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The Gill History of Ireland originally appeared in eleven volumes between 1972 and 1975. It was succeeded by a proposed six-volume series entitled New Gill History of Ireland in 1990, although in the event only five volumes were published. Now the revised and re-written series is published in its entirety.

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Nineteenth-Century Ireland

The Search for Stability

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D. George Boyce

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dismissed from his post as Deputy Lieutenant of Fermanagh, then most of the Protestant J.P.s in the north might resign; but if he were left untouched by the government, then Catholics could complain of partiality. Yet if the government pressed the Protestants too far, Protestant Tories might carry out their threat of shunning English parties and coalescing as an independent party to defend their own interests. Small wonder, then that in 1845 Peel, far from taking satisfaction from his Irish policy, declared that the condition of Ireland seemed to 'preclude honest and impartial government'.⁶⁹

Peel's gloomy contemplation of his administration's Irish policy was not shared by one of the shrewdest politicians and thinkers of his age, Count Camillo Cavour, the maker of Italian unification. In July 1844 Cavour published an article on 'Ireland: Its Present and Its Future' in the *Biblioteca Universelle de Geneve*, written when the Repeal agitation was at its height. Cavour, while acknowledging the 'eight centuries' of English oppression of Ireland, nonetheless regarded the Union as 'an event at which humanity must rejoice'. He praised the Whigs in the 1830s, and the Conservatives under Peel, who sought to remedy the social and economic ills of Ireland. He believed that repeal of the Union would be disastrous to Ireland, and the harbinger of civil war. He urged English politicians to continue what he called the work of regeneration in Ireland, a 'measured and prudent march' indeed, but a march nonetheless. And he asked, by way of a conclusion, whether these progressive reforms would succeed in 'completely fusing the sentiments and the interests of [Ireland] with those of Britain'. These, Cavour decided, were 'grave questions which only the future can resolve'.⁷⁰ They were no less grave after 1845 when the British government was faced with the spectacle of famine in Ireland.

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The Land and its Nemesis, 1845–9

When Count Cavour analysed the Irish problem in 1844, he diagnosed its main elements as the 'religious and social organisation of the country', its defective agrarian system, the division between landlord and tenant, the demands made upon the people by the Anglican clergy, and the abominations of a servile war of peasant secret societies.¹ He focused his attention on the question of the land, arguing that 'the improvement of the relations established by law between the proprietors and the tenants, between the minority who possess and the majority who cultivate, is one of the most difficult problems that the legislator can undertake'; but he did not doubt that a British government 'enlightened, strong and impartial, can by degrees effect great improvements'.²

Cavour, in referring to a 'defective' agrarian system, touched upon an issue which, in the early years of the Union, began to force its attention on the British government: the poverty of large sections of the people of rural Ireland, the visitation of famine, albeit on a more limited scale than later, and the tendency of areas of the country to fall into disorder, with peasant secret societies organising and directing violence and murder against landlords, farmers and the forces of law and order. These secret societies had been a part of Irish rural life long before the Union: they adopted titles—Whiteboys, Shanavests, Hearts

of Steel, Hearts of Oak, and many others. Their organisation and purpose differed according to local conditions and local problems. In one place they would oppose the extension of pasture farming, which was inspired by the fact that pasture land was exempt from the exaction of tithes for the upkeep of the Church of Ireland; in another they would refuse to pay the taxation levied on local people for the upkeep of roads. Sometimes they assumed a sectarian form, as in the case of the Defenders at the end of the eighteenth century; on occasion such organisations also included Anglican, Presbyterian and Catholic in a common front against what they regarded as unjust action by landlords, farmers or the Catholic Church as well as the Church of Ireland. What was important about them, generally, was that they fostered the idea of a group in society which could make its own 'laws', enforce them—often with cruel punishments—and for considerable periods of time establish a kind of local power or authority which the law, especially in its primitive eighteenth-century form, found difficult to suppress. Secret societies frightened respectable people, of whatever political or religious belief; and Daniel O'Connell stressed that one of the advantages of his Catholic Association was that it could, he alleged, control and even undermine outbreaks of rural combination and disorder.³ Certainly the role played by those two main societies at the time of the 1798 rebellion, the Defenders and the Orange Order, indicated that such organisations, however local or particularist, could be mobilised in the interests of a wider cause: could be politicised, used for the promotion or the suppression of an ideology, and—with arms—could offer a threat not only to individuals but to the stability of the state itself.

The tendency of rural people, sometimes in co-operation with urban elements as well, to fall back upon secret societies, either from motives of fear or respect, and to regard them as a kind of alternative to the state, creating and enforcing their own version of law and order, was what shocked most English observers of early nineteenth-century Ireland. Agrarian outrages were an inescapable part of every administration's agenda. Soldiers and secret societies in some areas, such as Cork in the 1820s, fought what amounted almost to a small war; and English observers looked with amazement as well as disgust on a society where 'faction fighting', the trailing of one's coat, the invitation of a group of families to another group to come and fight,

at an appointed time and with the assistance of strong drink, seemed so at odds with any concept of what rural society ought to be like.⁴ Not even the presence of Luddites in England, with their machine-breaking and their occasional attacks on local manufacturers, could match the horrid fascination of the brutality and disorder of certain regions of the Irish countryside. Contrary to later belief, the landed gentry were not the chief targets for agrarian terrorism in Ireland; they could still defend themselves and could if necessary call upon the assistance of the magistracy and the army. Isolated farmers, Catholic or Protestant, suffered most, and could not so readily find the means to repulse threats or actual violence to their lives and property.

By 1830 it was clear that Britain had taken upon herself a responsibility which she hardly knew how to discharge: that of maintaining law and order in a society, large parts of which appeared to be susceptible to the lure of secret organisations, with their own rituals, their own codes of conduct, their own law-enforcement methods; even urban society was not immune, as the formation of the Ribbon society and its activities after 1820 indicated. The Ribbonmen were particularly strong among the Dublin Catholic artisans and working class; and although they appear to have spent much of their time falling out over money and personal differences, they were an organisation which could muster over a thousand men at a meeting.⁵ Improved law and order measures were the obvious response, and by the 1840s an efficient, armed police force and more effective coercion legislation appeared to be gaining the upper hand. But the dislike of British officials for the crude and alarming nature of rural society in Ireland could not divert attention from what might be regarded as a more serious aspect of the case: the poverty and backwardness of the countryside. In particular there was concern for what was coming to be identified as the central problem of that society: the inability of the rural population to break out of the cycle of land subdivision, with plots of land becoming ever smaller as landlords, farmers, labourers and cottiers pursued subdivision as a means of providing for a growing population which made increasing demands on the land.

It is difficult to estimate both the actual population of Ireland in the early nineteenth century and the reasons for its rapid rise. Although censuses were taken in 1821, 1831 and 1841, their reliability was suspect: enumerators faced difficulties, meeting downright hostility in the pursuit of their task; adequate information about

parish or townland boundaries was lacking; and it was easy to miss seasonal labourers and beggars. But it is clear that the population of Ireland was increasing: one estimate puts the real figure as 7.2 million in 1821, 7.9 million in 1831, and 8.4 million in 1841.⁶ This population growth varied from region to region, with Ulster, the greatest growth area in the early eighteenth century, dropping behind Connacht in the period 1791–1821. And within the provinces there were, of course, local differences. But what was both paradoxical and ominous in these variations was that in more fertile and settled areas population growth increased least; in bogland, woodland and less fertile land it increased most. Population increase was to some extent modified by emigration to Britain and America and by mortality, but this did not reverse the population trend, which always remained on the increase. And the part of the country where population continued to rise, and where distress was most frequently forcing its attention on the state, was the west of Ireland: between 1815 and 1845 the clamour of distress came from Donegal, Kerry, Clare, Galway, west Cork, and Mayo, especially west Mayo.⁷

The reasons for the increase in the population of Ireland, especially among the poorer classes in the western areas, are complex: answers to this question invariably include high fertility, the use of the potato as a cheap and simple food, and early marriage.⁸ This argument has yet to be resolved; but more important was the question of what an increasing population would live on, how it would survive, in a country that did not enjoy the economic diversity, and especially the growth of industry, which might be expected to absorb its surplus population. Another, equally important question was what the government would or could do to cope with the importunate pleas that fell upon its ears with such troublesome regularity.

