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The Great Hunger 1845–1850

The arrival of *Phytophthera infestans* or potato blight in Ireland was first noted in the press on 6 September 1845. The 'New Disease' had already struck in the US in the summer of 1843. According to a contemporary account from there, 'potatoes [were] subject to dry rot, attacking some in the hill, and some in the heap, and fatal to the whole wherever it makes its appearance, causing them to rot and emit a very offensive stench'.[27] The blight then crossed the ocean by a mysterious route, reaching Ireland via Continental Europe and England. The news that Ireland had been hit caused the London *Gardener's Chronicle* to stop press, but local reports from Ireland were initially reassuring. Reaction in financial and commodity markets was minimal. Indeed the movement of potato prices on the Dublin market in the autumn of 1845 reflects this. Lumpers, which fetched 16d. to 20d. per hundredweight (or 50 kilos) in the second week of September, could still be bought for less than 18d. until near the end of November. (Then, it is true, prices rose beyond 2 shillings, and had passed 3 shillings by April 1846.) In political circles, however, the gravity of the situation soon became a 'party' issue: 'to profess belief in . . . the existence of a formidable potato blight, was as sure a method of being branded a radical, as to propose to destroy the Church'.[28] Constabulary crop returns soon put an end to the confusion; they suggested that less than half the crop had been lost, though the poor, who tended to plant their potatoes late, were worst hit.

[27] Quoted in N. E. Stevens (1933) 'The Dark Ages in Plant Pathology in America', *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences*, 23 (15 September), 441.

[28] (Isaac Butt) (1847) 'The Famine in the Land', *Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 29, 502.

The disease was, of course, a mystery. Most botanists agreed with Professor Lindley, eminent editor of the *Gardener's Chronicle*, who blamed the still, damp weather for the excess moisture that caused the tubers to rot. A fungal specialist, Rev. M. J. Berkeley, correctly diagnosed the mould on the plants as a 'vampire' fungus that fed on healthy potatoes, but the fungal hypothesis was scoffed at by most experts. Lindley dominated the official committee of inquiry ordered by Peel, now Prime Minister, and so the disease was diagnosed as a kind of wet rot. The committee's report suggested storage in well-ventilated pits as the best remedy: corollary remedies included dousing in quicklime, exposure to air, kiln drying, and a cover of ashes.[29] The blight excited enormous interest in the gardening and scientific press for a time, but Bourke (1964) suggests that 'few authentic clues' stand out amid the welter of hunches and assertions. Not that a different diagnosis would have eliminated the problem: an antidote for potato blight (copper sulphate solution) was not discovered until 1882. (Ironically the salutory effect of copper had been noted in Swansea in 1846, but quickly forgotten.) Acceptance of Berkeley's diagnosis would have dictated felling diseased tubers, thereby delaying the blight's progress. But that would not have mattered much. More important, the blight which, as noted above, had severely damaged the US potato crop in 1843, did so again in the US in 1844 and 1845 (Bourke, 1962). Had the fungal diagnosis been more widely accepted, might this tendency for the disease to recur have reduced the widespread complacency about the prospects of the 1846 Irish potato harvest?

Sir Robert Peel, long familiar with Irish problems – he had been Irish Secretary in 1822 and Home Secretary subsequently – acted quickly (O'Rourke, 1902, *122–30*). Against Treasury advice, he engaged the merchant house of Baring Brothers in November 1845 to purchase £100,000 worth of maize and meal – enough to feed 1 million people for over a month – in America. A buffer stock was built without fuss or publicity. In the event, it was hardly needed. Though history books often date the Famine from the first onslaught of the blight, few people perished in the 1845–6 season. This remarkable achievement was partly due to the efficacy of

[29] P. Hickey (1980) 'A Study of Four Peninsular Parishes in West Cork 1796–1855' (Ph.D. thesis, National University of Ireland), pp. 303–11.

relief, but partly too to the country's ability to handle such a shortfall, provided the next year's crop was not long delayed.

(i) Chronology

The renewed and more complete failure of the potato in 1846 heralded the true beginning of the Great Famine. Another failure had not been anticipated, for despite the previous year's poor harvest, the potato acreage was close to an all-time high in 1846. In the early summer the potato plots bloomed 'like flower gardens', but any hopes that the blight might prove a one-year wonder soon vanished. The tell-tale discoloured leaves and stalks and the stench were everywhere, and another police report based on returns from all over the country put the average yield at less than half a ton per acre (compared to the usual six to seven tons). The prices of potatoes of all varieties rocketed. Cups, which had been worth less than 2 shillings per hundredweight (or 50 kilos) on the Dublin market in October 1845 were selling for over 7 shillings a year later, while the price of the lowly Lumper had jumped from about 16d. to 6 shillings.[30] The average agricultural wage per day was now less than the cost of a poor man's food, making no allowance for those dependent on him. Famine loomed. The new minority Whig administration of Lord John Russell faced urgent pleas for public works and controls on the grain trade. But having berated the Tories for over-reacting in 1845–6, Russell's policy was one of wait-and-see.

The numbers starving to death began to mount alarmingly in the autumn of 1846, and reports of some particularly gruesome cases soon began to appear in the press. Some of these are described at length by Woodham-Smith (1962) and Kee (1981), but in the retreat from 'emotiveness' mentioned earlier, other accounts shun them.[31] Yet reports such as the following pair from south-west Cork, usually considered the worst-hit area in the early stages of

[30] This did not result in higher potato consumption. The Famine thus produced no evidence for potatoes being a 'Giffen' (*) good (see Dwyer and Lindsay, 1984).

[31] Daly's otherwise excellent survey (Daly, 1986) omits such accounts entirely. In this, it reflects the dispassionate, sanitized approach to the Great Famine now dominant in Irish historical scholarship.

the Famine, are at the heart of the famine story. They make it 'a palpable thing', adding context to the matchstick scavengers portrayed in the *Illustrated London News* in 1847 and 1848, and widely reproduced since (Edwards and Williams, 1956; Irish University Press, 'Famine Series', 1968; Woodham-Smith, 1962):[32]

> The famine grew more horrible towards the end of December 1846, many were buried with neither inquest nor coffin. An inquest was held by Dr. Sweetman on three bodies. The first was that of the father of two very young children whose mother had already died of starvation. His death became known only when the two children toddled into the village of Schull. They were crying of hunger and complaining that their father would not speak to them for four days; they told how he was 'as cold as a flag'. The other bodies on which an inquest was held were those of a mother and child who had both died of starvation. The remains had been gnawed by rats.

