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Article abstract

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Abstract: This article reviews the historical debate on the colonial causation and dimensions of the Great Irish Famine of 1845-50. It does so by briefly reviewing the evolution of the colonial relationship between Great Britain and Ireland before focusing on a number of specific fields of debate relating to the coloniality of the Irish famine. These include the economic structures and dynamics developing over the century before 1845 and the vulnerability of Irish society, the vector of the potato blight and its impact on food availability, and, most extensively, the motivations for and characteristics of British state response to the catastrophe. The variant interpretations of these factors in the nationalist, revisionist, post-revisionist, and post-colonial historiography are reviewed. The author concludes by drawing on his own primary research to suggest that, while shaped by colonial stereotypes and a preoccupation with social engineering, the British state and public response to the Irish crisis was varied and not intentionally genocidal, although ultimately subordinating humanitarianism to perceived British national interest. Critical British contemporaries drew negative parallels between the neglect of Ireland and the prioritization of imperial expansion overseas, while Irish nationalists concluded that the mortality of the famine demonstrated the bankruptcy of the British-Irish Union of 1800.

Keywords: Ireland, Britain, Union, potato, Trevelyan, providence.

A t first sight, this might appear a rather redundant question—not least in the context of a volume dedicated to exploring the comparative colonial contexts of modern famines. Nevertheless, in the case of the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s, it is a necessary question to pose, not least as the historical literature on the subject, and the historiographical frames of reference to which it relates, are to some extent conflicted on the subject. My purpose in this paper is not to provide a simple yes or no answer, but to investigate the ways in which the Irish famine experience of the nineteenth century can be construed as "colonial" and what the limitations of this interpretation might be.

It is, of course, unquestionable that Ireland had a long-standing colonial relationship with its nearest neighbour, initially the kingdom of England, which sought to extend its authority over the neighbouring island from the late twelfth century, and later the new composite state of Great Britain, which emerged in the early seventeenth century through the union of the crowns of England and Scotland, and was consolidated as the United

Kingdom of Great Britain in 1707. A geographically constrained medieval English colony on the east coast of Ireland was massively expanded and transformed by a series of wars, suppressed rebellions, land confiscations, and legal consolidation between the 1530s and 1690s. These wars occurred in the context of the European wars of religion and sometimes took the form of an overt Protestant crusade against the perceived threat of "Catholic power" in Ireland and the risk this might pose to the British state. This process resulted not only in the projection of imperial authority from London over the whole island, but the substantive (if never universal) replacement of both the Catholic indigenous and old-colonial landowning elite by a "new English" and emphatically Protestant ascendancy of landowners, reinforced in the early eighteenth century by a series of penal laws intended to induce further conversions from the old elites and keep Catholicism permanently subordinated politically and socially. To provide a garrison against insurrection and revive an economy devastated by war and depopulation, plantations of English and Scottish Protestant settlers were attempted in several regions, although this only proved successful in terms of producing a demographic majority in the north-eastern counties of Ulster, closest to Scotland.[1]

A number of Irish historians, Nicholas Canny most prominently, have drawn parallels between this early modern re-conquest and colonization of Ireland and the British Atlantic colonial expansion that paralleled it. Similarly, from the late seventeenth century, the Irish economy was formally subordinated to an English (later British) mercantilist system that restricted its ability to export certain products (such as woollens) and its entitlement to trade directly with colonies within the empire. While these commercial restrictions did not ultimately inhibit the massive growth of Ireland's two major export commodities in the eighteenth century-manufactured linen (exempt from legislative impediments) and animal products—and later grain crops, they were a source of political resentment in contemporary Ireland and of much debate in subsequent economic history.