The north of Ireland enjoyed its own regional economic development. In 1839 thirty-five linen-spinning mills employed some 7,758 workers, most of them in mills in Belfast or close by in such places as Banbridge, Larne and Carrickfergus. The linen industry moved from water power to steam power and continued to grow and prosper. It spread into the periphery of Ulster and even into parts of Louth, Longford, Mayo, Sligo and Roscommon. The woollen industry also offered employment. The two industries occupied both men and women, and in the rural areas offered the opportunity for work in the home. Domestic industry of this kind was on the retreat by 1841;

nevertheless, it offered what Ireland lacked—cash income, which freed men and women from dependence on the land, from the constraints imposed by land availability, and from the fear of scarcity. For one of the chief problems facing the poorer classes in rural Ireland was not so much unemployment as underemployment: the summer months were especially difficult, when the labourer had neither enough work nor potatoes nor money to purchase other food. Money could be raised by loans, but loans had to be repaid, and the labourer was obliged to pledge the results of his labour, mainly to farmers; and if he could not get credit, then he must beg. Fortunately, alms-giving was quite generous in pre-famine Ireland. But the lack of money to buy food was a problem made worse by poor communications throughout the most remote and impoverished parts of the country.⁹

Shortage and distress occurred, then, long before the great disaster of 1845–7: in 1816–17, 1822, 1826 and 1831. On each occasion the distress was worst in the west of Ireland; but it was coped with adequately, partly through the efforts of the government, which shipped oats, corn and biscuit to the affected areas, and made funds available for harbours and fishery development or public works schemes. New roads were built, and government inspectors appointed to oversee fever hospitals and general health matters. Money was spent on infirmaries far in excess of funds spent in Great Britain. The political culture of the time encouraged philanthropy, and charitable organisations in England were founded to help the Irish poor, whose plight was highlighted by writers such as Walter Scott, Gustave de Beaumont, J. G. Kohl and Alexis de Tocqueville. Above all, Irish landlords were exhorted to do their duty by the Irish poor; and many of them did so, spending substantial sums of money to help distressed areas.¹⁰ In the 1821–2 famine the government spent £50,000 on relief, and in 1831 £40,000. None of these famines altered the dietary habit of the Irish peasant, who, by the 1840s, was reckoned to be consuming fourteen pounds of potatoes a day.¹¹ But in the years before the Great Famine questions were being asked, not only about landlords' attitudes to their tenants and the Irish poor, but about the whole system of land tenure in Ireland, about the very basis of the Irish rural social and economic structure.

The Irish land system was the despair of any rational commentator on economic problems in Ireland in the early nineteenth century.

Unfavourable comparisons with England abounded; for in Ireland, it seemed, there were none of the comfortable hamlets, the sturdy yeomen, the easy intercourse between landlord and tenant, that were regarded as the norm in English society. Instead there was what could only be described as a ramshackle system: landlords living beyond their means; farmers dividing and subdividing land unreasonably, with smaller and smaller holdings parcelled out, sometimes between members of one family; labourers living at subsistence level; tenants falling into arrears; agrarian violence, at times of a ferocious kind; evictions; disorder. By 1844 responsibility for some 1,322 properties with a combined annual rental of nearly £1 million was vested in the Courts of Chancery and Exchequer because of unmanageable debts on the part of the landlords.¹² Landlords were not, of course, solely—perhaps not even mainly—to blame for this alarming scene; their efforts to check subdivision were often opposed by tenants, whose conservatism matched only that of their landlords. For the central fact of the Irish land system was that, for many groups of farmers and labourers, the existing arrangements enabled them to meet their necessities and their requirements. For the medium-sized farmer, subdivision of land enabled him to provide for his family by subletting his land into smaller parcels: sons and daughters could be given a plot of land, sometimes of as little as two or four acres, to provide for them on their marriage. Labourers lived a hard and meagre existence; yet they too could obtain that existence with ease, simply by building a cabin and planting potatoes, and by working for the means of life instead of for cash wages. This in turn suited the convenience of the Irish farmer, who could secure labour on his farm without the necessity of making money payment. By the 1840s the practice of subdivision was regarded with disfavour in economic thinking;¹³ but by then the practices of generations were hard to reverse.

Reversing this practice, however, required beginning somewhere; and since landlords were at the top of the social pyramid, and since it was their behaviour, in particular, that seemed to contrast most markedly with that of their energetic and innovative English counterparts, it was inevitable that, even before the catastrophe of the Great Famine, British fact-finders and official advisers should find Irish landlords remarkably deficient in the virtues essential to a well-run and satisfying landed society. As one witness, a farmer, put it to the Devon Commission, set up in 1843 to inquire into the Irish land

problem, 'It is just like horses; if they are badly handled, they will not pull well—and the people all seem to be badly harnessed. It seems to me to commence with the landlords.'¹⁴

It seemed to various other observers, both private and official, that the bad handling commenced with the landlords: their relationship with their tenants was what held civilised societies together; and if they were unsatisfactory, then the blame must be laid where it belonged. But it was easy enough to lay the blame for the landholding system, with its lack of improvement and development, on the landlords; it was more difficult to devise a remedy for the malady. The difficulty was revealed in the Devon Commission's recommendations, published in 1845, about ways in which legislation might act benignly upon the Irish land system. The commission produced many documents and much evidence, and interviewed 1,100 witnesses in the course of its deliberations. But it could hardly do more than uncover the size and scope of the problem. Moreover, it found fault with one of the most protective (to tenants) customs in Ireland: that of the so-called 'Ulster custom'. The Ulster custom was the most marked distinguishing feature of the north of Ireland, and it consisted of the right of the tenant to sell the 'interest' in his holding when he handed his farm tenancy over to a new incoming tenant. This custom was based upon the belief that the tenant possessed some kind of interest in the soil, which arose from the fact that he, and not the landlord, was responsible for its cultivation and development. This did not amount to a claim on the tenant's part that he could deprive the landlord of his right to terminate a lease if he, the landlord, wished to do so; but it provided for a set of securities that enabled the tenant to make good his belief, or claim, that he had an interest in the soil and that this gave him certain benefits. These benefits could be computed in cash: when a tenant left his farm, he was entitled to claim a sum of money from the incoming tenant, which recognised that the new tenant had bought the right to a quiet and untrammelled occupation of the farm. The landlord retained the right to approve of the purchase and the purchaser; but to interfere with the purchase of tenant right, or the right of the present tenant to ask his best price and make his bargain with the incoming occupant, was regarded as high-handed and unjustified.

Tenant right generally carried with it some further privileges and benefits for the tenant. The custom usually involved a claim that the

tenant had the right to a continuous occupancy of the farm at a reasonable rent. The landlord could, of course, terminate the lease if he wished, but he was expected in such cases to compensate the tenant for his 'interest' in the land. The rent had to be paid; and there was no 'fixity of tenure' in the sense of an unconditional occupancy of the farm. A 'fair rent' was a variable and uncertain principle, and a frequent cause of dispute, since the size of the rent would affect the value of the tenant right if a tenant were to sell up and move out. Moreover, the whole set of arrangements was a matter not of law but of custom and practice, and was therefore not underwritten by any legal guarantee. Its origin is disputed, but it probably arose from the preference given to a sitting tenant at the end of a lease to continue in his occupancy at a higher rent; if, however, he took the alternative option and chose to leave, then he could sell his 'goodwill' to the purchaser, thus giving the purchaser a clear, undisturbed occupancy of the farm—a token of goodwill and of a settled tenancy. This custom—found most commonly in Ulster, and especially in Counties Antrim, Down and Derry, and in some southern and western counties in an attenuated form—was generally regarded as contributing to good landlord-tenant relations and therefore to social stability.