Other accounts, like this horrific report from Caheragh in the Cork *Southern Reporter*, were widely publicized:

> The following is a statement of what I *saw* yesterday evening on the lands of Toureen. In a cabbage garden I saw (as I was informed) the bodies of Kate Barry and her two children very lightly covered with earth, the hands and legs of her large body entirely exposed, the flesh completely eaten off by the dogs, the skin and hair of the head lying within a couple of yards of the skull, which, when I first threw my eyes on it, I though to be part of a horse's tail. Within about thirty yards of the above-mentioned garden, at the opposite side of the road, are two most wretched-looking old houses, with two dead bodies in each, Norry Regan, Tom Barry, Nelly Barry (a little girl), and Charles McCarthy (a little boy), all dead about a fortnight, and not yet interred; Tim Donovan, Darrig, on the same farm, died on Saturday, his wife and sister the only people I saw about the cabin, said they had no means to bury him. You will think this very horrifying; but were you to witness the state of the dead and dying here at Toureen, it would be too much for flesh and blood to behold. May the Lord avert, by his gracious interposition, the merited tokens of his displeasure.
>
> I need make no comment on this, but ask, *are we living in a portion of the United Kingdom?* (emphasis in the original)

Soon notices of 'deaths by starvation' lost their newsworthiness. The contemporary shock value of testimony such as that just quoted is difficult to evaluate. A generation ago the right-wing

[32] Hickey, *op. cit.*, p. 361.

historian Max Hartwell ventured that people like himself 'well disciplined by familiarity with concentration camps' are left 'comparatively unmoved' by the scandal of child labour during the Industrial Revolution.[33] The assessment of 'emotive' accounts of Famine starvation in Irish historiography is similar: contemporary policy-makers, inured to – and constrained by – mass misery, took them in their stride, and no more should be expected of them. Later generations, then, should not set anachronistically high standards for the politicians and bureaucrats of the 1840s. But this perspective ignores the fact that in Ireland most decent people were shocked (compare also Woods, 1987), and clamoured for government to act. Even that most doctrinaire of policy-makers, Treasury Under-Secretary Charles Trevelyan, was jolted by reports such as those just quoted for a time, and the immediate policy response was influenced by the publicity given to mass mortality.

The poor reacted vigorously at first to the crisis. Food rioting was widespread, and secret agrarian societies (locally organized but generically known as Ribbonmen) stepped up their activities (Donnelly, 1973, *187–91*).[34] Still, the full story of this popular resistance and its repression, which holds great potential for comparative insight on issues such as the moral economy and farmer–labourer conflict, remains to be told. Meanwhile the crime statistics help highlight the extent of the upsurge. They show, for example, that the number of persons committed for trial rose from an average of fewer than 20,000 in 1842–6 to 31,209 in 1847, 38,522 in 1848, and 41,989 in 1849.[35] Cross-tabulations by type of crime show that the surge was more the product of desperation than of malice: the number of committals for non-violent offences against property trebled, while that for offences against the person (homicide, wounding, and sexual offences) hardly rose at all. The

[33] R. M. Hartwell (1959) 'Interpretations of the Industrial Revolution', *Journal of Economic History*, XIX, 229–49.

[34] Charles Townshend (1983) *Political Violence in Ireland: Government and Resistance since 1848* (Oxford), pp. 18–21. See too Jonathan Pim (1855–6) 'Address Delivered at the Opening of the Session of the Society', *Journal of the Dublin Statistical Society*, I, 18–19, 30–1.

[35] Data on the number of crimes reported tell a similar story, though they peak earlier. Crimes outside the Dublin metropolitan area rose from 8,088 in 1845 to 12,380 in 1846, and peaked at 20,986 in 1847. They exceeded 14,000 in both 1848 and 1849, and then dropped off sharply. Cf. State Papers Office Dublin, Returns of Outrages 1846–55.

dramatic rise in the proportion of illiterates among those charged during the Famine (from 30 to over 40 per cent) also supports this interpretation. Striking too is the persistence of high crime rates until 1849, after which the crime rate dropped off sharply.

The mounting death toll prompted a series of policy initiatives. The then-traditional policy of providing work for the poor on public schemes through a Board of Works had been reintroduced by Peel in March 1846. This continued but with more central supervision, with Russell's Labour Rate Act. The cost of acceptable schemes was to fall 'entirely on persons possessed of property in the distressed districts'. Nevertheless, a flood of applications ensued, and for a time the Board was handling about 1,000 letters a day. The official in charge, Colonel Harry Jones, described the Board of Works in the following months as 'a great bazaar' (quoted in Griffiths, 1970). Whitehall insisted on projects combining a high social and low private value. There was a cry in Ireland for 'reproductive' works, meaning land reclamation, drainage projects, and estate improvement generally. It was held that these would directly raise farm output, but the official preference for schemes such as road works and quays won out. The skill intensity of the projects selected was necessarily low: 'the work was chosen for the people, not the people for the work'. By October 1846 hundreds of projects were already employing over 100,000 people; 20,000 of the workers lived in a single county – Clare – while the whole province of Ulster accounted for only 1,200.

The schemes were proposed by local 'presentment sessions', bodies composed of local taxpayers with ultimate responsibility for repaying the cost. A sense of desperation, coupled perhaps with the conviction that government in the end would not exact repayment in full, bred fiscal irresponsibility. There was never the slightest hope that local taxpayers could repay the cost of all the schemes proposed, or even those sanctioned by the Board of Works. By the end of 1846 the Board was already exasperated, but the number of relief works under its aegis continued to mount, and by the following spring they had cost nearly £5 million. At the peak in March 1847 a vast army of almost three-quarters of a million was employed, at less than a subsistence wage, on works which made little sense in terms of either economy or their goal of staving off famine. Partly because they were failing in their main task, partly

because it was feared that they would 'crowd out' farm work, they were quickly disbanded in the spring of 1847. This policy reversal left its mark on the rural landscape; it left farmers cut off from their fields by unfinished roads, cottages isolated on cuttings, 'constant and unsightly monument(s) of a disastrous period'. Such eyesores would have been a small price to pay for staving off starvation, but the Board's low-wage policy ruled that out. In a pointed 'final report' on its relief role, the Board expressed the hope that 'labour will not in future be lowered to the purpose of relief, nor relief deprived of its character of benevolence' (Irish University Press, 'Famine series', 1968, *vol. 8, 383*).