While thus apparently colonial in its political and economic relations with Great Britain, and in its internal social structures, there were at the same time certain ambiguities. Over the course of the eighteenth century, a significant section of the landed Protestant elite came to articulate a "patriotic" opposition to British policies that assumed or sought to enforce Ireland's continuing colonial and mercantile inferiority: political and quasi-military mobilization against such grievances from the late 1770s led to a staged withdrawal from direct policy subordination by the British government (although informal political control over the Irish parliament

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[1] See recent surveys of the period from 1540 to 1800 by Jane Ohlmeyer and Ultán Gillen in Bourke and McBride (21-73).

was reasserted from the mid-1780s). Unlike the American "patriots," their Irish counterparts rejected the "colonial" construction of Ireland's constitutional position and insisted that it was in fact an ancient "sister kingdom" of Great Britain, with its parliament (also of medieval origin) ideally embodying that status. This assertion of Ireland's non-colonial character in the eighteenth century was polemical and directed against explicitly colonial policy from London. It was carried forward into the nineteenth-century Irish nationalist tradition, combining with older Catholic traditions that also constructed Ireland as an ancient European kingdom, now seeking the restoration of its rightful constitutional autonomy through "Repeal of the Union" or "Home Rule." At the same time, some modern Irish historians have given it some justification, with Sean Connolly, for example, arguing that eighteenth-century Ireland fitted better into a European "*ancien régime*" frame of reference (with parallels with central and eastern Europe) than that of classic colonialism (Connolly).

The constitutional relationship between the two countries changed fundamentally in 1800, with the passage of the Irish Act of Union, abolishing the separate Irish Parliament and transferring its representation to the newly enlarged Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Ireland thus became officially an integral part of the metropolitan state (the only part of the British Empire to be thus incorporated). Following the Union, it lost its separate currency and exchequer, but retained a subordinate government at Dublin Castle, which continued to be appointed by Westminster, and its own legal administration. Initially excluded from representation in the Union parliament and from major offices under the Crown, after a major political mobilization led by the charismatic lawyer-politician Daniel O'Connell, Irish Catholics were politically "emancipated" in 1829, albeit within the constraints of high property qualifications for both the franchise and admission to parliament.

Constitutionally, then, Ireland by the 1840s was a hybrid entity, a "kingdom" united with and having representation in the imperial centre, but retaining the structural legacies of its previous colonial subordination. It also featured a large and well-organized nationalist movement, which rejected the legitimacy of the Union, resented the economic and religious privileges of the descendants of the settler elite, and demanded the restoration of political autonomy under a more representative franchise. Attempts by British liberals to integrate the Catholic elite into the British body politic in the 1830s and 1840s (at the expense of some alienation of the Protestant landed elite) were of limited success, while the great bulk of the peasant population remained disaffected or at best indifferent toward the state as well as the landlord class (Geoghegan). As I have argued elsewhere, much of the public debate about Ireland's "colonial" status in this period centred on the continuing existence of the office of lord lieutenant or "viceroy" as head

of the Irish government ("'Ireland's Last Fetter'"). Paradoxically, it was British radicals and in 1850 the governing Whig party that sought its abolition as a colonial vestige symbolizing Ireland's incomplete incorporation into the British body politic, while Catholic nationalists defended it as an emblem of separate historic statehood (Gray, "'Ireland's Last Fetter'"). Tellingly, despite these rather abstract controversies, the ultimate decision to retain it rested on security considerations: the necessity of retaining a British authority figure in Dublin with military powers reflected a degree of colonial anxiety on the part of the establishment about the legitimacy of British rule and the challenges posed by revolutionary nationalist movements and agrarian rebellion (Gray, "'Ireland's Last Fetter'").

Thus, sketching the nature of the colonial (perhaps better described as quasi-colonial) nature of Irish-British constitutional relationships in this period is of limited value. The question of the relationship between colonialism and the famine needs to be refined—and to do so I will divide it up into the following areas for investigation: the socio-economic structures in existence in 1845; trigger mechanisms of famine in Ireland; and the determinants of state response—to what extent did these embody "colonial" mentalities and calculations and to what extent other ideological and pragmatic forces? Finally, I will explore the colonial impact and reactions to Irish famine in the wider British empire.