If the legalisation of the Ulster custom was quite beyond the recommendation of the Devon Commission, then at least the commission's report bore fruit in one respect, in that its most radical proposal became the subject of legislation in 1845. A land bill was introduced by Lord Stanley providing for the appointment of a commissioner of improvements, to whom a tenant could apply for a decision about any improvements he proposed to make: if they were approved, the tenant, on eviction within a certain period, was to be entitled to compensation for three classes of improvement: building, fencing and drainage. The Repeal Association denounced the measure as a 'miserable, transitory instalment of that right delusively promised'; the landlords objected to the idea of any right of the tenant to compensation at all.¹⁵ The parliamentary opposition was so strong that Stanley was compelled to withdraw the bill. The Devon Commission made other suggestions, among them the foundation of agricultural schools, easier loans to landlords, the fixing of fair rents by landlords, and the desirability of landlords getting to know their tenants better. And in the autumn of 1845 Devon himself sent Peel a list of bills which he had prepared to improve the Irish land system,

none of which would arouse party feelings.¹⁶ These bills were never acted upon, for the famine overtook events; indeed, it required the scale of the Great Famine to enable the government to act upon the kind of opinion that had been forming in official circles for some time and which was succinctly expressed by Lord Clarendon:

The landlords are the real obstacle to improvement, and their condition generally is deplorable. As a body they are insolvent. Many of them lack the first necessities of life, and, though still exercising the rights of property, they can perform none of its duties.¹⁷

Nevertheless, when famine occurred, it was to the landlords that the British government looked for a major effort at coping with the disaster.

The Irish rural problem was not unique. In the western Highlands of Scotland too harvest failure, such as that of 1836-7, brought many people to the brink of starvation; here too there was what can properly be called a 'peasant society', with the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants depending to a significant extent on small holdings and tiny patches of land for subsistence. This population was to experience the potato blight of 1846-7 and suffer from its consequences, since the potato was central to its diet. And this area, like much of Ireland, was confronted with a crucial and alarming fact: its population growth, while not in itself a cause of social destitution, was in a kind of imbalance with its resources and its employment possibilities.¹⁸ There were simply no alternatives for the people except the precarious existence available to them from their subsistence on their simple diet and their small patches of land; none, that is, except emigration. Between 1815 and 1845 over a million inhabitants left Ireland; and one of the remedies frequently suggested for the Irish rural problem was state-assisted emigration rather than workhouse relief.¹⁹ But emigration in itself, while possibly a palliative, was not a cure, since the fundamental problem—that of a society in which most people did not have the money to buy alternative means of subsistence if their staple crop failed—remained untouched. What the inhabitants of peasant Ireland needed was greater employment opportunities, which mere emigration could not provide.

The potato blight of 1845-6 was caused by the fungal disease

phytophthora infestans, which makes its first appearance in the form of black spots on the leaves, with a whitish mould on the under-surface, which contains the spores; these are conveyed to other plants by wind, rain and insects. For germination to occur, moisture is necessary; and Ireland, like the west of Scotland, would naturally suffer if the blight ever appeared there. Its appearance was not new in 1846: a disease of a similar kind was reported in northern Germany in 1830, in parts of the Hebrides in the 1830s, and on the Atlantic coast of North America in 1842. But the outbreak that caused the widespread failure of the potato crop in Ireland in 1845–6 was a disaster on a much larger scale, and it was compounded by the fact that the fungus could lie dormant during the winter, only to return again and again. Thus a new potato crop, planted alongside the slightly infected old potatoes, could become infected when climatic conditions were favourable. Since there was no known chemical remedy, the disease could flourish unchecked and with great rapidity. It was not just the first failure in 1845 that caused the catastrophe, but its repetition in subsequent years; indeed, as late as 1854 the blight was as serious in the western Highlands of Scotland as it had been in 1846.²⁰ In Ireland the first attack of the blight in 1845 was not as serious as that of 1846. The absence of blight in 1847 occasioned false optimism, but the blight returned in 1848 and destroyed the summer crop yet again, and conditions were as bad as they had been in 1846. By the end of 1849 the worst of the Irish famine, at least, was over.

The complete failure of an indigenous food crop was bound to cause social disaster on an unprecedented scale; the words of one Scottish observer apply equally to Ireland: 'society now smitten at its base'.²¹ Between 1845 and 1851 at least 800,000 people (approximately one-tenth of the population) died from hunger and disease. Those hardest hit were the class of people whose numbers had risen rapidly in the decades before the famine: the agricultural labouring classes, whose decline as a proportion of the rural population began and remained unchecked. The famine hit these people hardest because their means of livelihood was that of the penniless entrepreneur: the labourer rented his subsistence in the form of a cabin and a potato patch and paid for them through his work. Cottiers, like labourers, were always engaged in a gamble with existence, depending for their survival on their potato patch. This dependence was fragile; after 1830, as the number of cottiers rose, the cottier was obliged to take a

declining quality of land, and was frequently forced to eat a poor-quality type of potato known as a 'lumper' ('Just try it for six months and you'll never want another,' a commission of inquiry into the Irish poor was told in 1836).²² Fishing might be expected to have formed a considerable part of the Irish diet, especially in the west. But the main fishing was for herring, which was caught mainly in the autumn and winter (the time when famine was at its worst). There were few boats and equipment was poor. In any case fish must be salted to be stored, and the Galway fishermen were too poor to buy salt to preserve fish.²³

The unprecedented scale of deaths in the famine, which truly earned its epithet 'great', was not only due to starvation; disease too struck the starved and weakened people whose means of existence had been destroyed by the blight. The chief diseases which flourished during the famine years were typhus and what was known as 'relapsing fever'. These were not themselves caused by a poor diet, but thrived when conditions of severe destitution were present. Moreover, such diseases were easily transmitted to towns and cities invaded by the destitute from the countryside; famine deaths were not confined to the rural poor alone, but hit the middle and upper classes as well. Medical provision and institutions for the poor did, of course, exist in Ireland; but the county infirmaries, fever hospitals and dispensaries (supported by private subscription) were overwhelmed by the scale of the disaster, and their doctors and medical attendants were themselves susceptible to the diseases which famine brought in its wake. In 1846 a government minister told the House of Commons that 'With respect to the danger of approaching fever, which unhappily generally follows a period of scarcity in Ireland, the Poor Law Commissioners have made the most ample provision.'²⁴ But in fact many areas did not possess hospital provision of any kind; the system lacked co-ordination to enable it to cope with the emergency; and the dispensaries were incapable of coping with thousands of fever patients scattered over many square miles of countryside. Overcrowding in the workhouses caused the spread of fever; and, in addition, some of them were brought to bankruptcy through the unexpected rush of inmates. Prisons too became places of death; in Castlebar the mortality was 'fully forty per cent' and included the Catholic chaplain, the deputy governor, deputy matron and a turnkey.²⁵

Small wonder, then, that contemporaries watched with horror as

society itself seemed in a kind of process of dissolution. Starving people gathered nettles, wild flowers, weeds, and fed on carcasses of diseased cattle, dogs and dead horses—but mainly on the herbs in the field, wild mustard and watercress.²⁶ When the sick were refused admission to the already over-full hospitals, their friends would often bring them in carts at night and deposit them at the door or nearby, in the hope that the staff would admit them.²⁷ The fear of infection caused people whose custom was never to refuse food and shelter to a stranger to turn away even near neighbours. Fear of contracting fever through contact with the bodies of the dead (caused by the transfer of lice, though this was not known at the time) caused people to discontinue traditional burial ceremonies. Bodies lay for days in cabins which the survivors had deserted. There was even a public outcry against the making of new burial grounds, in case the dead should be the means of killing the living. Many bodies were buried without coffins; many more were found lying on the roadside, often with no means of identification.²⁸

Such a catastrophe might, in an earlier age, have been assigned to the judgment of God and regarded simply as divine punishment for some dreadful sin committed by the people. But the Great Famine was different, not only because of its scale, but because of its implications for the government of Ireland under the Union. The image of coffinless bodies consigned without dignity to famine pits, thirty or more at a time, has endured.