The provision of 'soup' or gruel – in effect 'any food cooked in a boiler, and distributed in a liquid state' (O'Rourke, 1902, *427*) – under the Destitute Poor (Ireland) Act, which came into operation in March 1847, seemed a step in the right direction. It attempted to tackle the problem of subsistence directly, and was less likely than the public works to 'crowd out' other employment. The cost was supposed to come from rates and charity, supplemented *pro rata* by government aid. During the summer of 1847 millions of meals were provided by local relief committees: in July the number fed reached 3 million daily. In some places more meals were provided daily than there were people. The distribution of soup was an impressive feat, and historians rate the scheme a success. The soup kitchens have not been subjected to close analytical scrutiny, however. True, mortality fell off during the summer of 1847 but this was, in part at least, a seasonal phenomenon. Whether soup alone would have prevented the mass mortality of the following winter is a moot point, because the last of the government soup kitchens were wound up, amid protest, at the end of September 1847. In practice the food value of the often watery soup was low, and the people were routinely humiliated by being made to queue for hours. Yet this was arguably 'by far the most effective of all the methods adopted by government' (Donnelly, 1988).

The Irish Poor Law Extension Act of June 1847 switched the main burden of relief to the Irish Poor Law system. The switch was prompted by a fall in food prices and an anticipated seasonal rise in the demand for labour. The workhouses, it was believed, could now cope with the numbers requiring relief. However, the work-

house system had been devised for the quite different purpose of coping with non-crisis poverty. It could not handle the larger responsibility, and during 1848 one-quarter of all Boards of Guardians, mainly those located in the poorest areas, were dissolved by the Commissioners in Dublin. Cross-subsidization *within* Ireland through the highly unpopular 'rate-in-aid' shifted some of the burden to more prosperous unions (Woodham-Smith, 1962, *378–9*). Clearly the workhouses themselves, though they had greatly expanded their capacity, could not house all the poor. Outdoor relief was widely relied on: in July 1849 the workhouses still housed over 200,000 people, but another 800,000 were on outdoor relief. The principle of 'less eligibility' was pressed home by the infamous Gregory Clause, which barred tenants who held more than one-quarter of an acre of land from relief. But the decision, taken in the summer of 1847, to throw the burden of relief on the Irish Poor Law and the Irish taxpayer was the most cynical move of all. It amounted to a declaration that, as far as Whitehall was concerned, the Famine was over. This callous act, born of ideology and frustration, prolonged the crisis. In the west roadside deaths were still commonplace in the winter of 1848–9 (Ó Gráda, 1988, *86–8*; Woodham-Smith, 1962, *406–7*).

Unfortunately for Ireland, the height of the Famine period – late 1846 and early 1847 – was one of financial crisis in Britain. The 'railway mania' which began in 1845 had run its course, and bad harvests in both Ireland and Britain in 1846 led to a huge trade deficit and consequent drain of bullion on the Bank of England. The ensuing sharp rise in the cost of credit embarrassed many companies. The value of cotton output fell by a quarter. The financial crisis of 1847 thus had 'real' origins, though it was exacerbated (so most economists argue) by the restrictiveness of the Bank Act of 1844. The crisis was relatively short-lived, but it was one of the nineteenth century's worst, and from Ireland's point of view the timing was inauspicious. With the plight of the Bank of England to worry them, it is easier to see how Ireland's problems took a back seat in the minds of Russell and Wood.

The history of the Famine has always been handled without due attention to its short-term impact on the Irish economy. The crisis left no sector unscathed. Censal occupational data show that while agriculture was worst hit, other sectors, dependent either directly

Table 2.1 *Money in circulation in Ireland during the Famine*

Week ending	Notes of £5 and over	Notes less than £5	Total note circulation	Specie held by banks
3 Jan. 1846	3,039,855	4,364,509	7,404,366	2,489,254
2 Jan. 1847	3,151,117	4,364,295	7,515,414	2,608,012
1 Jan. 1848	2,502,756	2,693,357	5,196,116	1,618,760
27 Jan. 1849	2,303,587	2,371,148	4,674,739	1,645,463
11 Aug. 1849	2,109,704	1,723,367	3,833,072	1,687,778
10 Aug. 1850	2,128,956	1,949,296	4,078,255	1,423,349

Source: Thom's Directory, 1847–50.

or indirectly on purchases from farmers and labourers, suffered severely too. The numbers in Table 2.1 tell the story in another way. The dramatic and sustained falling off in monetary circulation can be explained neither by the crisis of 1847 (which it outlasted) nor by legislative reform. Its connection with the Famine is underlined by the dramatic drop in the circulation of low-denomination banknotes, used in transactions such as wage payments and the business dealings of the poor. The amount of silver specie held by the banks (Table 2.1 refers to gold specie only) also fell markedly.[36] 1846 was a boom year for business and banks, but 1847 presented difficulties as the price of corn plummeted, and rents were not paid.[37] These years saw too the creation of Ireland's rail system. Between 1845 and 1853 track mileage grew from 70 to 700 miles, and in 1846–8 railway construction projects employed on average about 40,000 men. The benefits of railway investment for the Irish economy proved more lasting than those of the roads and bridges built by a far larger army of emaciated workers on public relief. But while the long-run consequences of the network were very important, this railway boom could do little to alleviate the Famine.[38]

[36] See 'The Agricultural and Commercial Condition of Ireland: The Bank Returns (1849) *Dublin University Magazine*, 34, 372–80. These numbers are a better measure of the Famine's impact than the trend in bank deposits, which fell in 1847 but rose thereafter. Cf. Philip Ollerenshaw (1987) *Banking in Nineteenth-Century Ireland: The Belfast Banks, 1825–1914* (Manchester), pp. 70–2.

[37] F. G. Hall (1947) *The Bank of Ireland 1783–1946* (Dublin), pp. 216–24.

[38] Joseph Lee (1965) 'An Economic History of Early Irish Railways' (unpublished M.A. thesis, National University of Ireland), pp. 140–2, 170–2.