There remains a debate within Irish economic history about the extent to which the legacies of aggressive colonial economic policies, especially of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, created continuing socio-economic structures that rendered Ireland particularly vulnerable to famine. While older nationalist readings attributed all weaknesses in the economy to colonialism or the denial of national autonomy or independence, "revisionist" economic historians in Ireland in the 1960s and after set out to challenge this. Louis Cullen, in his general economic history of modern Ireland published in 1972, questioned this nationalist determinism, drawing attention to growth sectors in the pre-famine Irish economy and the country's ability to exploit colonial opportunities (such as the transatlantic provision trade and later the export market in linens). Even for the period after the economic shocks brought on by the end of inflated wartime conditions from 1814-15, these historians would stress the variegated nature of the pre-famine economy, not only in the successful industrialization of the north-east, but the modernization and commercialization of agriculture in the east and around Dublin (Cullen). One member of this revisionist group, Liam Kennedy, has been the most outspoken in rejecting the validity of any colonial or post-colonial frame of reference for interpreting the modern Irish past. Kennedy observed that evidence for such a relationship, especially as it related to economic history,

was at best elusive, "despite the length of the Irish-English connection and the wealth of historical materials" (109). This rather sweeping rejection appears to have been part of a wider reaction to the dominant place acquired by the 1990s of often rather reductionist post-colonial models in Irish literary and cultural studies and their application to contemporary political controversies, especially relating to the Northern Irish conflict (see Howe).

The more econometrically minded historians who have dominated Irish economic history since the 1980s, most prominently Joel Mokyr and Cormac Ó Gráda, have differed from the revisionists in robustly rejecting any neo-Malthusian reading of Irish vulnerability in the early nineteenth century, but have nevertheless tended to avoid overt colonial models of explanation for the underlying causes of famine. Mokyr's seminal monograph *Why Ireland Starved* restricts its frame of reference to the half century before 1845. He stresses such factors as entrepreneurial failure, the collapse of proto-industrialization due to factory-based competition, and limited capital formation in Ireland as causes of economic weakness, exacerbated by Ireland's status as a "small open economy" by the middle decades of the century. However, Mokyr downplays the role of government economic policies in bringing this about. His point of comparison is not the British Empire, but the experience of another European country—the Netherlands (Mokyr). Ó Gráda, for his part, characterizes the Irish agricultural economy as underdeveloped in contrast to England and lowland Scotland, but not in comparison to most of central, eastern and southern Europe (indeed Ireland's indices for literacy, urbanization, and industrial employment were above European averages for the early 1840s). His argument tends to stress the contingency of Irish socio-economic vulnerability in the period (and its concentration in certain districts and among the labouring poor) rather than identifying any elements of inevitability arising from either population pressure or colonialism. At the same time, both Ó Gráda and Mokyr would, to a much greater extent than the revisionists, identify state failure in response to the famine crisis as a serious causal factor in explaining mass excess mortality, and both are open to investigating the applicability of Amartya Sen's theory of entitlement-related vulnerability to the Irish case.

Two groups of scholars have more recently sought to revive a more colonial mode of explanation for famine causation in Ireland. Firstly, there is a group of Irish historical geographers, including David Nally, whose recent book *Human Encumbrances* attempts to apply the Foucauldian notion of colonial biopolitics to famine causation and response in 1840s Ireland. The eminent geographer William J. Smyth at University College Cork, central to the team that produced the core sections of the *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* in 2012, stresses "*longue durée*" structures of colonial governance in explaining the events of 1845-50. In the *Atlas*, both Smyth and Nally trace long-term weaknesses in the economy to the early modern colonial period,

the devastation of war, and the reconstruction of Ireland as an extractive agrarian producer, tied to English demand (Smyth; Nally, "The Colonial Dimensions"). Both the established economic historians and political historians of British governance of 1840s Ireland might quibble with the tendency towards reductionism and an assumption that certain policy agendas were inherently "colonial" in these interpretations, but they are welcome in doing much to re-introduce the debate about the colonial back into the historiography of the Great Famine. The other group seeking to do so, although perhaps without the same degree of critical impact, are the cluster of Marxist-leaning economists, sociologists, and literary critics associated with Terrence McDonough, who contributed to the provocatively titled collection *Was Ireland a Colony?* in 2005. The economic discussion in this book offers a much more negative picture of economic development than that of the mainstream economic historians, utilizing dependency theory and Marxist analysis to stress the continuing post-mercantilist subordination of the Irish economy to the British and the continuation of feudal social relations as characteristic of the Irish countryside (McDonough).