Charles Gavan Duffy's verdict, 'a fearful murder committed on the mass of the people',²⁹ has been answered in cool historical terms: that early Victorian government was not in the business of providing state support on any considerable scale, and certainly not enough to cope with the Irish famine; the age of *laissez-faire* was not the age of the welfare state. And the usual response to famine before 1845 was for charitable action to meet social adversity: private individuals were expected to dig into their pockets to alleviate public distress.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to imply that the state saw itself as simply neutral or non-interventionist in its essential character; *laissez-faire* was an aspiration rather than a reality, and the government was in fact aware of its need to play some sort of role in mitigating the disaster whose gravity was conveyed to it from its Irish officials in Dublin Castle. After all, government had intervened in Ireland to establish a poor law, a national educational system, and a

police force. The problem with the Great Famine was its scale. State intervention on a scale necessary to cope with the famine was a daunting prospect, and, as Sir Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, wrote to Sir Randolph Routh of the Army Commissariat, who was head of the Central Commission in Dublin charged with dealing with the crisis, the people must be taught to 'depend on themselves for developing the resources of the country, instead of having recourse to the assistance of government at every occasion'.³⁰ The problem lay in defining exactly what role the state should endeavour to play. Since the previous decade had seen a gradual state disenchantment with the whole Irish landholding system, and especially with the landlords themselves, it was believed that landlords should now find their own way out of the predicament that their non-progressive estate management methods had got them into. Thus Irish landlords must bear the main burden of relief; they alone could restore Irish society to a healthy condition.

Internal alleviation of famine, however, was bedevilled in all sorts of ways. Many landlords did their best to provide relief, and some endured great financial hardship in so doing. Others refused altogether to subscribe to famine relief schemes. Some held that they were already contributing sufficient funds through the rates which financed the new workhouses created by the Irish Poor Law Act. Lord Sligo has been cited as an example of a landlord who chose the harsh path of eviction, which he certainly did; but, like all western landlords, he was obliged to cope with a part of the country where famine hit hardest. By the beginning of 1848 he owed nearly £1,650 to the Westport Board of Guardians, of which he was chairman, a debt which he discharged by borrowing. He received only a fraction of his nominal rental. This, added to his already existing encumbrances, placed him, in his own view, under 'the necessity of ejecting or being ejected'. It was a cruel necessity. In the whole of Ireland a minimum of some 48,740 families were permanently dispossessed between 1849 and 1854, amounting to a total of almost a quarter of a million people.³¹

Private charity became a contentious issue through the allegation that Protestant clergymen were seizing the opportunity to exchange relief for Catholic conversion to Protestantism. Certainly some more zealous members of the Church of Ireland sought to take advantage of the disaster to convert those in need—of spiritual as well as

material support, as they would have said: the Lord's 'chastening rod' was being applied to Ireland.³² Such individuals were not truly representative of the Church of Ireland, but their activities were tolerated by some bishops and other clergy in the dioceses and parishes; in other cases proselytisers met with strong opposition. Methodists and Presbyterians alike showed interest in the missions, which were most successful in the west of Ireland, and certainly won over some converts; but what was regarded as the Lord's will by the missions was, not surprisingly, deeply resented by the Catholic clergy and seen as a manifestation of Protestant guile. Against this must be set the instances of Protestant clergy administering food, alongside Catholic priests who attended the dying. In 1847 forty Protestant clergy died from famine fever, sufficient testimony to their selfless care for the distressed. Nevertheless, the sectarian war-cry could catch fire even in the midst of famine, and allegations of 'souperism' hindered relief efforts and often caused a breakdown in co-operation between the different churches. The famine exposed Ireland's lack of general social cohesion and exposed the resentment and suspicion that lay not far below the surface.³³

There was also the human frailty of local and government officials when they came to devise means to combat the famine and its consequences. The government's agents in Ireland simply did not expect the blight of 1845, which was not serious by comparison with what came after, to repeat itself in 1846; they assumed that the potato crop of 1846 would be sufficient to feed the population. The officials of the Board of Health took the decline in fever noticed in the summer of 1846 as evidence that the worst was over; here again their confident forecasts were mistaken. Moreover, while the relief institutions looked sound on paper, they proved badly wanting in practice, especially, again, since no one expected them to be subject to such intolerable demand; and while it is easy with hindsight to 'predict' what was about to happen, contemporaries would have been obliged to foresee the extent of the disaster and ask the Treasury to build hospitals and provide remedy for those who were not yet sick. Medical knowledge about the reasons for the spread of disease was inadequate; wholesale treatment of the population would have required a massive and even dictatorial response, compulsorily enforced. As one Irish physician put it, 'we cannot be suddenly wise'.³⁴

But it was the British government's attitude which was to come

under the closest scrutiny by posterity. And not only by posterity; there were contemporaries in the House of Commons who pleaded for a massive injection of official funds for famine relief.³⁵ Lord Clarendon, who became Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in May 1847, responded a few months earlier to a criticism from the editor of *The Economist*, James Wilson, who forwarded letters from one of its contributors, W. R. Gregg, and G. R. Potter (an economist and statistician, formerly of the Board of Trade). They complained that the government was wrong in adopting 'measures unanimously condemned by all the able and influential organs of the Press, and by all acknowledged thinkers in the country'. Clarendon, while agreeing 'as to the mischievous tendency (or rather certainty) of the course we are adopting' insisted that it was unavoidable because of the 'overwhelming character of the calamity' and the 'nature of the people' the government had to deal with: 'You in fact say do nothing, which is exceedingly comfortable for a gentleman writing by his fireside in London, but not at all practicable for a government having to answer to the humanity and generosity of England for the mortality of Ireland'. Interference was forced by circumstances. 'You', he continued, 'lay down abstract principles and desire that men should be left to act upon them, which is quite right if ordinary men under ordinary circumstances were in question, but you have to deal with Irishmen . . .'. And while Clarendon deemed it 'a great misfortune for us to have such a people under our charge', he insisted that 'we cannot leave them entirely to their own devices at a moment when they are unusually incapacitated'.³⁶ It was a response, not unique among British officials (and others) that combined an impatience with the people of Ireland with a grim acceptance that something must be done to alleviate their suffering. But it must be emphasised that this impatience extended to landlords as much as tenants. Lord Clarendon's frustration at the 'idleness and helplessness' of the people encompassed the landlord class. On 19 July 1847 he wrote to Henry Reeve that he detected 'grains of progress, which, if they can but be protected from their numerous assailants, may ripen into something good. A spirit of exertion and self-reliance, altogether new in Ireland, is manifesting itself; landlords are beginning to bestir themselves, and to understand why hunting, drinking and mortgaging bring their estates to auction and themselves to ruin'.³⁷ Lord John Russell was equally critical. 'I am not ready to bring in any restrictive law', he

explained to Clarendon in November 1847, 'without at the same time restraining the powers of the landlord. It is quite true that landlords in England would not like to be shot like hares and partridges by miscreants banded for murderous purposes; but neither does any landlord in England turn out fifty persons at once, and burn their houses over their heads, giving them no provision for the future.'³⁸

