An Early Irish Reaction to Malthus

Cormac Ó Gráda

Malthus’s well-known concessions to “moral restraint” in the second edition of the Essay on Population are usually put down to the stimulus of William Godwin and to the Scandinavian trip of 1799 (e.g., Petersen 1979, 48–50). The possible influence on his thinking of William Parnell, one of his Irish friends, has been overlooked. Sometime in 1798 the youthful Parnell wrote a letter to his brother Henry, in which he reported attempting to convince Malthus that the prudential check to overpopulation was much more pervasive than the Essay (Malthus 1970, 86–103) had allowed.¹ The letter anticipates more clearly still the sympathetic attitude to Irish problems articulated by Malthus in the Edinburgh Review in 1808 and 1809 (reprinted in Malthus 1963, 33–70), though not found in second and later editions of the Essay (James 1979, 142–59; Ó Gráda 1984). The letter, undated but postmarked 1798, reads as follows:

Hampstead

Dear Henry

I am much obliged to you for your letters. I am glad you like Malthus’s book on population, it does him very great credit, and though it was a received principle of political economy among most men of general information, yet no one had ever written expressly on the subject. I have talked to Malthus about his book, and I think have convinced him that he [is] wrong in supposing that population can only be checked by vice and misery and that no country can be without a class of poor. The fact is that the great check to population is prudence and the spirit among all ranks of preserving their respective situations in society; and Holland is a proof that industry and economy joined with a spirit of comfort can raise the lowest ranks to a sufficient competency. But these can never exist under an oppressive government, and hence we learn the great merit of

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¹. This letter is to be found in the Congleton Papers, Southampton University Library, K57. My thanks to Lord Congleton for allowing me to publish it, and to James Donnelly and Sarah Maza for their comments.
liberty in raising a pride and self importance in the people which will make poverty a disgrace and restrain them from imprudent marriages. If you examine different nations you will find that the people breed in exact proportion to the tyranny of the Government.

I have scarcely seen King\(^2\) as he has been forced to be at Ockham and I could not leave Sophia. I saw him in town yesterday and he returns tomorrow. He has turned out what I have long foretold, quite a moral miracle particularly with regard to talents.

You shall hear from me soon. My knee is much better. The change of weather has had some effect on Sophia but I hope it will not continue.

Your affectionate brother

W. Parnell

William and Henry Parnell were the sons of Sir John Parnell, a noted Irish landowner and politician; the Sophia mentioned in this letter was their younger sister. Henry (1776–1842) was to become an influential monetary economist and Whig politician; he was responsible for securing the family seat of Portarlington for Ricardo in 1819. William (1777–1821) spent most of his life at Avondale, County Wicklow,\(^3\) earning an enduring reputation there as an interested and indulgent landlord. He was briefly M.P. for County Wicklow and is deemed by one biographer of his more famous grandson to have been “as radical a theorist as it was possible for an Irish Protestant landlord to be” (Foster 1976, 16).

References


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2. Lord Peter King, author of Thoughts on the Restriction of Payments in Specie in the Banks of England and Ireland (London, 1803); succeeded to the family estate at Ockham, Surrey, in 1793.

3. Future seat of his grandson, the nationalist political leader Charles Stuart Parnell (Lyons 1977, 20).