The trend of weekly deaths in the poorhouses is a fallible but still useful indication of the spread of the deaths over time. The numbers highlight the seasonality of deaths and – more importantly – the long-drawn-out character of the crisis (Mokyr and Ó Gráda, 1984, *84–6*). Now famine deaths, it is true, usually outlast the literal shortage of food, but in Ireland what shocks is the *size* of the excess mortality in 1848–50. The continuing winter mortality peaks point like accusing fingers pointed at the official determination to declare the crisis over in the summer of 1847. The precise number who died will never be known, though guesses abound (Boyle and Ó Gráda, 1986; Cousens, 1963; Mokyr, 1980b). Some recent revisionist accounts have reduced the figure to 0.5 million, but Woodham-Smith has proposed 1.5 million (1962, *411*) and the *New Encyclopedia Britannica* puts deaths as high as 2–3 million.[39] Civil registration data on mortality are lacking, but by extrapolating the censal population estimates of 1841 to 1851, and allowing for non-crisis mortality and migration, an estimate of famine mortality is generated as a residual. In practice, incomplete Famine emigration data present a problem. No proper count was kept of the *flow* to Britain: only data on the number of Irish living in Britain in 1851 are available. Nor do passenger list tabulations, the best source on the numbers who boarded ships to move further afield, capture everybody either. In calculating excess mortality it is thus easy for the historian to consign to a premature grave some who escaped abroad unnoticed. For what they are worth, two recent estimates confirm the traditional guess of an excess mortality of 1 million, or one in nine of the whole population (Mokyr, 1980b; Boyle and Ó Gráda, 1986). Both ignore the difficulties of disentangling cholera deaths from the total, and base their assumptions about 'normal' mortality on imperfect censal data. Mokyr (1980b) reminds us that the Famine also reduced the birth rate below the 'normal' level, and argues the case for including such averted births as famine victims. He puts their number at about 0.4 million.[40]

If scientific diagnosis of the potato blight was crude, medical

[39] Compare Mary Daly (1980) *The Economic History of Ireland since 1800* (Dublin), pp. 20–1: T. Garvin (1981) *The Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics* (Dublin), p. 54; *Encyclopedia Britannica* (15 edn, New York, 1974), p. 674.

[40] However, as Kennedy (1983, *210*) points out, Mokyr overlooks the 'reincarnation' of some of these as the children of emigrants.

science was ineffective in preventing the ensuing deaths. Ireland had a large number of hospitals (about 40 regular and 60 fever hospitals) and over 600 dispensaries. These hospitals and dispensaries, largely the relics of earlier crises, survived on a combination of public funds and local enterprise. Worthy institutions, they were often poorly managed, and their spread was inverse to need. Medical practitioners grumbled about their rewards for famine duties. The work was dangerous, however: 36 of the 473 men appointed as medical officers by the Board of Health died of the occupational hazard of famine fever. But medical men had no remedies for fever or dysentry beyond what commonsense dictated. The treatment meted out in fever hospitals in the 1840s – deemed 'lazarettos for the reception of the sick' by Dublin's leading physician, Dominick Corrigan – was still fumigation with sulphuric acid and 'nitre', and the baking of victims' clothes.[41]

Those who died better-publicized deaths during the first famine winter in places such as Skibbereen perished of starvation, and of dysentery induced by infected and unwholesome foods. But 'no famine, no fever', and later deaths were disproportionately due to fever. Relapsing sickness, a less virulent form of fever endemic in Ireland, was accompanied by (and sometimes confused with) the more murderous typhus. Typhus was more likely to attack all socioeconomic groups, and once the rich contracted it, they were more likely to succumb than the poor. The cholera epidemic of 1849 was undoubtedly intensified by the Famine. Cholera's first visitation in 1832–3 had killed 25,000. The higher toll in 1849–50 – the 1851 census put the total at 36,000 – may be attributed in large part to the effects of the Famine, for a double reason: casualties were more frequent where the Famine was gravest and, besides, well-fed people can usually withstand or recover from cholera infection.

Who perished? The Famine presumably forced many families, like the occupants of an overloaded lifeboat, to make life-and-death choices: an equal sharing of the burden of hunger might have doomed all. Were the young sacrificed so that others might live? The admittedly curious tale of an infant 'at the mother's breast [who] had to be removed' so that its teenage brother 'might

[41] See Peter Froggatt (1987) 'The Response of the Medical Profession to the Great Famine', in (Crawford).

receive sustenance from his mother to enable him to remain at work' highlights the issue (O'Rourke, 1902, *274*). A recent study of the Famine's incidence by age and sex shows that crisis mortality was almost a straightforward multiple of ordinary mortality. Children under 10 years and old people over 60 were over-represented among the famine dead; they accounted for less than one-third of the population but three-fifths of the deaths. Thus in a sense the very old and young were 'sacrificed'. But such proportions held in normal times also (Boyle and Ó Gráda, 1986). In this the Great Famine resembled the Bengali famine of 1940–3. The pattern is by no means inevitable, however (Watkins and Menken, 1985, *654–6*); Irish famine mortality was the product of a particular combination of the 'lifeboat ethics' described above, dysentry which tended to target the young, and typhus which was more inclined to attack the elderly.

(ii) Ideology and relief

The history of the Irish Famine is also British political history. By mid-October 1845 the potato failure had convinced Peel that only 'the removal of all impediments to the import of all kinds of human food' would remove the threat of famine, and this dramatic reversal of a key Tory policy – the Corn Laws – led to his political downfall eight months later (Gash, 1972, *538*). Other leading politicians of the day, from Whig (or Liberal Party) leader Lord John Russell to Tory protectionist Lord George Bentinck, were less inclined to bend their previous views. The range of attitudes in high places towards public help for the Irish is curious. In terms of today's political alignments, the Tories of the time would be considered 'liberal'. Peel's determined action in 1845–6 has often been contrasted with the harsh policies of Russell and Wood at the height of the Famine,[42] while Bentinck was a vocal supporter of more spending in Ireland, in particular on railways. Against this,

[42] Compare the contrast in India a few decades later between two successive Governors General, one throwing 'all his resources into saving lives', the other 'trusting to the workings of the market to perform the same job'. S. Ambirajan (1976) 'Malthusian Theory and Indian Famine Policy in the Nineteenth Century', *Population Studies*, 30, 6.