Ireland did in fact receive more state aid than Scotland. The entire amount advanced by government towards the relief of the Irish famine was £7,132,268, of which £3,754,739 was, however, to be repaid within ten years; the rest was a free grant. Of the sum lent, a large part was remitted between 1847 and 1852; in 1853 the total loan was remitted by Gladstone, in consideration of Ireland's assuming the burden of income tax.³⁹ Large sums were raised through private charity in Great Britain, where the British Association raised £434,251 to bring succour to the 'remote districts' of both Scotland and Ireland. Queen Victoria's personal appeal for relief for Ireland and Scotland raised a further £170,000. The total sum was distributed in the proportion of five-sixths to Ireland and one-sixth to the Scottish Highlands.⁴⁰

Sir Robert Peel, like many British ministers responsible for the government of Ireland, regarded that country with a mixture of scepticism and, paradoxically, a sense of duty (and even a certain intimacy). Thus, while he declared that all reports, including those about famine, from his executive in Dublin needed critical scrutiny because 'a haze of exaggeration covered Dublin Castle like a fog', he was aware that as early as October 1845 he was facing a major crisis in Ireland.⁴¹ His measures harked back to the remedies he and others had adopted in earlier Irish famines: the state would act as a kind of enabling agency, setting up a relief commission which included representatives of the army, police and coastguard, the Poor Law Commission and the Castle, which would in turn stimulate local effort and local relief works. He went further than contemporary orthodoxy dictated and set up food depots stocked with secretly purchased Indian meal. Some £185,000 was spent on the government's food scheme, of which £135,000 was recovered in sales of the food by local committees or to private customers.⁴² These measures were largely successful, but they were overtaken by the worsening crisis, and the fall of Peel's government in the summer of 1846 coincided with the second, more devastating outbreak of the potato blight.

Peel's government fell as a result of his long-meditated decision to repeal the corn laws, and the subsequent split in the Conservative Party. A combination of protectionist Tories, Whigs and Radicals turned him out of office, to be replaced in July by a Whig government under Lord John Russell.

The guiding hand so far in the government's response to the Irish famine was that of Sir Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to the Treasury. Trevelyan harboured ambiguous attitudes towards Ireland, as he did towards Scotland. Trevelyan's attitude to Ireland is controversial. He himself denied any anti-Irish feelings and prided himself in his family's 'Celtic' origins.⁴³ He did not doubt that Anglo-Saxon society was the more advanced of the two, and he dared to hope that the social evil that beset Ireland, which was 'altogether beyond the power of man' to cure might be cured by the 'direct stroke of an all-wise Providence in a manner as unexpected & unthought of as it is likely to be effectual'. But as Robin Haines has pointed out in her thoroughly researched book, Trevelyan reserved his frustration, not for the 'Irish', but for the Irish landlords and gentry, who, he wrote to Cecil Spring Rice (one of that category) in October 1846 were defective in the 'execution of their duties'. This brought the government into 'direct collision with the entire labour population of the country in the capacity of Employer, & to a great extent in that of the Provision Merchant also'. Trevelyan hoped that the famine would arouse the landlords from their dependence on government intervention, and oblige them to 'take the lead wh. their position requires of them & preventing the social revolution (i.e. the working of "Providence") from being so extensive as it must otherwise become'.⁴⁴ He also declared that 'the people must not, *under any circumstances*, be allowed to starve';⁴⁵ and his organising ability and energy surmounted the limited resources of his staff and underpinned the tribute made to Peel by the *Freeman's Journal*: 'No man died of famine during his administration.'

Those who have sought to indict Trevelyan as indifferent to suffering, or as one who saw himself as the engine of a divine providence, ridding the empire of useless Irish peasants, ignore the fact that Trevelyan worked under Peel. What is significant about Trevelyan's first experience of the Irish famine was his firm belief that any provision of food by the government must be compatible with the free market. In January 1846 he instructed local committees to buy

Indian meal from the food depots only when the prices of other foods, such as oatmeal, were rising. In February he warned Randolph Routh that 'we must not aim at giving more than wholesome food. It would do permanent harm to make dependence on charity an agreeable mode of life'.⁴⁶ In June he emphasised the necessity of not allowing food to be sold at below the market price, but Routh replied that 'our price is the market price', and warned that 'the wants of the country are everywhere most urgent'.⁴⁷ In July 1846 he did interfere with the free market, agreeing to Routh's requests for a few more shiploads of food to be submitted to the Treasury 'with every disposition to comply with your wishes'.⁴⁸ But he still adhered to his belief in the market, warning in September 1846 that 'permanent damage' must be inflicted on the market by selling corn at too low a price.⁴⁹ He was not alone in his conviction that state interference must be approached with extreme caution. The supervisor of the Waterford food depot agreed in February 1846 that state intervention should only be adopted in order to stabilise prices, and could be used to threaten unscrupulous corn merchants to control their prices: a 'broad hint might keep the market at its fair level'.⁵⁰ And there were such merchants, for not all the Irish people were deeply concerned with their fellow countrymen's plight. Farmers in Churchtown, County Cork, delayed paying rent because they left their corn unthreshed in expectation of very high prices. Trevelyan responded by instructing local committees not to buy oatmeal from those who had been responsible for creating artificially high prices in the district, thus preventing farmers from making a profit from their neighbours' misfortune.⁵¹ Nevertheless, Trevelyan was at one with the Whig government's belief that public works, where people would labour in return for money to buy food, was the way forward, a policy which they adhered to from the second half of 1846 until the beginning of 1847, and to facilitate this he placed all public works under the control of a reorganised Board of Works. But the numbers of people who must be maintained by the works reached 720,000 in the spring of 1847. Not all of these people were the 'deserving poor', since large farmers or their sons were encouraged by landlords to go on the public works and thus earn enough money to pay their rents. Some who were most deserving of relief were not strong enough to undertake the hard work involved. The enormous cost of the exercise (£4,848,235) was hardly commensurate with the results.⁵² In January

1847 Trevelyan wrote to Colonel Henry Jones of the Board of Works acknowledging that 'the tide of distress has for some time past been steadily rising and appears now to have completely overflowed the barriers we endeavoured to oppose. The question I have to ask you therefore is whether the time has not arrived for having recourse in a direct and effectual manner to what we have been aiming at by many indirect means, namely, the outdoor relief of every destitute person'.⁵³

Trevelyan was determined to ensure that state intervention would not undermine the principle that the government's purpose was to help local effort, not supplant it. Nevertheless, the state found itself going much further in the case of Ireland than it did in Scotland, and it became an administrator of a huge famine relief operation. Soup kitchens were opened in the spring of 1847; and in June a separate Irish Poor Law Commission was set up and put in charge of further assistance under the Poor Law Amendment Act, which empowered boards of guardians to grant outdoor relief to the aged, infirm and sick poor, and to poor widows with two or more dependent children. It also empowered Poor Law Commissioners to permit boards to give food to the able-bodied poor for limited periods, though excluding persons holding more than a quarter-acre of land. The use of outdoor relief in place of soup kitchens placed an intolerable burden on the workhouses, which were obliged to cope with numbers greatly in excess than those originally envisaged; living conditions in the Ballinrobe workhouse by the end of 1847 were described by one observer as 'a picture of demi-savage life'.⁵⁴ The government intended that Irish property should pay for Irish poverty, a perfectly respectable policy in normal times, but the times were far from normal, and some unions became bankrupt. Landlords were encouraged by the Gregory clause in the 1847 Poor Law Amendment Act, which excluded anyone holding more than a quarter of an acre from relief unless they first surrendered their holdings, to evict their tenants. Once again the state must intervene, this time by loans and then by levying a special rate on all rateable property. Once again ratepayers' interests could only be protected by the union managers economising as far as possible, to the detriment of the poor. It seemed indeed that Trevelyan's doubts about the efficacy of state interference were not unreal, though to the modern mind state intervention on the most direct and massive scale seems to be the obvious answer to the Great Irish Famine. But to the Victorians the free market was sacrosanct. Even the supervisor of the

Waterford food depot acknowledged that his reading of Edmund Burke's work on scarcity removed doubts about the great evil of government being depended on for subsistence by the people, and 'meddling' with the market 'if it can be avoided' (though he did suggest that the government might do 'much moral good by making occasionally a legitimate use of their "reserve" to keep down the prices of the markets').⁵⁵ And when to this was added the longevity of the crisis, the lack of direct understanding of its depth, and official impatience with demands on the public purse, then the state's response to the famine is less perplexing.