I turn now to the trigger mechanisms leading to the onset and continuation of famine conditions in 1840s Ireland*.* The central role of the potato blight ("*Phytophthora infestans*") in devastating the subsistence crop of the rural poor, directly or indirectly over five consecutive harvests from 1845 to 49, is not contested by those posing nationalist or post-colonial critiques of the dominant economic narrative. For econometric historians, this was the exogenous shock, essentially unforeseeable and unpredictable, that threw a vulnerable economic system and impoverished social groups within it into a catastrophic crisis. The scale of the blight's impact on agricultural production and calorific availability was stressed initially by Austin Bourke in a series of publications from the 1970s, and most tellingly by the American economic historian Peter Solar in his 1989 article "The Great Famine Was No Ordinary Subsistence Crisis," which makes a strong case for a real food availability decline crisis, at least in 1845-47.

Identifying a clearly colonial dimension to this epiphenomenon is difficult, beyond highlighting the structural factor of the acute levels of potato dependency potentially consequent on the subordination of the Irish agrarian economy to British demand for imported grain. If the potato arrived in Ireland through colonial exchanges (it was allegedly first introduced by Sir Walter Raleigh on the estate granted to him as part of the sixteenth-century plantation of Munster), it was not until the later eighteenth century, and as a consequence of the rapid and under-capitalized boom in grain cash-cropping for export, that it began to acquire a dangerously high level of dominance in the diet of labourers and poor peasants. However, the fatal blight that arrived from the Americas in 1845 came as the consequence of

global capitalist exchanges in seed potatoes (arriving in Ireland via Belgium and England) rather than through any mechanism specific to Ireland.

Instead of contesting the blight as the harbinger of famine, both nationalists and those seeking to trace a colonial interpretation of causation for mass mortality and associated radical social restructuring, have focused on government response to the crisis triggered by the blight, rather than on the disease itself. At its most extreme, as articulated by the exiled revolutionary nationalist John Mitchel in 1860 (and echoed by his followers ever since), "The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine" (219). This "Mitchelite" interpretation posited both a genocidal intent on the part of the British government and a mechanism for bringing it about—the forced export of the alleged "superabundance" of other foodstuffs produced in Ireland that, if retained, would have been sufficient to prevent a famine threatened by potato failure (see Donnelly). Although it remains resilient in popular historical writing to the present, the economic case for this was undermined through painstaking analysis of export/import patterns and the calorific value of foodstuffs available in Ireland by Solar (see also Coogan). This does not, however, preclude an investigation into the ideological preoccupations underpinning food policy in the later 1840s, or the possibility that some greater retention of the export surplus (if this had been accompanied by an effective distribution policy) could not have made a significant difference in mortality rates, especially in the "hunger winter" of 1846-47.

Within more solidly grounded historical writing, the debate over famine policy, its motivations, and its consequences continues to veer between, on one side, the argument for a coherent and rigorously pursued ideological agenda of "colonial biopolitics," as proposed by Nally in *Human Encumbrances* and supported from a more nationalist perspective by Christine Kinealy, and, on the other side, neo-liberal apologias for the government and its operatives offered by Robin Haines in her tome on the Treasury administrator Charles Trevelyan. More recently, the latter position has been enhanced by an attribution of government failure as almost entirely due to the external constraints set by the London money markets in a period of fiscal crisis, as argued by Charles Read.