Whig spokesmen such as Whately and Senior believed that preventing mass mortality was simply impossible. Even attempting to do so was wrong, since it would bankrupt Irish landlords, and the ensuing demoralization would destroy 'industry' and 'self-dependence' and ultimately put a stop to economic activity. The Whigs, too, were consistent in their faith in the market, and their text might have been Adam Smith's dictum that 'the free exercise (of trade) is not only the best palliative of the inconveniences of a dearth, but the best preventative of that calamity'.[43]

The contrast oversimplifies, for Peel as long ago as 1822 had articulated those same fears of generous relief now so emphasized by the Whigs. But he had felt and insisted too that 'the exigency of the present case precludes any consideration of ultimate results'.[44] Nor were political groupings in the 1840s as ideologically monolithic as today. Clarendon, the Whig Lord Lieutenant, was much more eager for aid than his colleagues in Whitehall. The split in the Tory ranks on the Corn Laws spilled over into Irish policy, and after his defeat in July 1846 Peel tended to support the Whig ministry against Bentinck from the backbenches. Again, some of the Whig reluctance to spend may be traced to their wish to embarrass Irish landlords, in the main supporters of the Tories. But once more the distinction is hardly clearcut, since several leading Irish landlords were influential Whigs. Yet the ideological tensions that divided Whig and Tory on the Poor Law and factory legislation are also reflected in Famine relief policy. In line with their more *noblesse oblige* attitude toward social welfare legislation, the Tories at least paid lip service to more food aid, a less restrictive use of the Poor Law, more public spending on the infrastructure, and subsidies to improving landlords.

Leading Whigs and Radicals, by contrast, insisted on the evils of public charity and the 'inevitability' of the outcome. They were strongly supported in this by the *Edinburgh Review* and the fledgling *Economist*. Avoiding deaths was not the prime Whig preoccupation: relief would shift the distribution of food 'from the more meritorious to the less', because 'if left to the natural law of

[43] A. Smith (1976) *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford), p. 532. Compare P. Samuelson (1967) *Economics*, 7th edn (New York), p. 45 (quoted in Ambirajan, p. 63n).

[44] O'Neill, 'The Famine of 1822', ch. 3, p. 51

distribution, those who deserved more would obtain it'.[45] Thus in the Commons Russell refused to commit himself to saving lives as the prime objective, and some Whig ideologues such as Nassau Senior and *The Economist's* Thomas Wilson ('it is no man's business to provide for another') countenanced large-scale mortality with equanimity. In India as in Ireland, Whig logic highlighted the abuses of intervention, and made light of the cost in human lives (Ambirajan, 1978, *ch.3*). It is easy to see why populist and socialist critics saw this as Malthusian murder by the invisible hand (see Gibbon, 1975). Ironically historians have been dismissive of the likes of Bentinck and William Smith O'Brien, who showed far more humanity then either, say, Lord Brougham or John Roebuck, MP for Bath, remembered today as enlightened men. But historical wrath has been reserved for permanent Treasury Under-Secretary Charles Trevelyan, the able but arrogant mandarin responsible for day-to-day policy decisions during the Famine. Trevelyan, very much the villain in Woodham-Smith's plot (1962), has an able defender in Austin Bourke, who contrasts Trevelyan's more dogmatic pronouncements under Russell with a more flexible stance earlier under Peel.[46] With Russell in command, claims Bourke, Trevelyan's humanitarian instincts could find no voice. An analysis of Trevelyan's private papers, however, lends little support to this view. It shows that the Under-Secretary, a deeply religious man, fully believed throughout that the Famine had been ordained by God to teach the Irish a lesson, and therefore should not be too much interfered with (Hart, 1960). In India, Trevelyan's thinking on Ireland was invoked by bureaucrats in the 1850s to justify keeping interference to a minimum (Ambirajan, 1978, 79).

The Whig belief in the power of free markets to direct food where most needed dictated a policy of *laissez-faire* in so far as supply was concerned. Demand would be met by the purchasing power of money wages earned on the public works. Tying relief to work would minimize sponging, and limiting works to infrastructural projects would leave private investment unaffected. In theory the policy thus aimed at distortion-free relief. In practice, however, relief measures taken during the worst of the crisis were

[45] *The Economist*, 30 January 1847.

[46] Austin Bourke (1977) 'Apologia for a Dead Civil Servant', *Irish Times*, 5–6 July.

reluctant and wrong-headed. As noted earlier, policy relied on competitive market forces to keep prices down. High prices would increase supply through either imports or reduced exports of grain. In economic jargon this amounts to no more than the hope that the market provides a Pareto-optimal outcome (*) even in famine conditions. Whether the market was powerful enough to control speculation and hoarding is difficult to say. Folklore and literary fiction stress the huge profits made by village merchant-cum-usurers, but the man in the street typically cannot distinguish between hoarding and supply-and-demand fundamentals as the cause of high prices. While some traders in remote areas no doubt prospered – even government acknowledged as much – there is no theoretical presumption that monopoly power rises in times of crisis. Hard evidence is lacking. The gombeenman or 'meal-monger', vilified in folk memory but without whom matters might have been worse still, certainly charged more during the Famine than before. But was this monopoly extortion, or a reaction to higher default rates? The unlovable gombeenmen have left few traces for the historian to assess. The evidence from the country's biggest potato market, that of Dublin, is at least consistent with no hoarding, because hoarding would have led to high prices after harvest-time, but a smaller rise in price thereafter as traders rid themselves of their hoards before they rotted in the late spring or early summer. This implies a seasonal price pattern not observed in the data (Ó Gráda, 1988, *ch. 3*). Thus it would seem that deaths were not due to the failure of the market to work. The question warrants full investigation, especially since research elsewhere points to speculative bubbles and market failure during famines.[47]

The massive mortality has understandably prompted the verdict that 'relief operations . . . made no impression on starvation' (Gibbon, 1975, *132*). None of the policies pursued was beyond criticism. The public works were a tremendous achievement in *bureaucratic* terms, and made sense to the extent that most of the money went to labourers. About 90 per cent of the outlays went on wages, and the necessarily large bureaucracy took only 7 per cent.

[47] See e.g. Salim Rashid (1980) 'The Policy of Laissez-Faire During Scarcities', *Economic Journal*, 90, and Martin Ravallion (1987) *Markets and Famines* (Oxford).