The move by so many labourers, and indeed farmers and their sons, to the public works further dislocated Irish rural society; and there was an increase in agrarian crime as labourers reneged on pledges to pay for conacre land which had yielded only diseased potatoes. There were attacks on ships off the west coast of Ireland; crops were stolen from the fields. But there was no breakdown of law and order, such as the government feared. The worsening state of the country after 1846 produced apathy, not social—let alone political—rebellion. And in September 1848 Trevelyan wrote to Stephen Spring Rice:

The poorest and most ignorant Irish peasant must, I think, by this time, have become sensible of the advantage of belonging to a powerful community like that of the United Kingdom, the establishments and pecuniary resources of which are at all times ready to be employed for his benefit. At any rate, the repeal of the Union will not be seriously demanded while so large a proportion of the Irish people are receiving union wages and eating union meal.⁵⁶

This is a verdict which posterity has been inclined to contest; and claims have been made that the whole episode of the famine was a kind of British-generated holocaust, a deliberate effort by the British government to allow Ireland to starve. One recent historian has contrasted the British government's expenditure, a few years after the famine, of £69.3 million 'on an utterly futile adventure in the Crimea' with its failure to spend such a sum on famine relief in Ireland, even half of which 'would have saved hundreds and thousands of lives'.⁵⁷ This ignores the fact that to the British, and indeed French and

Turkish governments, the Crimean War was by no means a 'futile adventure', but a completely necessary use of force against Russian diplomatic ambitions. It also raises the question of how far the British government could exceed the limits which it wished to impose upon itself in its famine relief measures. The government did exceed these limits, to the extent that it accepted in 1847 that a high proportion of the Irish population must be fed without charge and without entering the workhouse. The failure of the government to provide enough food for its depots was exacerbated by the fact that the autumn and winter of 1846–7 saw considerable food shortages throughout Europe, and the government feared that to export inordinate quantities of food to Ireland might provoke a shortage in another part of the United Kingdom.⁵⁸ Quantities of food began to arrive from February 1847 onwards; from 1 September 1846 until 1 July 1847 wheat imports were five times as great as the exports, and the import of Indian corn and meal was three times as large as the total export of cereals.⁵⁹

And yet there was the feeling, not without foundation, that an Irish famine was different from an English one, had there been such an event; that the British government failed to respond to the plea made by the Tory *Dublin University Magazine* to send her ships and her men to Ireland to show to Ireland and the world a truly generous and concerned spirit. This case is unproved and unprovable; but the claims of the Irish famine on the state in 1846 were regarded as so large that the Highland famine was not allowed to make an equal drain on the public purse. There was no specifically anti-Irish feeling behind government policy, though there was a sense that indeed this disaster, like its Scottish equivalent, had been brought by the people upon themselves as a result of their backward way of life. A slip of the tongue by Charles Wood, Chancellor of the Exchequer, revealed this prejudice. In September 1846 the Mallow Relief Committee went to London to canvass the Exchequer for aid. The secretary of the Committee, the Reverend Gibson, urged that the wages paid to those on the public works should not be less than 10 pence a day. Wood replied that 10 pence was a high rate of wages—for an Irishman. Gibson—a Protestant Dissenting minister—retorted angrily that 'if that were the opinion of an English gentleman . . . God help the people!'⁶⁰ However, against this must be set the awareness that the government's duty was to save life, and not to adopt a policy of detachment: there was never at any time an acceptance, or even a

suggestion, that the Irish or the Scots should be left to starve. Yet they had starved, and in numbers that the government (and some historians of the famine) hesitated to count. It would, therefore, be necessary to use the disaster as an opportunity to initiate in Ireland a more advanced social and economic system to prevent this happening again: for were future summers to be followed inevitably by crises? There was never any idea that this would provide a kind of dreadful solution to the Irish or Scottish rural questions, even though there was the consolation that the famines would indeed prepare the way for a more workable and sensible economic system in the Highlands of Scotland and the west of Ireland.

The experience of the famine, both then and later, became inextricably linked with the question of the Union and its reality, even its viability. As we have seen, Sir Charles Trevelyan had expressed the belief that union wages and union meal would make Unionists out of the most ignorant Irish peasant; but in less than a year's time Lord Palmerston expressed his astonishment that the Irish elections had 'gone in favour of Repeal candidates; and this just after two or three millions of Irish have been saved from famine and pestilence by money which if the Union had not existed, their own parliament would never have been able to raise. This is not natural.'⁶¹ This vote for Repeal had little to do with sympathy for famine victims; it was a measure of O'Connell's ongoing electoral and political organisation. But it was the last success of the O'Connellite movement that had maintained itself in Irish and British politics since the 1820s. The famine destroyed the Repeal movement, and indeed Irish political life, for a few years at least. This was a sign perhaps that O'Connell was not the dominating figure, nor his organisation the deep-rooted and permanent one, that they appeared to be. O'Connell himself was ill, and in March 1847 he set out for Rome, dying in Genoa in May. It is doubtful if he could have done much to help his country in the terrible few years that still lay ahead; but it is clear that he believed that if any relief was to be provided, then the government, in co-operation with the landlords of Ireland, should provide the means of financing it—that the twin bulwarks of the Union must show that indeed they could rescue Ireland from misery.⁶²

This was not a belief shared by O'Connell's most persistent critics, the Young Irelanders. The death of O'Connell and the collapse of the Repeal movement left the way open for other, bolder spirits, with the

foundation of the Irish Confederation in January 1847. But it was not clear just how bold they would prove themselves to be. Young Ireland had addressed itself to the land question, arguing that the landed aristocracy should be preserved, if their loyalty to the nation were assured. Davis argued for the establishment of an Irish yeoman class, in possession of small estates, on the model of Norway, mainly because of his hatred of the cities and towns, with their sickly and mean-looking populations.⁶³ But he had no specific plan of how to bring this about. Charles Gavan Duffy hoped that the landlords' own suffering in the famine would make them more 'nationally' minded. This was not as fanciful as it sounded. The landlords, politically adrift since Peel's apostasy on the corn laws and the break-up of the Conservative Party, were uneasy about the government's response to the famine and its initial determination to make Irish property come to the aid of Irish poverty. This policy resulted in the economic ruin of many of their number and increased the encumbrance of landed property in Ireland. A meeting of peers, gentry and M.P.s of all political parties held in Dublin in January 1847 pressed the government to change its policy on the famine relief question. But this gathering, like a further meeting in May, failed to come up with firm and immediate remedies; it could only hint at what might be done if only men would work together for the common good.⁶⁴

The Young Ireland movement was now faced with a dilemma: landlords—Ireland's natural political leaders, and a class for whom the Young Irelanders still had a considerable, if possibly misguided, faith—could not help Ireland in her hour of need. But the great majority of Young Irelanders were not fiery revolutionaries, bent on leading a starving peasantry in the manner of the great French Revolution of 1789; and in the autumn of 1847 and the spring of 1848 they followed the propensity of many Irish political movements—they split. In October 1847 John Mitchel called on tenants to withhold agricultural produce for their own consumption. In December he appealed to the Irish peasants to arm themselves in defiance of the government. But Charles Gavan Duffy immediately prohibited Mitchel from using the pages of the *Nation* to call for insurrection, whereupon Mitchel resigned from the Irish Confederation policy committee and urged the use of arms to resist eviction. But when the Confederation met to debate the crisis in February 1848, Mitchel confessed that he did not as yet advocate the use of force in Ireland's