Rather than give a detailed analysis of the literature on this complex and contested field, I will summarize my own conclusions on the subject, with particular emphasis on the question to what extent policy can be seen as "colonial" and in what ways. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, it should be recalled that the government in office for most of the Famine period, that of Whig party leader Lord John Russell, was weak (with a minority of votes in parliament), internally factionalized, and buffeted by external crises, including not just the potato blight, but a British fiscal and industrial crisis in 1847, and the European revolutions of 1848. This weakness rendered the

administration particularly susceptible to shifts in articulated public opinion, especially in the metropolis, and voiced through the major London newspapers. While at certain times the press and middle-class public could express a remarkable degree of humanitarian concern for the plight of famine-sufferers in Ireland (as manifest in the large amounts collected for charitable relief in early 1847), at other times—and increasingly as the famine lengthened—this could degenerate into antagonistic and racialized stereotyping and an insistence that "natural causes" should take their effect in Ireland. The conflicting responses and swings of opinion are worthy of attention, but fundamentally the collapse of sympathy for Ireland and the Irish was grounded in long-standing prejudices in England that rendered it too easy to "other" the Irish and deny any common "British" characteristics or entitlements to them as citizens of what was (after 1800) nominally a United Kingdom (Gray, "The Great British Famine"). As the prime minister himself observed following the UK general election of August 1847, it was "very difficult to please England, Scotland and Ireland at the same time—we have in the opinion of Great Britain done too much for Ireland and have lost elections for doing so. In Ireland the reverse."[2]

In addition to the hostile effusions toward the "barbarous" Irish from organs such as the London *Times,* there were clearly ideological preoccupations evident within the administration, if by no means shared, or shared with equal intensity, by all ministers and administrators. *Laissez-faire* ideas had paramountcy, if checked in some policy areas and at some times by arguments that exceptional circumstances prevailed in Ireland that should permit some limited deviance from "orthodox" political economy. In itself, *laissez-faire* was not an inherently colonialist position (a similar non-interventionist policy had been adopted in England and Scotland in response to the acute unemployment crisis and hunger, albeit not famine, of 1842-43), although it might be argued it was deployed as such if used in a discriminatory fashion against Ireland or with inadequate consideration for its inapplicability to Irish conditions.

Although evident in *Times* leading articles and in some (although, interestingly, not all) treatments of the Irish crisis in the political caricatures of the satirical journal *Punch*, overtly racialized language was rarely employed in governmental public and private discourses in the 1840s. In one of the few extant occasions in which such language was used, the lord lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Clarendon, wrote to the prime minister in August 1847 making an explicit colonial parallel: "Esquimaux and New Zealanders [i.e. Maoris] are more thrifty and industrious than these people who deserve to be left to their fate instead of the hardworking people of England being

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[2] Russell to Clarendon, 2 Aug. 1847, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Clar. dep. Ir., box 43.

taxed for their support."[3] Despite this outburst, however, Clarendon's subsequent interventions were to demand increased relief spending in Ireland, which bore almost no fruit, and to denounce the mean-spiritedness of Treasury policy. His warnings in late 1848 that "the religion and charity of John Bull [i.e. England] will in the end revolt" against the deadly consequences of inaction, led him to endorse Irish fury against "C[harles] Wood and Trevelyan who sit coolly watching and applauding what they call 'the operation of natural causes.'"[4] In the wake of the failure of his proposed scheme of "remedial measures" to provide employment schemes and assisted emigration in Ireland, the prime minister could only lament that in his opinion it was less the "crude Trevelyanism" of the Treasury than the hostility to further aid expenditure lying "deep in the breasts of the British people" that ruled out further interventions.[5]

Russell was personally a weak premier, and it seems clear that the centre of gravity in Irish famine policy from 1846 lay principally with the Treasury, headed administratively by Charles Edward Trevelyan (the "*bête noire*" of so much popular historiography of the Irish Famine) and his political superior, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Charles Wood. The private and public correspondence and publications of both (and their allies) indicate a strong ideological drive that combined with elements of pragmatism to shape policy. To what extent was this "Trevelyanism" lamented by Clarendon colonialist in character? Trevelyan, who had previously served in British India, was himself certainly conscious of the existence of racialized prejudice concerning Ireland in much of British public opinion. However, he disliked the *Times'* attacks on the racial deficiencies of the "Celts" and confided that, given his Cornish ancestry,