Nor is the inevitable petty cheating and malingering, sensationalized by critics at the time (e.g. Senior, 1968), the issue. There were more serious problems. First, as already noted, the outcome too often was 'work which will answer no other purpose than that of obstructing the public conveyances' (Woodham-Smith, 1962, *180*). From October 1846 landlords were allowed to sponsor works that would improve their properties, provided they accepted responsibility for all the charges incurred. The conditions were too onerous, and this measure achieved little. The maximum number employed on estate improvement never reached more than a tiny fraction of those on the roads. Second, payment by results on the public works benefited those with some capital and those still healthy, and widened the gap between these and the most needy over time. By the end of 1846 the Board was already declaring that the problem had become 'one of food, not labour' (Irish University Press, 'Famine Series', 1968, *VIII, 383*), but the claim is imprecise. What was lacking was the *purchasing power* to command subsistence at prevailing prices. On average, the Board paid its workers about 12d. *per diem*, enough for a family to subsist on in normal times, but now literally a starvation wage (Irish University Press, 'Famine Series', 1968, *VI, 190–1*; *VII, 537*). Third, money spent on the works did not always necessarily reflect famine conditions, because the local organization necessary to request schemes seems to have been lacking in some of the worst blackspots. The cost of the projects constructed by starving workers was high, of course. In south-west Cork in 1845 the regular presentment sessions were allowing 12 shillings per perch for roads; by the end of the following year, the cost was over £2, stark evidence of both enforcement problems and the declining strength of workers.[48]

Another key element of policy, local responsibility, told most against those areas least equipped to fend for themselves. Thus though thousands were starving in west Cork in December 1846, even there the '*main point*' was to get local subscriptions, since 'there must be somebody . . . capable of some contribution'. Matching grants represented a peculiarly regressive form of governmental assistance (Irish University Press, 'Famine Series', 1962, *5, 849*).

[48] Hickey, *op. cit.*, p. 356.

The public works may have provided the framework, but they failed to provide the funds for preventing starvation. Mass emigration, properly subsidized and regulated, would also have reduced mortality. Instead, the government relied largely on unaided individual effort. To a widely-supported scheme of assisted emigration to Canada proposed in the spring of 1847, Russell's riposte was dismissive (O'Rourke, 1902, *493–6*). Of course, the crisis produced a massive exodus regardless: between 1845 and 1855 about 1.5 million left for good, double the numbers that would have left otherwise. Emigration in 1845 was unaffected by the blight. Next year's blight did not strike until the usual passage season was almost over, yet over 100,000 left for North America, the highest in any year until then. But 1847 produced an exodus of one-quarter of a million, and an average outflow of 200,000 or more was recorded for the next five years. Then the numbers fell and were down to about 70,000 by 1855. Most of this migration was unaided by other than family members, often through emigrant remittances. Recent calculations imply that no more than 3 or 4 per cent had their passages paid by landlord or government, though others were subsidized by charity and rent rebates (Fitzpatrick, 1984; Edwards and Williams, 1956, *ch. 6*). Most of the migrants ended up in the United States.

Not surprisingly, the Famine migration differed from earlier movements in several respects (Fitzpatrick; Miller, 1985; MacDonagh in Edwards and Williams, 1956). First the poor were better represented, though the very poorest were more likely to succumb to the Famine at home than to emigrate. Second, it was more likely to consist of family groupings than either earlier or later movements. Third, the regional composition of the Famine exodus was different too. As noted earlier, migration before 1845 tended to be from the richer provinces of Leinster and Ulster, but the Famine gave the spur to mass migration from the poorer west and south-west, establishing a trend that has lasted till this day. Fourth, the migration of 1847 exacted a higher toll in lives *en route* than earlier crossings. In theory the emigrant was protected from corrupt agents and shipowners by the Passenger Acts, but the machinery and personnel in place for enforcing existing controls were completely inadequate. The screening of passengers already stricken with fever was inadequate, and overcrowding and the lack

of proper food and medical care led to more. Mortality on the Atlantic passage in 1847, particularly on the Canadian route, was high (Mokyr, 1983, *267–8*; MacDonagh in Edwards and Williams, 1956; McDonagh, 1961). The emigration commissioners charged with protecting passengers from abuse reacted timorously, 'oppressed by a sense of general Treasury disapproval'. Legislation could not have eliminated all abuses without placing the traffic as a whole at risk. Some emigrants were bound to perish: the supply of proper ships and medical inspectors was too inelastic in the short run to cope. Yet here too dogmatism cost lives, before the existing legislation was tightened up and acted upon. The outcome was a retreat from laissez-faire and free contract (McDonagh, 1961).[49]

The sums spent on relief by government are on record. In 1850 the Treasury put its outlay since 1845 at just over £8 million. The remission of public works loans and the soup kitchens accounted for less than half of this; the rest was in the form of loans which had not been repaid by 1850. These were consolidated then, and written off in 1853. Ireland spent more than this on famine relief. The poor rates produced over £7 million, while landlords spent an unknown amount privately, and borrowed over a million (Donnelly, 1989). Historians disagree about the significance of the sums spent by government. The tone of Edwards and Williams (1956, *vii–xvi*) is distinctly apologetic; awestruck by the '[impressive] extent of the actual outlay', they urge that to expect more is anachronistic. However, they chose to ignore those contemporary critics who repeatedly protested at the stinginess of aid. Complaints that 'England could find a hundred millions of money to spend in fighting the Grand Turk', 20 millions to compensate West Indian slave-owners for freeing their slaves, or a similar sum for 'the luxury of shooting King Theodore', while funds could not be found to save Irish lives, were commonplace (O'Rourke, 1902, *162*; Ó Gráda, 1988, *ch. 3*). A curious feature of the literature is that non-Irish Famine specialists are less inhibited than Irish historians in their critiques of policy. Thus Mokyr (1983, *291–2*) and Donnelly (1988) stress the limitations of relief policy. And, relative to output or total

[49] See too Philip Taylor (1972) *The Distant Magnet: European Migration to the U.S.A.* (London), pp. 107–16.

government spending, spending on Irish famine relief indeed seems small. Spread out over the period of the Famine, outlays were about 0.3 per cent of GNP or 2–3 per cent of public expenditure. Total gross public liabilities were *less* after the Famine than before it. Such arithmetic exaggerates the impact of relief, since much of the generosity was *ex post*. Had this been fully grasped before, spending might have been geared more towards helping the most needy. Like the British standard-of-living debate, positions on the Great Famine tend to reflect political biases. Thus it is hardly surprising, however depressing, to find the eminent historian John Clapham claiming 'that the indiscriminate provision of relief . . . was still further directing the Irish from the steady industry and increased self-help which alone, in the end, could save them', or Ireland's leading Marxist thinker insisting instead 'that England made the Famine by a rigid application of the economic principles that lie at the base of capitalist society'.[50]

Private generosity helped, but was unequal to the problem (Woodham-Smith, 1962, *382–3*). The generosity of some groups, including the much-publicized efforts of the Society of Friends, was matched by those who raised funds, largely under Catholic auspices, in America and Australia. Emigrant remittances flowed in too (Miller, 1985). Nearer home, however, private charity was in short supply during the Great Famine. English charity had been crucial in 1822 and 1831. What changed in the interim? Several possible reasons have been outlined by Tim O'Neill. The passing of the Irish Poor Law in 1838 may have crowded out some private charity, and the feeling in middle-class Britain that Irish property was reneging on its responsibilities was encouraged by ministers and the press. But exaggerated perceptions of Irish criminality, anti-Catholic bigotry, and British disillusionment with agitator-parliamentarian Daniel O'Connell and his campaign for the Repeal of the Union, all played a role (see Senior, 1868).[51] Finally, 'donor fatigue' is indicated by the ebbing of private charity in 1848 and later.