'broken and divided condition'. He simply did not rule it out absolutely. He said to the people 'arm, arm', not 'agitate, agitate', as the Confederates did; yet he denied any intention of 'leading out a starving peasantry to be mown down in open fields by regular troops'. He then made his position even more complicated by declaring darkly that there were 'far worse things going on around us than bloodshed'. William Smith O'Brien moved a resolution committing Young Ireland to constitutional action and the 'force of opinion', whereupon Mitchel, John Martin and Thomas Devin Reilly, representing the 'physical force' minority within the movement, withdrew from the Irish Confederation, and Mitchel founded his own newspaper, the *United Irishman*, to propagate his beliefs. But what were his beliefs? In the *United Irishman* he declared that the people must await attack and avoid shedding the first blood.⁶⁵ Thomas Francis Meagher, who was wont to sing of the virtues of the sword, explained that, like O'Connell, his object was not to draw blood from the government, but to prevent it from being drawn from the people. The whole tenor of the Young Ireland 'physical force' group was defensive; no one as yet wanted to take the initiative.

Political splits and the battle of the newspaper press were hardly likely to help the starving people of Ireland; a rebellion would almost certainly prove even less efficacious. The likely outcome was more divisions (and no doubt more newspapers). But events abroad prompted some of the Young Irelanders into drastic, if futile, action. In Paris, three weeks after the Confederation debate on the use of force, a revolution overthrew the monarchy; and the spectacle of liberals, socialists, republicans, middle and lower classes, all combining in one great wave of popular protest to overthrow King Louis Philippe and establish a popular government was enough to inspire the weakest heart. Republicans and Confederates alike in Ireland met to hail this new dawn, as their political ancestors had greeted that of 1789.

In this kind of revolutionary ferment—a ferment of the few, for the mass of the Irish people were indifferent or engaged in the grim business of survival—anything seemed possible. The idea of a republic was resurrected, for the memory of 1789 triggered off memories of 1798 and 1803. Mitchel denounced the previous objectives of Young Ireland, which had demanded only the restoration of the Irish parliament on College Green. Now, he

declared, the demand must be for a republic, 'one and indivisible'. And now a levelling social spirit manifested itself: Mitchel asserted that the 'life of a labouring man is exactly equal to the life of one nobleman, neither more nor less'. The tenant right question was now being defined as one which could only be resolved, as James Fintan Lalor put it, by rooting the peasantry 'like rocks to the soil of the land'.⁶⁶

But there was an air of philosophical debate, even about these stirring war-cries. No one had yet defined the 'peasantry' that was to be 'rooted' in the soil: was this peasantry to include well-to-do tenant farmers, or the poor labourers, who were now fleeing from the land in large numbers for fear of hunger and death? And was force to be initiated by the Young Irelanders, or should they follow Smith O'Brien's advice and wait upon British provocation to arouse a general resistance? The Young Irelanders might have debated this point for ever, had not the government indeed taken the initiative. Mitchel was arraigned on a charge of treason and transported. Duffy, Meagher, Michael Doheny and Thomas D'Arcy McGee were arrested, *habeas corpus* suspended, and membership of the Confederation Club declared sufficient grounds for arrest. The remaining Confederates, led by Smith O'Brien, decided they had no choice but to strike at once. Their chances of success were few: there was no popular desire for an uprising—indeed, there was no popular desire for any political action—and the Catholic Church was hostile. In July 1848 O'Brien, Terence Bellew McManus, James Stephens and about forty Confederates engaged the Irish Constabulary at Boolagh Commons, near Ballingarry, County Tipperary, in what became known to posterity as the 'battle of the Widow McCormack's cabbage patch'. In August Smith O'Brien was arrested and transported, his request to be hanged, drawn and quartered for treason being refused by the bench. Meagher, McManus and Doheny followed him to Van Diemen's Land. John O'Mahony, a Catholic landlord, who abandoned a comfortable life to embark on a career as a professional revolutionary, led large numbers of men driven off the land by famine in a seven-week mobile campaign in the Comeragh Mountains which kept the authorities in suspense. Lack of co-ordination frustrated the enterprise.⁶⁷ In September 1849 there was a brief sequel, when at the instigation of Lalor an unsuccessful attack was made on Cappoquin police barracks.

Later generations were to look on 1848 as an inspiration—or at least later generations of revolutionaries, however few in number,

were to so regard it. But no general conclusion regarding the state of public opinion on the Union, and the British government's attitude to the famine, can be based upon the events of 1848. In 1849 Queen Victoria visited Ireland amid a display of popular enthusiasm. This may not have been deep; nor should it be taken as evidence that Ireland was devoid of grievances. But the public response to the royal visit was as deep, or as shallow, as any other political opinion in Ireland in the wake of the famine. Ireland was politically directionless, and politically safe, as far as anti-Union feeling was concerned.

But it was in social and economic terms that the real importance of the famine lies. The famine reduced the proportion of the labouring classes in rural Ireland, which in the previous decades had comprised two-thirds of the population, outnumbering the tenant and independent farmers by four to one: by 1900 farmers outnumbered labourers, and the gap between them in social status was larger. This was partly because of the consolidation in farm holdings. One farm in four disappeared between 1845 and 1851, with the decline confined to holdings of less than fifteen acres. The average size of a farm increased; by 1851 51 per cent of farms were more than fifteen acres, while the proportion of holdings under five acres fell from 24 per cent in 1845 to 15 per cent in 1851.⁶⁸ This left the tenant farmer as the largest class in Ireland, though not yet a 'class' in any sense that would imply solidarity or sense of common purpose. Indeed, even when that class began to develop such characteristics, these varied from region to region, depending on the economic and social gradations and differentiations within the broad category 'tenant farmers'. The cottiers and labourers, whose number fell by 40 per cent during the following sixty years, were the only 'peasants' properly so-called; their role as founders and members of agrarian secret societies was now sharply curtailed, and despite the fact that landlords in certain areas of the country continued to carry out evictions, agrarian crime decreased markedly. Landlords also moved against middlemen, who had paid a fixed rent on a long lease, and who were responsible for much of the practice of subdivision of land before the famine; both they and their sub-tenants were removed, for example in the Kilrush Union in County Clare.⁶⁹ The famine greatly accelerated the trend, already evident, for the rearing of livestock to replace tillage; and this, with the decline in the labour force, the rise in wages, and the international trends towards higher prices for livestock products, now became the main business of

the Irish farmer, except in the west of Ireland.⁷⁰ That area, which had borne the worst of the famine, was, oddly enough, the area which returned to the potato crop most quickly and generally. Finally, the famine greatly accelerated another development which contemporaries hardly noticed: the massive and sustained decline in the Irish language. This was not only because of the famine; it marked the serious and sustained belief that the language was a barrier to social advancement, and the beginning of the use of English in everyday speech as well as more formal occasions.

