which attacked mercilessly (and without any sense of irony) the self-appointed 'First Living Historian' and his 'cruising mission' against Ireland. The relevance of the juxtaposition of his Famine narrative with the critique of Froude's claims about the rise of 1641 and its aftermath was assumed to be self-evident to his readers.

Froude's acerbic Carlylean style and intense anti-Catholicism were shared by his contemporary Goldwin Smith, who had been Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford between 1838 and 1868 (a post that both Froude and Lecky were later to hold), before moving to the United States and later to Canada. Goldwin Smith's writing about Ireland, although marred by poor historical method, frequent inconsistencies and a tendency to indulge in racial stereotypes, was also more complex than it at first appears, reaching a position by the early 1900s that seemed to reconcile liberal unionism with support for a form of limited and closely supervised self-government for Ireland. However, Smith's principal concern was to
uphold the rationality and desirability of the Union, and in his historically inflected journal articles, as well as in his short book *Irish History and the Irish Question* (1903), he set out to do precisely that. Tactically citing the historical narratives of some of the more moderate Home Rulers such as A. M. Sullivan and T. P. O'Connor, who were evidently uneasy with Mitchellic rhetoric, Smith claimed it to be 'fully admitted, that England came heartily and generously to the aid of Ireland in the famine'. The source of Ireland's sorrows, he insisted, lay in 'natural circumstance and historical accident', as much as in the crimes and follies of man, and famine had been the consequence of the island's population rising to double what the island could naturally bear. If Russell's administration had been in any way at fault, a better policy would have made little difference; only a 'vast emigration' could and did offer any real amelioration. Smith inserted emotive examples from O'Connor's *The Parnell Movement* to demonstrate his empathy for the Famine's victims (ignoring the latter's insistence on the 'artificiality of the Famine and genocidal consequences of clearances'), but the key messages were that 'English humanity' had been manifest, and that government had finally recognized that land transfer – beginning with the 1849 Encumbered Estates Act – was the real mechanism for resolving the 'Irish question'.

45 Donnelly, *Great Irish Potato Famine*, 216.

Conclusion

A number of conclusions may be drawn from this review of the early historical literature on the Great Famine. The first is that polemical attempts to appropriate the 'history' of the event were by no means restricted to Irish nationalists – indeed, in the context of the acutely contested constitutional and agrarian politics of Ireland between the 1860s and 1914, the historical meaning of the Famine acquired contemporary political significance for all the competing parties. To the extent that the question of the Famine was equated with that of the Union, it became the subject of multiple distortions and simplifications, and led to a tendency to neglect or suppress those aspects of the crisis not directly usable in the controversy over state and landlord responsibility. Famine narratives were thus all too frequently moulded to fit the polemical purposes of their author and the political expectations of his readership. Also striking is the remarkable extent to which this controversy was played out, both by its Irish and its British protagonists, before an American audience. Irish nationalists sought to persuade not simply or even principally their compatriots in North America, but the non-Irish American onlooker who needed to be enlightened on the sufferings of Irish immigrants and the roots of their diasporic rage. In direct response to this, Froude touring the US in the early 1870s, Goldwin Smith lecturing at Cornell from 1868, and Irish liberal-unionists publishing in American journals were all seeking to wrest back the meaning of Irish history (including the Famine) in the American mind from what they regarded as the deluded ravings of nationalist fanatics. What is also striking is how privileged 'historical' accounts of the Great Famine became over other forms of memorialization, and the extent to which the 'official' historians (Lecky, Froude and Goldwin Smith, as holders of university professorships) were drawn into the fray, despite professional disapproval of contemporary history. While 'historical' writing as a mode of discourse had already been privileged before the Famine by Young Ireland authors, this may also have been related to the rising cultural status of history as a conveyer of truth about the past in the era
that saw the gradual diffusion of Rankean ideals of historical practice in Anglophone societies.

Given the fury of controversy over the recent Irish past and the ready resort to instrumentalism to make that past usable for current political purposes, it is perhaps surprising that anything of lasting historical value was created. Yet despite all its acknowledged limitations as a text, O’Rourke’s *History* at least pointed the way towards a more substantive form of historical understanding – not least through its efforts, albeit halting, to utilize a broader range of source materials (including oral testimonies) and to attempt to offer at least a measure of historical contextualization.

**ANDREW G. NEWBY**

‘Rather Peculiar Claims Upon Our Sympathies’: Britain and Famine in Finland, 1856–1868

Never yet, perhaps, were English sympathies appealed to in vain... During the past year the corn crop, in the North of Europe generally and in Finland particularly, was a most deplorable failure [...] The English people, brought up in the lap of luxury, can form but a very imperfect idea of hundreds of fellow creatures dwindling away into moving skeletons and at length staggering to their graves the victims of a general starvation. Here, then, indeed, is a fit occasion for English sympathy and liberality [...] It is on behalf of the Finns particularly that we speak: for them and in the holy name of Charity we plead, when we ask that the benevolence which has long glorified our name shall not be withheld from the starving inhabitants of Finland.¹

The stirring rhetoric of this appeal from the *Ladies’ Newspaper* is only one of many examples of British public engagement with the idea of charity, and more specifically famine relief, during the Victorian era. The Great Irish Famine (1845–52) had thrust arguments about poor relief prominently into the public sphere, not least as a result of the 1838 Irish Poor Law’s reinforcement of notions of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor.² These arguments were informed by the increasingly prominent role of the British middle classes in philanthropic activity, along with the development of the British imperial self-image, an autostereotype that emphasized a

¹ *Ladies’ Newspaper* (11 April 1837).