[50] J. H. Clapham (1943) 'A Source for the Historian', in *The Economist 1843–1943: A Centenary Volume* (Oxford), p. 39; James Connolly, quoted in (Gibbon, 1975).

[51] T. O'Neill, 'The State, Poverty and Distress', pp. 304–6.

(iii) Regional dimensions

Another important aspect of the crisis is its regional dimension. The numbers on the public works highlight this. In mid-March 1847 in Connacht there was an average of one individual per family on the works; in the least affected counties (Dublin and eastern Ulster) the ratio was one man per sixteen families. The death toll was highly uneven regionally. The Famine killed few in the north-east and there it was soon over. Cemetery returns suggest some excess mortality in Dublin, where the crisis prompted a massive inflow of beggars and vagrants. But the cholera outbreak of 1849 seems to have killed more in the capital than famine fever or starvation. Even in some poor but less potato-dependent parts of Ulster the decline was small: in the west Donegal parish of Tullaghobegley,[52] population fell modestly, from 9,049 in 1841 to 8,982 in 1851. In the prosperous Wexford baronies of Forth and Bargy, where population growth had been moderate before the Famine, numbers hardly fell at all. The provinces of Munster and Connacht, with less than half the population of Ireland in 1841, accounted for well over two-thirds of the excess deaths, and Connacht's population decline was almost double that of Leinster. Still, misery was widely diffused and only one county of the 32 (Dublin) increased its population between 1841 and 1851. The occupational data in the census reports of 1841 and 1851 also highlight the differential regional impact of the Famine: Table 2.2, with summary data for the badly-hit province of Connacht and the south-eastern county Wexford, captures the range. Wexford escaped lightly, but *all* sectors of Connacht's population were hit (compare Kennedy and Ollerenshaw, 1985, *25–30*.

The lack of Irish research on the Famine is well reflected in the paucity of regional studies. The south-west has been relatively well served. Donnelly (1973) focuses on the rural economy of Cork during the crisis, while Patrick Hickey's account of part of the same county, the severely-hit area around Schull and

[52] Lord George Hill's widely-read *Facts from Gweedore* (London, 1846) provides a bleak description of the area.

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Table 2.2 *Occupation distribution in Wexford and Connacht 1841–1851 (males aged 15+, in thousands) (percentages in brackets)*

Sector	Connacht		Wexford	
	1841	1851	1841	1851
Food	324 (84.8)	220 (83.7)	42 (73.7)	38 (74.5)
Clothing	21 (5.5)	11 (4.2)	4 (7.0)	3 (5.9)
Lodging	16 (4.2)	12 (4.6)	5 (8.8)	4 (7.8)
Other	21 (5.5)	20 (7.6)	6 (10.5)	6 (11.8)
Total	382	263	57	51

Source: 1841 and 1851 Census Reports.

Skibereen,[53] is the only scholarly work of its kind so far and confirms the popular impression – based on the great publicity given to hardship in the area by the *Illustrated London News* and press reports – that the crisis was worst there. Perhaps further such studies will show that other western counties, such as Clare, Kerry and Mayo, suffered equally, but in silence (O'Rourke, 1902, *268–9, 383*). Yet even in the south and west there are areas where allegedly the Famine did little damage. Scholarly accounts of the Famine at local level are almost nonexistent. Parish and local histories are plentiful, but they lack comparative perspective, and are usually based on linking secondary sources such as Woodham-Smith (1962) and Edwards and Williams (1956) to local primary sources such as contemporary newspapers, and perhaps the Poor Law Guardians' and relief commissioners' reports.[54]

Much could be learned from local studies about the efficacy of different relief policies, the role of landlords, commercialization, and topography. The history of the Aran islands off the Galway and Clare coasts, with a population of over 3,000 souls in 1841, is a tantalizing case in point. Its poverty and remoteness made Aran

[53] 'A Study of Four Peninsular Parishes'. Also worth noting, Kieran Foley's (1987) 'The Killarney Poor Law Guardians and the Famine 1845–52' (unpublished M.A. thesis, National University of Ireland).

[54] Good examples include Edward Garner (1986) *To Die By Inches: The Famine in North-east Cork* (Cork); Sean Kierse (1984) *The Famine Years in the Parish of Killaloe 1845–1851* (Killaloe); A. T. Culloty (1986) *Ballydesmond/Baile Deasmhumhan: A Rural Parish in its Historical Setting* (Dublin), ch. 6; Ned McHugh (1986) 'Famine and Distress in Drogheda During 1847', *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological and Historical Society*, xxi (2).

at least as likely a candidate for Malthusian retribution as any part of the country, but both folkmemory and the statistical record suggest that it escaped the Famine's ravages lightly. Whether this was because it was partially spared the blight, or because fish was plentiful during the crisis, is not clear, but Aran relied little on relief during the Famine years, and its population declined but little. If indeed Aran pulled through as indicated, it offers a glimpse at that might-have-been, an Ireland spared the blight in the 1840s. In the long run the islands' population dropped as elsewhere, but at a lower cost in terms of human suffering (Ó Gráda, 1988, *ch. 3*).