> I myself boast to be of Celtic origin; I have always regarded with peculiar interest the Celtic branch of our national family. However superior the German race may be in some points, I would not have Ireland Anglo-Saxon if I could; and it has always appeared to me, that in the infinitely varied distribution of the rich gifts of Providence, the Celtic race has no reason to complain of its share.[6]

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[3] Clarendon to Russell, 10 Aug. 1847, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Clarendon letterbooks.

[4] Clarendon to Russell, 6 Dec. 1848, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Clarendon letterbook 3.

[5] Russell to Clarendon, 8 Dec. 1848, 24 Feb. 1849, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Clar. Dep. Ir., box 43, box 26.

[6] Trevelyan to S. Spring Rice, 10 Nov. 1846, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Trevelyan letterbooks, vol. 9.

At the same time, he regularly and vehemently denounced the "defective part of the national character" of Ireland as the root social cause of the famine there. This he connected not to the Gaelic/Celtic origins of the bulk of the peasantry nor to the Catholicism of the majority, but to a spirit of dependency on the state and reluctance to engage in self-help that infected society as a whole. While the peasant needed to be educated in work discipline, the principal target of Trevelyan's invective, and arguably of the policy instruments he advocated and sought to control, were the "nobility and gentry" of Ireland, the class he held to be morally and practically responsible for the underdeveloped and socially backward state of Irish society and, hence, of its fatal potato dependency. This target group (accepted as such by much of British liberal opinion in the 1840s) was, of course, overwhelmingly British and "Anglo-Saxon" in origin. A deeply religious man, Trevelyan sincerely believed that divine providence had intervened through the potato blight to bring a "blessing" to Ireland by revealing the corruption of its social and moral constitution and initiating a "social revolution" that would see the landowners either shoulder their legitimate burden of the costs of relief and reconstruction or be swept away themselves through bankruptcy and "free trade in land."[7]

This was the repeated refrain of his relentlessly "optimistic" apologia for government policy in Ireland, published as *The Irish Crisis* in early 1848 (a text which was approved by the government, but is, in my opinion, unquestionably Trevelyan's own in tone and argument). The concluding section, setting out his conviction that the era of Ireland's previous colonial subjection to Britain was past and that the famine was achieving the final social assimilation of the two societies under the Union, is worth quoting at length:

> Our humble but sincere conviction is, that the appointed time of Ireland's regeneration is at last come. For several centuries we were in a state of open warfare with the native Irish, who were treated as foreign enemies, and were not admitted to the privileges and civilizing influences of the English law, even when they most desired it . . . . Now, thank God, we are in a different position; and although many waves of disturbance must pass over us before that troubled sea can entirely subside, and time must be allowed for morbid habits to place to a more healthy action, England and Ireland are, with one great exception, subject to equal laws; and so far as the maladies of Ireland are traceable to political causes, nearly every practical remedy has been applied. The deep and inveterate root of social evil remained, and this has been laid bare by a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence, as if this part of the case were beyond the

[7] See Trevelyan to Monteagle, 9 Oct. 1846, NLI, Monteagle Papers, Ms 13,397; Gray, "Ideology and the Famine."

unassisted power of man . . . . God grant that the generation to which this great opportunity has been offered may rightly perform its part, and that we may not relax our efforts until Ireland fully participates in the social health and physical prosperity of Great Britain, which will be the true consummation of their union! (Trevelyan 199-201)

Trevelyan's opinions were delusional both respecting the likely political consequences of the famine and in seeking to impose a utopian liberal social transformation on a country prostrated by the destruction of the staple food of over half its population. The policy he endorsed involved a transfer of responsibility for mass mortality from the state to the recalcitrant landlord class, while at the same time permitting that class to uproot from the soil hundreds of thousands of the "surplus population" of peasants through land clearances in the latter stages of the famine. Obsessed with imposing his vision of reconstructing Irish society in the name of national integration (I have elsewhere characterized the dominant policy as amounting to an attempted "capitalist cultural revolution"), Trevelyan and the government he served permitted hundreds of thousands who might have been saved by more interventionist relief policy, to die from neglect (Gray, *Famine, Land, and Politics* 331).