This would imply that the chief changes of the famine were indeed economic and social rather than psychological. The problem lies in evaluating such evidence as exists in the Folklore Commission collection. This material was collected in the 1950s, and has to be interpreted with caution, but it seems that folklore tradition did not indict the British government in the way that Nationalists such as John Mitchel did. The image of ships leaving Ireland with food was recorded; but this was not blamed on the government. Even the expression 'The Great Famine' (*An Gorta Mór*) was not widely used; the 'Bad Times' appears in the folklore material.⁷¹ This changes the concept of the event, rather like the use of the term 'Troubles' instead of 'War of Independence' alters the picture of the events of 1919-21, conveying a less well-defined, less coherent, and above all less dramatic account. Irish America was the most significant repository of hostility to Britain because of the famine, though the impact of famine on emigration must not be exaggerated. The rush to flee the country was, of course, an increase in demographic movement, and a dramatic one; but still an increase, not a new development. Landlords and philanthropic societies had actively assisted emigration before 1845; and travel between Ireland, Great Britain and America was cheap and readily available. The famine increased this trend, and shifted its geographical origin, which had lain mainly in Ulster, to the south and west. The difference was that the famine compelled whole family groups to emigrate, and also large numbers of youths of both sexes under 25 years of age. Emigration now became an expected option, as soon as the means to buy a passage could be found.⁷² The image of the 'coffin-ships', however, was new: passengers in the famine emigration were of the poorest and most destitute kind, and they brought diseases, especially typhus, with them.⁷³ European emigrant ships fared much better because their passengers had not suffered the

destitution or exposure to infectious diseases that emigrants from Ireland experienced. This emigration, both to Britain and America, has been taken as a major development in a particularly virulent kind of Irish nationalism, which harboured a deep and bitter sense of anti-Britishness, though landlords were ignorant of harsh conditions on voyage and in North America. But at the time this was not a factor in British-Irish relations, and would not become so for more than a decade. Even then, its importance must be carefully assessed. No country was less concerned about its emigrant population than Ireland; indeed, that very sense of isolation from the homeland which bred a sentimental and backward-looking nationalism was increased by the fact that the Irish abroad were regarded by the Irish at home as very much abroad, and by the fact that the Irish, of all emigrant peoples, showed the least tendency to return home⁷⁴ (though they might sing of it often enough). The Irish in Britain and America were to add a new element to nationalism, and, more importantly, much money to its coffers.

The famine did not mark the beginning of the end of the Union; nor was it taken by anyone as signifying that the Union had failed, though criticism was made of government policy, and Young Ireland raised its futile revolt. Nor were the landlords as yet seen as the great oppressors of their country; rather they were, more accurately, exposed as the sufferers (in a very different way) of the consequences of the pre-famine agrarian system and the post-famine consequences of that system. In 1849 the government passed an Encumbered Estates Act for the purpose of enabling financially embarrassed landlords to sell up. It allowed every creditor, except the petitioner who was forcing the sale (and even him, if he obtained the leave of the court), to bid for the encumbered property and to become its owner with an indefeasible title. Owners of land could themselves apply to the court to sell their estates. When the sale was completed, the court was to distribute the purchase money among the various claimants, pay the residue to the vendor, and grant the new proprietor a clear and legal title to the land.⁷⁵

The purpose of this act was to introduce into Ireland a new kind of landlord who would make an economic success of the land system, and who would introduce new and enlightened personnel as well as new methods—for English and Scottish farmers would, it was hoped, accompany the landlords and demonstrate their farming abilities in

an Irish context. Between 1849 and 1857 over 3,000 estates were sold under the act; but of the 7,200 purchasers, only about 300 came from Great Britain, and there was no general input of capital from England and Scotland (the British purchasers contributed less than £3 million out of the £20 million purchase money). Moreover, the bulk of land in Ireland was still owned by the old landed families: the famine did not produce a new set of entrepreneurial landlords. In this respect at least the famine changed society, and yet left it familiar enough.

The famine left its deepest mark on the poorest members of society, who were of no immediate political significance. The traditional beliefs and customs of the rural labourers, now diminished and still diminishing in numbers, who held to what may be called (in an admittedly ambiguous phrase) the folk ways of Ireland, began to disappear with the people who lived by them. This decline was noticed in the 1820s and 1830s, as wakes, traditional festivals and magic beliefs were being undermined by a society in search of progress and advancement and open to modern and commercial pressures.⁷⁶ The death of so many people, particularly the elderly, the rapid emigration of so many more, especially the young, accelerated the disappearance of a real 'hidden Ireland'. That Ireland was now rapidly replaced by the Ireland of the tenant farmer, an increasingly dominating influence on the style and attitudes of the countryside (and therefore of the social, political and religious life of the nation as a whole), with his solid house, orthodox religious beliefs (purged of any troublesome pagan or deviant notions), unshifting conservative outlook, and that most dynamic of all desires in any society—the desire to better himself, and to ensure that he went on bettering himself. Such people were likely to give their children an education, unlike the labourers, who were mainly illiterate. Such people were likely to listen to their clergy, whose views and values they shared, and whose approval would be a sign that they were getting on in this world as well as the next one. 'Modern' Ireland was in the process of being born; 'traditional' Ireland, when it was resurrected in the 1890s, would bear little resemblance to the real traditions of the poor and weak who died or emigrated as a result of the Great Famine. Their fate might be a useful item in later nationalist propaganda, though not as much as might be expected, for few wanted to restore the Ireland that modern and modernising Ireland was—it seemed—far better without.

The census of 1851 revealed that most Irish people still lived on the land (83 per cent); that the families of the 570,338 tenant farmers enumerated by the census officials comprised over half the rural population; that the majority of the rest were landless labourers; and that the landlords, some 10,000 in number, owned most of the land, numbering among their ranks such figures as the Duke of Leinster, with 73,000 acres in Kildare and Meath, and the Marquis of Downshire, with 115,000 acres in five counties. In 1851 47.8 per cent of farms were over fifteen acres; by 1861 some 40 per cent of the land was held in farms of a hundred acres or more. This process of consolidation of holdings slowed down after 1851, but it was never reversed. For those tenants who held the farms of less than fifteen acres, which comprised one-half of the total, farming was still a precarious and uncertain business, liable to raise alarming memories of the famine. Landlords were themselves more inclined to take a closer interest in balancing their books than they had done before the famine: estate management and a tighter rein were essential. In a clash of interests, tenant and landlord would find little room for manoeuvre.⁷⁷

The famine did not destroy, or even undermine, the Union; it might even be suggested that it stabilised it, by debilitating the Repeal movement and Young Ireland, thus leaving the way open for Irish politics to be based upon other, less divisive issues. It did, however, establish a historiography of its own, in both England and Ireland, where writers as diverse as Cecil Woodham Smith and the I.R.A. leader Ernie O'Malley shared a common view of the famine as a kind of deliberate act of genocide. This view has been refuted by most modern Irish historians, who see the Russell government as unable to free itself from the economic orthodoxy of the day. The genocide theory⁷⁸ is utterly without historical justification. The British government was determined to save as many of the people as it reasonably could—though not at too high a cost. The Poor Law Amendment Act of June 1847 put virtually all relief as a charge on local property, through financing under the Poor Law. From mid-1847 it was convinced that it had done enough for Ireland, and left the Irish Poor Law Commission to cope. And it did see Ireland not as an integral but (like Scotland) as a rather remote and certainly different part of the United Kingdom: as a backward land, set in unprofitable and obscurantist ways of life and thought. Once the famine was

(officially) over, then England could get on with the ordinary business of government, leaving the Encumbered Estates Court to encourage free trade in land. In this sense the famine revealed that the United Kingdom was a political convenience rather than a genuine political concept. But this was not necessarily a weakness. For if the Union, by 1850, was not based upon a consensus about 'common citizenship', then it could at least rest upon acquiescence. And the tenant farmers, now consolidating their holdings and emerging as the key group in the Irish countryside, next to the landlords, had other preoccupations than the tragedy of the famine (the most savage indictment of which was left to the Ulster Presbyterian Young Irelander, John Mitchel). In a loose and diverse political association such as the United Kingdom was (and continued to be) acquiescence was as good a political cement as any. Indeed, few political systems, encompassing a variety of peoples and religions and economies, could claim foundations half as secure.