Nowhere else in Europe did the potato's failure exact as high a price as in Ireland. Yet the ensuing misery in Scotland's Highlands and in parts of Germany was considerable, while in the Netherlands and in Belgium (where the potato was much less central to the diet than in Ireland) the blight also led to significant mortality. Mokyr has put excess deaths in the Netherlands at about 60,000 (or one-fifth the Irish rate), but in Flanders, where a severe crisis in the linen industry compounded the difficulties, the toll was about 50,000 in a population of only 1.4 million.[55]

(iv) Food entitlements (*)

A pivotal sound in Irish playwright Thomas Murphy's rendition of the Famine tragedy is 'the noise of a convoy of corn-carts on a road'.[56] This evokes the enduring populist lament that the fundamental problem in 1846 and after was not the availability of food, but grain being shipped out of Ireland to pay rents as the people starved. If food was scarce why not balance supply and demand at a lower price by halting grain exports? Government relied instead on the self-correcting power of the price mechanism and free trade to match supply and demand, pinning their hopes on a quick supply response from overseas. They had the authority of Adam Smith and Edmund Burke on their side in rejecting any inter-

[55] Joel Mokyr (1980) 'Industrialization and Poverty in Ireland and Netherlands', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, x (3), 436–7; Flinn *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 430–8.
[56] T. Murphy (1977) *Famine* (Dublin), p. 23.

Table 2.3 *Grain exports and imports 1844–8 (in thousands of tons)*

	Exports	Imports	Net movement
1844	424	30	+394
1845	513	28	+485
1846	284	197	+87
1847	146	889	−743
1848	314	439	−125

Source: (Bourke, 1976).

ference.[57] In the long run, freeing imports made more sense than prohibiting exports. And, to a point, supply response worked as indicated. By the summer of 1847, Irish markets were flooded with foreign corn and maize. In a sense the traditional populist focus on outward shipments of grain is wide of the mark because (as Table 2.3 makes clear) there was a huge drop in net exports in the late 1840s. Nevertheless, as Donnelly and others have argued, a *temporary* surprise embargo on grain exports in late 1846, in anticipation of imports already on their way, might well have helped.

Did the country produce enough food in the late 1840s to feed everybody? The puzzle evokes the typology of famine recently formalized by Sen (1981). Sen's study of modern famines suggests that the lack of food, in the literal sense of there not being enough to fill all stomachs, often fails to explain starvation. Such famines are 'artificial', the outcome of politics, speculation, or panic. The claim was not new in Ireland in 1846: both the crises of 1816–19 and 1822 had been put down to unemployment and distributional shifts rather than lack of food (Ó Gráda, 1988, *ch. 3*). But surely in 1846, when the shortfall in potatoes was massive, and the acreage under grain also fell, this was irrelevant?

An answer requires some dietary arithmetic. Let us accept Arthur Young's claim that an acre under potatoes provided enough food in an average year to feed four people, while it took twice as much land to produce the same food value in wheat. The claim is borne out by later assessments; in Britain during the First

[57] A. Smith (1976) *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford), pp. 532–6; E. Burke (1852) 'Thoughts and Details on Scarcity. Originally presented to the Right Hon. William Pitt, in the Month of November 1795', in *The Works and Correspondence of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (1852), vol. v, pp. 179–212.

World War nutritionists calculated that an acre of land could feed 2.08 people on wheat or 4.18 people on potatoes (see too Mokyr and Ó Gráda, 1984, *108*). If the potato's advantage was about two to one, then about 3 million extra acres of grain would have been needed annually to meet the food shortfall caused by the blight. This was out of the question, and in this sense Sen's critique of the 'food availability doctrine' rings false for the Great Famine (see Solar, 1989). Superficially, however, it receives some support from another piece of arithmetic: if half an acre of grain was enough for subsistence, then the acreage actually under grain during the crisis, appropriately divided up, would have provided enough to feed everybody. But the underlying calculations overlook some awkward dynamics. The output consequences of redistribution cannot be assumed away, nor should feed and animal input needs be ignored.

An analysis of the Famine in a United Kingdom context provides a more plausible defence of Sen's model, although the focus of attention needs is shifted to relief once again. Had the poor in Ireland been granted a living wage on the public works during the winter of 1846–7, then no doubt an adequate supply of food would have been forthcoming from across the Irish Sea or further afield.

There is another sense, though, in which the Sen model is inappropriate to the Irish context. The pure Sen model in which 'adventitious' effects – the phrase is Louise Tilly's[58] – such as war or commercial speculation produce famine conditions, may be interpreted as a zero-sum game. Since there is enough food, there are gainers and losers. However, it is difficult to pinpoint many gainers from the Irish Famine. At the top of the socioeconomic scale, landlords found their rents shrinking, and many of them lost their estates: about one-seventh of the landed area changed hands in the wake of the crisis (Lee, 1973, *37*). At the bottom, the poor starved. In-between farmers relying on agricultural labour found that the efficiency wage – the wage which minimized the cost to them of effective hours worked – that they faced had risen. During the Famine workers were prepared to work for a bare subsistence, but that represented a rise in what farmers must pay, and many

[58] L. Tilly (1982) 'Food Entitlement, Famine and Conflict', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XIV, 333–49.

must have found it not worthwhile to supply the wages. The result was an unemployment which dogmatists such as Nassau Senior put down to laziness (Senior, 1868). Only farmers who specialized heavily in livestock production – and they were still few in the 1840s – benefited from the Famine. Little affected by the rise in wages, they took full advantage of the fall in rents.

Landlords responded variously to the fall in their incomes. If traditionalist nationalist historiography underestimated the difficulties facing landlords, the evidence bears out its story of mass clearances in the wake of the potato failure. Comprehensive data are unavailable for 1847 and 1848, but between 1849 and 1854 alone proprietors evicted one-quarter of a million people, and that excludes those who 'surrendered' possession for a workhouse ticket or subsidized emigration (Donnelly, 1989). Landlord insolvency had been a problem before the Famine: in 1845 the Court of Chancery was handling estates worth £0.8 million. Indebtedness increased massively during the Famine. The Encumbered Estates Court established in 1849 was envisaged as a means of replacing the traditional penniless, thriftless landlords and middlemen by a new breed of improving landlord, possibly foreign (Black, 1960, *32–41*; Donnelly, 1973, *131*). The estates sold off by the Court in its first few years fetched rock-bottom prices. In Connacht land could be had for as little as 5 to 6 shillings per acre in 1850–2, but by 1857–8 the price had doubled.[59] The early 'bargains' were associated with fears – groundless as it turned out – of heavy and lasting outlays on paupers and rates. But the speculators who took advantage of the cheap land were not the entrepreneurs hoped for by Peel or agronomist James Caird; they were mainly members of the old landed and professional elites with money left to spend.

[59] Calculated from data in P. G. Lane (1969) 'The Social Impact of the Encumbered Estates Court on Counties Galway and Mayo, 1849–1858' (M.A. thesis, National University of Ireland).