In conclusion, we return to the question to what extent was the Irish Famine "colonial"? In terms of policy, the question was posed most starkly at the time by the conservative and later nationalist Irish politician Isaac Butt: had the famine occurred at Cornwall rather than Cork, would the government have responded in similar fashion ("The Famine in the Land")? His conclusion that Ireland was being denied the benefits of the Union led him to question the value of the British connection (Butt, *The Rate in Aid*). However, as a counterfactual, no definitive answer can be given. On the one hand, government policy toward the contemporaneous potato famine in the Scottish Highlands and Islands differed little from Irish policy. On the other hand, the smaller scale of the crisis, the proportionately much greater and long-lasting charitable transfers from industrial to impoverished rural districts, and the ability and willingness of Scottish landowners to comply with government demands that they feed, employ, and (more typically) assist to emigrate their cottar tenants, led to a quite different outcome in terms of mortality (Devine). The spirit of the 1834 new English poor law, with its emphasis on less eligibility, was not dissimilar to the Irish poor law in intent and sparked widespread social resistance in northern working-class districts.

However, what rendered Ireland different was the continuing colonial context in which policy was enacted and the continuing legacy of the deep social structures created by previous colonial practice (too readily dismissed as redundant by Trevelyan and his allies). British working-class radicals (the Chartists) sought entry into the British political nation on equal terms; Irish

nationalists (whether constitutionalist or revolutionary) rejected the legitimacy of Ireland's incorporation into the Union and regarded it as emblematic of the country's continuing subordination. Whether, as has often been claimed, a self-governing Ireland would inevitably have dealt more effectively with the famine crisis is an open question (the policies of self-governing Netherlands in the 1840s and autonomous Finland when faced with devastating famine in 1867-68 raise serious doubts about this) (Gray, "Famine Relief"; Newby).

However, in this governing context, and given the continuing use of British military force under viceregal authority to repress both revolutionary nationalist threats and agrarian social violence in the later 1840s, state policy could not but be construed as colonial in nature. Had that policy been benign (and there were indeed some episodes of humanitarian response, most notably in the brief episode of relief via state famine kitchens, which fed over three millions daily in summer 1847), this might have passed unnoticed. However, when the policies of the latter stages of the famine were denounced by one of the government's senior poor-law administrators as amounting to "one of extermination," it is inevitable that they should have been so inscribed in Irish memory.[8] We might leave the last word to that official, Edward Twisleton, who in evidence to a parliamentary committee in 1849 lamented that the county had failed to spare itself "the deep disgrace of permitting any of our miserable fellow subjects . . . to die of starvation." Referring to the expense and bloodshed involved in the contemporaneous expansion of Britain's Indian domains, he pointed to the humanitarian failure in Ireland and concluded, "of how much less permanent importance is the conquest of Scinde or the Punjaub for the greatness of the Empire!"[9] The British state's abject failure to deploy its full resources to alleviate Irish famine (and, later, Indian famines of 1866, 1876-79, 1896-99, 1899-1900 and 1943-44) thus was due in part to colonial stereotyping and attempted social engineering, but unlike a number of twentieth-century cases, was not genocidal in intent.

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[8] Clarendon to Russell, 12 Mar. 1849, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Clarendon Letterbook 5.

[9] Edward Twisleton's evidence, *Second report of the select committee of the house of lords, appointed to inquire into the operation of the Irish poor law,* HC 1849 (228), xvi, 717; Twisleton to Clarendon, 10 Mar. 1849, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Clar. Dep. Ir., box 29.

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